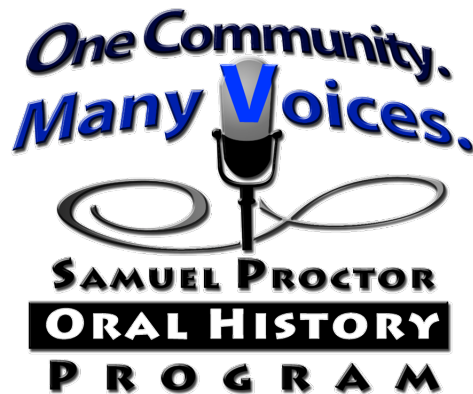


# Mary Lou Farmer

**Southeastern Indian Oral History Project  
MISS CHOC-010**

**Interview by:**

**Dr. Samuel Proctor  
December 3, 1973**



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**MISS CHOC 010 Mary Lou Farmer**  
**Southeastern Indian Oral History Project (SIOHP)**  
**Interviewed by Dr. Samuel Proctor on December 3, 1973**  
**28 minutes | 24 pages**

**Abstract:** Mary Lou Farmer speaks about her family and remembers living on a farm when she was a child. She shares how Christmas was celebrated when she was a child and what church she went to. She discusses funeral customs that older Choctaw would observe, her relationship with her grandmother, and the work that her and her family would do on the farm. Farmer shares what food her family would eat and how they made hominy. She ends the interview by describing her work as a nurse's aide in the 1930s, the hardships the community faced during the Great Depression, and where she lives currently.

**Keywords:** [Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians; Mississippi--Choctaw; Agriculture; Oral biography]

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MISS CHOC 010

Interviewee: Mary Lou Farmer

Interviewer: Dr. Samuel Proctor

Date of Interview: December 3, 1973

P: I'm doing an oral history interview as part of the Choctaw Indian Oral History Program with Mary Lou Farmer. We are doing this interview in the gymnasium of the high school on the reservation, the Choctaw Reservation, Pearl River community. This is 9:20, Tuesday, December 3. Mrs. Farmer, do you want me to call you Mrs. Farmer?

F: That'll be all right.

P: Mrs. Farmer, where were you born?

F: I was born in Newton County.

P: Where is Newton County?

F: Down south.

P: What community do you live in now?

F: I live in Conehatta community.

P: Could you spell Conehatta for me, please?

F: C-O-N-E-H-A-T-T-A.

P: Conehatta. That's a Choctaw name?

F: Yes.

P: Do you know what it means?

F: I really don't know. I've heard it.

P: I don't either. I've heard it a lot and I was just wondering what it meant. When were you born?

F: I was born May 20, 1917.

P: 1917.

F: Yes, sir.

P: Have you lived in this area all your life?

F: Well, yes. Mostly.

P: What about your family? Where did your mother and father come from?

F: I really don't know.

P: Do you know if they were born in this area?

F: No, I sure don't.

P: What was your mother's maiden name?

F: Mandy Warner.

P: Mindy Warner?

F: Mandy Warner.

P: W-A-R-N-E-R?

F: Yes.

P: What about your father's name?

F: John Farmer.

P: John Farmer.

F: Yes, sir.

P: Now, you are using your maiden name? Farmer is your maiden name.

F: No, sir. I was married and married a Farmer.

P: Oh, I see. All right, that's good. I want that for the record, to find out that a Farmer married a Farmer. What kind of work did your father do?

F: He was a farmer.

P: And where was your home?

F: Down south, just below Lake.

P: Just below where?

F: Lake, Mississippi.

P: Lake, Mississippi?

F: Yes. It's about ten miles from Conehatta, farther south.

P: Farther south.

F: Yes.

P: As far as you know, your father had always been a farmer?

F: Yes, sir.

P: Did he own his own land?

F: No.

P: What was the situation, then?

F: He was a sharecropper.

P: Who'd he work for? Do you remember?

F: Floyd Loper.

