Myers gets grant for native Americans study

Sam Myers is not a native American Indian. But he can tell you a lot about them if you take his "American History I" course or "The American West" course at St. Louis Community College at Florissant Valley.

Or you can listen to cassette tape recordings of 139 native Americans and hear about their lives first-hand. The tapes recorded by Myers on a traveling Sabbatical last fall are available at the Florissant Valley Instructional Resources Building.

Myers, assistant professor of history at Florissant Valley, has recently received a grant of up to $20,000 from the National Endowment for the Humanities to be used to transcribe the interviews and disseminate them to other colleges and universities in the U.S.

Although endowment grants were awarded to 29 colleges and universities in 14 states, Florissant Valley was the only grant recipient in Missouri.

"We feel that these tapes and transcripts will give our St. Louis Community College students and people throughout the country a more intimate understanding of the lives and life chances of this minority group," says Florissant Valley president Raymond Stith.

"I think that Sam is reaping professional acclaim from an activity that began as a hobby and has grown into a major professional contribution. I really hope that the materials will be used by a wide variety of institutions across the country as well as in this area because they graphically describe what it means to be an American Indian in contemporary United States," he continues.

The people Myers interviewed range in age from 15 to 70, and include militants and non-militants, scholars and farmers, city dwellers and people who live on reservations, in addition to poets, Holy men and college students.

"I talked with people from about 50 different tribes in 17 states. I wanted to get a good cross section," he says. "My interview with Robert Bennett, ex-commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs gave me a neat overview of the situation in the U.S. today."

Myers found his sources helpful and in a variety of locations.

"One of my most unusual interviews was conducted in the St. Louis County jail in Hibbing, Minn. I got the judge's permission to talk for 30 minutes to a Chippewa who had been in and out of jail 29 times. Naturally, he was resentful and bitter about being 'unjustly' imprisoned. He saw the world as being wrong and he was right. However, he was soft-spoken and courteous. Incidentally, that tape begins with a singing dog."

Myers' interview with Ada Deer, a leader in the restoration of the Menominee Reservation in Wisconsin, is one of his favorites.

"She is an inspiring person. She believes that you can make things better if you are willing to pay the price and work for change. And she proved it."

On another tape is a discussion Myers had with a Navajo girl who dressed in her ceremonial clothes for the occasion. She told him that her entire family spends every weekend working at their sheep camp.

"It's the biggest event of her life," Myers says.

Another interesting interview was conducted with Ruth Roessel, an educator at the Navajo Community College in Tsaile, Ariz. "I found out that she socializes with the Kennedys and Shrivers when she's in Washington. For relaxation in Arizona, she goes sheep herding."

Myers' interest in American Indians has been strong since childhood. He was raised in Park Rapids, Minn., 20 miles from the White Earth Indian Reservation inhabited by Chippewas.

His interest in native Americans began snowballing after he joined Florissant Valley in 1969. At that time he suggested the curriculum include a special problems course about the American West.

A new special problems course entitled "American Indians—History" will be offered Spring semester at Florissant Valley. It will focus on their history, culture, religions and current situations.

Myers estimates that it will take about eight months to transcribe the tapes and another four months to edit, retype texts, and duplicate them. Transcripts will be cross-indexed by topic and the cross-index duplicated. Also, all colleges and universities in the U.S. will be notified of this material's existence. Complete sets of all transcripts will be sent to nine major universities and libraries from Yale to the University of California at Berkeley, Myers says.