P: Floyd Loper?

F: Yes, sir.

P: And can you tell me something that you remember about the farm when you were a little girl? What it looked like—

F: I remember so much, though. I just don't know how to begin.

P: Well, tell me. Let's start out. What is your earliest memory?

F: I guess it was about eight, seven, eight.

P: Eight years old, seven years? Yeah. Tell me what it was.

F: Oh, it was fun, living on the farm where you had to go to go to bed early, get up early. Go to the field, chop cotton. Pick cotton. Milk cows, feed hogs. Also pick cotton, and—

P: Now, you said that was fun. It sounds like hard work to me.

F: It was hard work, but it was fun.

P: Why? Why was it fun?

F: I liked it.

P: You like the life on a farm?

F: Yes, I do.

P: That's your earliest memory, about seven years old. Was it associated with any particular incident or anything? Search back in your memory and tell me the first thing that you can remember about your household or your family.

F: There's just so many thing I remember. [Laughter]

P: Can you remember your first Christmas?

F: Well, yes, my first Christmas, but we didn't have it at home. We had our Christmas at church. We had to come about ten miles in a wagon to the party, the Christmas party we had at church.

P: What church was that?

F: Macedonia Baptist Church.

P: Macedonia Baptist Church.

F: Yes, sir.

P: You are a Baptist?

F: Yes, sir.

P: Were you an only child?

F: No. It was three of us girls.

P: Three girls in the family. You're the oldest?

F: Yes, I'm the oldest.

P: What are your sisters' names?

F: Lily and Grace.

P: And where do they live?

F: They live in the same community as I'm living now.

P: What about your parents? Are they living?

F: No, they're both dead.

P: Where are they buried?

F: At the Macedonia Baptist Church, at the cemetery.

P: In the cemetery at the church?

F: Yes.

P: Are there any special customs associated with Choctaw Indian burials?

F: I really don't know, 'cause nowadays they bury them just like they do the non—

P: Indians.

F: Indians, and so ....

P: Is there a mortuary in Philadelphia that just takes care of the Indians?

F: No, it's in Union.

P: Union.

F: The one at Union and Philadelphia is the only two that I really know right now.

P: Are there any particular customs associated with death? Do you have a wake, for instance? When an Indian dies, what happens? Do friends and family come in?

F: Oh, yes. They do.

P: Is there a period of waiting between the time of death and the period of burial?

F: Yes.

P: About how long?

F: Oh, I imagine about one or two days. Somewhere along in there because some of 'em, when they die, well, they have friends living a long ways off and they have to send for them. And so, it's about same as the non-Indians, the way they do.

P: You don't think that there's any difference in customs or—

F: No, not nowadays.

P: How 'bout in the past?

F: In the past, well, they didn't wait too long to bury them. Within one day. Then, they had the funeral later on. They just buried the person.

P: And then had a funeral service later on?

F: Yes.

P: How much later on?

F: I'll be truthful with you. I've heard my grandparents says they wait a year or six months.

P: Why?

F: I really don't know.

P: Was it because the minister, perhaps, had to come in from some distance?



F: No, that wasn't it, I don't think. They just had this old-fashioned cry, as they used to say. But that's the way they had it, as a funeral. It was just a cry.

P: What do you mean by a cry?

F: Well, it's just like funeral. That's the way I think it is.

P: Now, the corpse is buried and this comes at some later time. Weeks, maybe even months after the corpse was buried. Is there any festivity associated with it? Not happiness, but I mean eating and drinking?

F: I really don't know too much about that, now.

P: Now, you never saw any of this. This is what your grandparents have told you.

F: No, I never have seen it, but I have heard my grandparents. The older people has talked about it a lot of times and I've heard it.

P: Were you very close to your grandmother and grandfather?

F: Yes, I was close to my grandmother, but I really don't know my grandfather.

P: But you do remember your grandmother well?

F: Yes, I do.

P: What kind of a lady was she?

F: Oh, she was a healthy lady.

P: What was her name?

F: Ellen. Cornelia Ellen Warner.

P: Warner. Now, you don't know where she came from?

F: No, I sure don't.

P: Or when she was born?

F: No, I sure don't.

P: But she's buried at the cemetery at the church?

F: Yes.

P: Did she live with you in your house?

F: No.

P: Where was she living?

F: She lived about a mile or two miles from where we lived.

P: You saw her regularly?

F: Oh, yes, I did.

P: What did she talk about, as far as the past?

F: There's so many things she talked about. I don't remember too much of it.

[Laughter]

P: Well, we oughta try to get some of that down on the tape so it isn't lost. Did she tell you about the past very much?

F: Not too much. But she was a hard-working lady.

P: What'd she do?

F: She lived on the farm, and done all the—

P: And so she worked on the farm too?

F: Oh, yes, she did. Oh, yes.

P: In an Indian household, a traditional Indian household, the mother, of course, had to take care of the family and do the cooking.

F: Yes.

P: She also worked outside in the fields?

F: Yes.

P: Well, in your house, where there were three girls, who helped your father? There was a lot of hard work to be done that you girls couldn't do.

F: Well, we did. We helped plow, because we helped in the fields. I was the oldest but I plowed some and so did my other sister—my baby sister, she plowed.

P: And you picked cotton, planted cotton?

F: We did. Pulled corn, picked dried peas, pulled up peanuts. Lot of things we did on the farm. Stripped cane, make syrup.

P: You made syrup?

F: Yes, in the wintertime we'd go to the woods, cut firewood. Haul 'em in or either tote them in. Either way.

P: What's the difference between hauling it in and toting it in?

F: [Laughter] Well, in toting it in, you have to carry it in your arms. When you hauled it, you have to have a mule and a wagon to haul it in.

P: And you brought the firewood in and then what'd you do with it?

F: Burn it.

P: Inside? That provided heat in the house?

F: Yes.

P: Your mother cooked on a firewood stove?

F: Yes, on the firewood stove, cast iron stove. That's what she cooked on.

P: She had an inside kitchen?

F: Yes.

P: Tell me about grinding cane. Tell me how you did that. Just think about it now, each of the steps.

F: [Laughter] I can think about it, but I just can't exactly put it the way it should.

P: Yes, you can. Did you have a mule, or—

F: Yes, the mule would go around and you put—

P: In a circle.

F: In a circle, and you put the cane between those two things and it squeezes the juice out and there'd be a great big pan out there where it goes in a big old barrel. And it drains into that, then it runs into that pan.

P: A wooden barrel?

F: Yes, wooden barrel.

P: All right.

F: And it run into that pan where they cook it and had a fire under it. And they cook the syrup until it's, you know, syrup.

P: How long does it take to cook it, do you think?

F: I don't know.

P: A day?

F: Oh, yes. It takes a day. But when you have a lot of it, it takes a week or so to get it all done up.

P: You grew your own cane?

F: Oh, yes, we did.

P: And cut it?

F: Yes.

P: Stripped it?

F: Yes.

P: And then you made it into what?

F: Syrup.

P: Syrup.

F: Yes.

P: And you bottled your own syrup?

F: We put 'em in syrup cans, in gallons and half-gallons. We'd call it tin cans, but they were cans that was tight enough to hold the syrup.

P: Where'd you store the syrup?

F: In barns.

P: Was this just for the use of the family or did you sell it?

F: Yes, we'd sell it. If we have any to sell, we'll sell it, but mostly we'd keep it.

P: Where did you haul the cotton in?

F: In a wagon.

P: To where?

F: To a gin.

P: How far away?

F: Right at that time, there was one close by, about two miles and a half from where we used to live.

P: After it was ginned, tell me what happened to it.

F: Well, they would sell the lint in bales. You know, they bale it up. And they sell it and also the seed, unless some keep it for seed.

P: Mrs. Farmer, when you were a little girl, what did y'all do for fun?

F: Fun? I just really don't know. We'd play in dirt, make mud pies.

P: Did you go swimming?

F: No.

P: There was no place to swim?

F: No place to swim, all except the creek. But Mother and Daddy wouldn't let us go swimming in creeks, so we never did swim. And I still don't know how to swim.

[Laughter]

P: What about toys? What kind of toys did you have?

F: We didn't have no toys. We made toys out of corn cobs or either rag dolls. That's what we used.

[Break in recording]

P: We were talking about the toys. You said y'all made rag dolls.

F: Yes.

P: You had no store-bought toys?

F: No, there wasn't any in town. There was not any in town at that time.

P: There were no toys in town?

F: No, not as I know of. Now, of course, I never did go to town too much. Just once a week, and that was on Saturdays.

P: Did you play any particular kinds of games? You said you played with dolls and you made mud pies.

F: Well, yes, we played games. But it was just hide-and-peek, a game we knew. That's all we played.

[Break in recording]

P: I want to ask you, Mrs. Farmer, about some of the holidays that you remember celebrating as a child. Was Christmas the big holiday of the year?

F: That's about the only holidays that I knew was Christmas.

P: What did you do on Christmas? Did you have a tree?

F: No. We never did have no tree. Not as I remember.

P: Was this true generally of the Indians? Did they not go in for decorated trees in those days?

F: I'm pretty sure it was.

P: Why?

F: I don't know.

P: Did you know about Santa Claus?

F: No.

P: Today, is Santa Claus a part of a child's Christmas today? An Indian child's Christmas?

F: Yes, I think that's true. But now, I think they know what Santa Claus, what real Santa Claus is.

P: Back in those days when you were growing up as an Indian girl, how did you celebrate Christmas?

F: I really don't know how we celebrated it. All I know—

P: Just tell me if you remember the things that you did on Christmas and getting ready for Christmas.

F: Oh. We would cook and invite friends over for dinner or either.

P: You went to church on Christmas Day?

F: Yes, we did.

P: What about the preparation for Christmas? Did you decorate the house at all?

F: No.

P: No decorations, no tree—

F: I don't believe we decorated—

P: Did you ever use the stocking idea of hanging stockings?

F: Yes, I believe I did.

P: How did you get your gifts on Christmas morning?

F: Well, Mother would tell us Santa Claus was coming, and so—well, I believed in it. I really believed there really was a Santa Claus. Well, he'd fill the stockings with candy and fruits, and that was our Christmas.

P: When you got up on Christmas morning, now, you got your gifts?

F: Oh, yes. I did.

P: And then the family went to church?

F: Yes, we did.

P: How far was church from home?

F: About ten miles.

P: How'd you get there?

F: In a wagon. We went in a mule and a wagon.

P: And did you go to Sunday school?

F: Yes, we'd go about twice a month. It was so far that we couldn't go every Sunday, but we would go twice a month.

P: Was this an Indian service? Was it an Indian preacher?



F: Yes, it was an Indian preacher, but we had a non-Indian Sunday school teacher. But still, he was our missionary. I believe that's the way it was.

P: All right, you went to church on Christmas morning.

F: Yes.

P: Do you remember anything about it being a special type of Christmas service?

F: No, I sure don't.

P: Any special Christmas hymns that you liked? What was your favorite Christmas hymn?

F: At that time, I don't think I stayed in church long enough to listen at any song—but in Choctaw. They sang mostly in Choctaw.

P: Everything was in Choctaw? The service was in Choctaw?

F: Yes, it was in Choctaw.

P: And, as you remember, was it the traditional Christmas song, "Silent Night", sung in Choctaw?

F: No, no. That wasn't it.

P: What do you mean, it wasn't it?

F: Well, we can't sing "Silent Night" in Choctaw.

P: Can you sing any of the Christmas songs?

F: No.

P: Why?

F: I don't know. I don't guess any people knew it.

P: But they did sing Choctaw hymns.

F: Yes. Yes, they did.

P: I see. Now, when you got finished you came back home, of course, from church and that's when you had your Christmas dinner.

F: Yes.

P: And friends and relatives were invited into the household?

F: Yes.

P: Did you serve any traditional Indian foods?

F: Now, what do you call Indian foods?

P: Well, that's what I want to get from you. I want you to tell me what—if you would describe anything as being Indian foods.

F: Well, I tell you, we didn't have all of this—I mean bread and things like that, but we had cornbread and biscuits and peas and things we grew on the farm.

P: Things that you grew on the farm.

F: Yes.

P: It was a self-sustaining farm.

F: Yes.

P: You ate the pork that you butchered and the beef that you butchered—

F: And the chicken we raised.

P: I see. And this constituted your food throughout the year, including special meals like Christmas Day. You didn't go out and get a turkey or anything specially for Christmas.

F: No. If we had turkey—I don't remember we having turkey—but if we did, it was wild turkey because there was wild turkeys at that time.

P: And your mother, of course, cooked everything.

F: Oh, yes.

P: She baked her own bread and biscuits and that kind of thing.

F: Yes.

P: Can you think of things that might be described as being traditional Indian things in the way that we associate spaghetti with being an Italian dish?

F: Well, what I can remember now is hominy. Now, we do that ourselves.

P: You remember how you did it?

F: Oh, yes. I do it myself.

P: Well, tell me how you fix it.

F: Oh, at that time we had these big old logs that you cut around it and burn it so long until it make a big hole in it. Then you wash it out. Then you get your corn, you put it in there and you have this—a pestle, I think they call it. And just beat it, a little for a long time, then, until the husk is coming off. Then you start beating it up harder, then it'll come to little pieces. Then you get the husk off and you cook it with peas or with neck-bones or ribs, something like that.

P: Some meat goes into the dish.

F: Yes. You can use meat. You can use chicken or pork.

P: Is this a main dish when it's served?

F: Oh, yes. It's the main dish. Now, you cook it with peas.

P: Any other vegetables? They used in the hominy?

F: No, they didn't at that time, but I think you can do it nowadays.

P: You ate whatever, then, was on the farm. You had plenty to eat?

F: Oh, yes. There was plenty at that time.

P: And you had to eat hearty because you were working hard in those days.

F: Oh, yes.

P: What about going to school?

F: [Laughter] Well, that's just a little—I don't know. I did go to school, though.

P: You did go to school?

F: Yes.

P: You learned how to read and write?

F: Yes, I did. I went to school when I was about nine, I guess.

P: Was it an Indian school?

F: Yes, it was an Indian teacher at that time. We went to church, to our Macedonia Baptist Church. There was two Indian teachers there, and I had to board with my uncle. I stayed with my uncle during the week and my father would pick me up on the weekends. And that's where I went to school. I didn't go to no government school until they built the government school. Then I went, I don't know, about two or three years.

P: How far did you get in school, Mrs. Farmer?

F: As far as the fifth grade.

P: The fifth grade. But you learned how to read and write, and no problems about that at all?

F: That's right.

P: All right, now. When did you get married?

F: Oh, gee. That was in the [19]30s. Around [19]36—

P: How old were you?

F: About eighteen or nineteen. I'm not real sure.

P: And what is your husband's name?

F: I first married a guy that was [inaudible 22:29]. Then he left me. Then I stayed single for two or three years, and then I went to work at the Indian hospital. I worked there for three years, I think. Then I got married again to a Farmer that lives at Philadelphia. Now, we've been separated for quite a while now.

P: Is Mr. Farmer an Indian?

F: Yes, he's an Indian.

P: What were you doing at the hospital?

F: Working as a nurse's aide.

P: And what did your duties, responsibilities?

F: Oh, gee, there were so many. That was in the [19]30s.

P: Those were the Depression years, weren't they?

F: Yes, it was. And it was just forty dollars a month. [Laughter] And, well, it was everything you had to do. Because it was just me on duty and the nurse. And I had to mop, sweep, give patient a bath, make up the beds. There's a lot of things I did.

P: Was this an Indian hospital?

F: Yes, it was an Indian hospital.

P: Where is it?

F: That one up here at Oak Hill, I worked there.

P: How'd you get the job there?

F: I don't know. I really don't know how I got it, but it was just before school started. Me and my mother, we was going out to pick cotton and the field nurse drove up and says they needed somebody to work in the hospital for two or three days. And she thought I could work. And I said, "Just for two or three days," so I says, "Yes, I could work." So I went. I came back with her. Then we went on. We came on up here to the hospital and that's where I started to work. And out of that two or three days, it was two or three years. [Laughter]

P: I was going to say, you must have fallen in love with that job.

[Break in recording]

P: Was life hard here during the Depression years?

F: It was. It was really hard. After Mother died, well, I quit working.

P: Why?

F: There was nobody to take care of her, and so I just quit and went home, and got married and raised kids.

P: How many children do you have?

F: I have five.

P: Now, these are from both marriages?

F: No, just one.

P: Mrs. Farmer, why was it so hard here during the Depression? The Indians were already poor.

F: Well, I really don't know. But it was really hard to get any—well, I guess it was just people kinda quit growing things. I think that's what it was.

P: What do you mean, they kind of quit growing things?

F: They quit growing things.

P: Why?

F: I don't know.

P: There are not very many farmers here now, are there?

F: No, there isn't.

P: And yet, this is the way that many Indians used to make their living, farming. You said you came out of a farm family.

F: Yes. Yes, I did.

[Break in recording]

P: How about your children? Tell me about your children. You said you have five children. What are their names?

F: The oldest one's my son, Cecil Farmer. The second is a girl, Jessie Lou Farmer. She's married now. And the third one is Donna Jean Grant, she's married. And the fourth one is Ruth Ann. Well, she's still single. And my baby is Ellen Gary Farmer.

P: Is your oldest boy married?

F: Yes, he's married.

P: So, you've got three married children and two living home with you?

F: Yes.

P: What does your boy do?

F: He's working here at a dormitory.

P: Doing what?

F: He's working at one of the dormitory as the boys' supervisor.

P: How many grandchildren do you have?

F: Nine.

P: I'm just glad that you can keep track of 'em, Mrs. Farmer. I didn't want to catch you in anything there. [Laughter] Where do you live now? How do you make your living? That's really what I'm asking.

F: I am not farming or anything, but on welfare.

P: Do you live on a farm?

F: No, I don't.

P: You moved off of that many years ago?

F: I live on the same place. On the same place as where we used to live. After Mother and my step-daddy died, well, they just built new—just some project houses on that place.

P: So what was a farm in former years is now a town.

F: Yes, that's what it is.

P: Right. The town's grown up around you?

F: Yes. And so, I'm living in a trailer on the same place. But I'm living in a trailer.

P: How long have you lived on that property? All your life?

F: Well, I moved away for nine years, and I came back. Now, I've been there three years, soon be four.

P: Where'd you move away?

F: I moved in Neshoba County close to Sebastopol. I stayed there nine years, then I moved back.

P: You've always lived in Mississippi, though.



F: Yes, I did.

P: Have you ever traveled outside of the state?

F: Every now and then. Not too many.

P: You've been to Oklahoma?

F: Yes, I've been there to my son's graduation and also my daughter's graduation.

P: Where did they go to school there?

F: Sequoia, Oklahoma.

P: This was a boarding school?

F: Yes.

P: You understand what we're gathering this information for, don't you, Mrs.

Farmer? That it is for scholarly research purposes?

F: Yes, I do.

P: You don't mind us transcribing this material at all and letting you see it to edit the thing? We'll send it to you.

F: That's fine.

P: All right, good.

[End of interview]

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