LISTENING TO INDIANS

LEE COOK, Chippewa
August 26, 1975
Minneapolis, Minnesota

This transcript is one of a series of interviews with American Indian people throughout much of the United States by S.I. Myers of the History Department of St. Louis Community College at Florissant Valley, St. Louis, Missouri, 63135.

The purpose of these interviews is to bring the Indian peoples' own comments to students in classrooms, and to foster greater understanding among the peoples of the United States by providing Indians the opportunity to express their ideas and opinions to a wider audience.

This transcript has been edited for clarity and ease of reading, but every effort has been made to preserve the original feeling. Conversations and opinions were encouraged on any subject of interest to interviewees; questions and responses do not necessarily reflect the viewpoint of the interviewer, the National Endowment for the Humanities, or St. Louis Community College.

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NO. 25

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Sam Myers:
I'm talking today with Mr. Lee Cook, in his office in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Lee, you're a Chippewa from Red Lake?

Lee Cook:
Yes I am. Red Lake is kind of a unique reservation. It is unique in the country. The reservation is a Chippewa reservation located in the northernmost part of Minnesota. Its population is approximately 4,000 people, and its acreage is about 700,000 acres. Red Lake, incidentally, the lake itself, is the largest body of fresh water in any one state in the Union. Our reservation is recognized in this state and nationally as one of the few really "closed reservations." We have no state jurisdiction, and no jurisdiction other than federal jurisdiction on our reservation.

SM: Is that the difference between a closed and an open reservation?

LC: Essentially.

SM: You have your own laws?

LC: We have our own tribal court, our own tribal council, our own governing body, our own school system, our own police system, our own highway system, and a pretty self-contained community, although sometimes we do have some problems, similar to mine. I was elected to the council a year ago last May. The old council members denied me seating, and so I wound up in federal court for about ten months, and went through another election last February, and re-elected, and they still wouldn't seat me, and I nearly had to threaten to take over the reservation before they finally seated me. And sitting in the position that I'm in, I wind up being one of, I think, a very few persons--maybe right now the only one--that lives 300 miles away
approximately from his reservation, and sits on the tribal council.

SM: Do you have to get up there to attend meetings every so often?

LC: Yeah, I get up once or twice a month, and it's easier now, of course. I can always drive there if need be, but otherwise I can fly up to the reservation from Minneapolis. It's not a big problem, but Red Lake in itself is unique in a sense that it never went through the old Allotment Act. It's still communally owned, and the reservation and all the property--none of it's divided or held by individuals.

SM: Somebody said once that it's a piece of land that has never been ceded to the United States. In other words, it's still in the original Indian hands the way it was in the beginning. Is that true?

LC: Yeah. Legally we weren't relocated there, we didn't migrate there, we've been there for as long as history can record, so that when we've ceded lands to retain a part of our original land base which is presently our reservation, we ceded lands outside of the present exterior boundaries of the reservation with the understanding that within our exterior boundaries we would retain sovereignty and retain our own style of life and self-government. So that's unique. It wasn't a matter of establishing a plot of land by treaty or by agreement. We've had treaties, of course, but it wasn't a matter of agreeing to a particular portion of land. Uncle Sam has essentially agreed that we would stay where we were as always, and we would cede some lands outside of our historical land base.

SM: So the people are still there on their own territory as it has always been, operating it the way they see fit?

LC: Right.

SM: And, for example, the people on the reservation can fish, make their
own laws for fishing, they don't go by the state laws?

LC: No. We have nothing to do with the state. We've had a fishing industry up there, a commercial fishing enterprise, right now, for almost 70 years, and we've got a logging and timber enterprise that we've had for equally as long. We've always had some kind of basic enterprise, and again, I guess that's been unique to our reservation.

SM: Does the BIA have anything to do at all with Red Lake Reservation?

LC: Oh they're there like they are everywhere, and I think like everywhere else they do some ineffective. .. at Red Lake I don't know anybody'd miss them if they were gone. But at any rate, they happen to be there, and their role is more of a housekeeping kind of a function. But you know, the relationship between our reservation and our people and the federal government, the BIA happened to be the trustee on one hand. They're there, and I guess they'll always be there until our people become sophisticated enough to tell them to leave, which I hope isn't too long. They couldn't leave soon enough for me.

SM: The school up there. How is that operated?

LC: It's a large public school from K through 12. It's operated with a combination of funds that come from the states or Uncle Sam, and a combination of federal funds from Johnson-O'Malley funds to Title IV funds to what-have-you. Many of the same kind of funds that other public schools have throughout the United States, with the exception, I think, of Johnson-O'Malley funds. Ours is an Indian school board. We probably have one of the oldest Indian school boards in the country.

SM: Your own experience now. Were you born there, and did you grow up there?

LC: Yeah. I was born and raised there.
SM: Went to the reservation school?

LC: No. I've never been a particularly great fan of public schools. I went to the Catholic school there on the reservation, and I think the Catholic schools' results, at least at this point, are much, much better than the public schools'. If you were to take a combination of the leadership up there, and compare where they got started, the vast majority come out of the mission school, the Catholic mission school. Of 14 college graduates we have going now, something like 12 out of the 14 came out of the Catholic school. At the present time, sitting on the council, we've initiated a study to review the public school system, and to see why the lack of productivity, why the low achievement levels, and why the lower level of excellence among our public school kids than among the rest of the population. I think I know, of my own experience, some of the fundamental problems of our kids in the public school system, or any school system for that matter. But hopefully we'll come up with some recommendations and some opinions and some ideas from the consulting firm that's doing the study. The first phase of it ought to be done the end of next month, and we'll get some idea what we're looking at.

SM: Have you noticed what's happening at the Pine Point school? How they are running their own school now with their own school board also?

LC: Well, I was familiar with it in terms of its beginning and its intent and purpose. I'm not sure what its results are.

SM: It seems that the general atmosphere is one of much greater interest on the part of everybody involved now that they're running it themselves.

LC: Oh yeah, I think you've got much more community interest. What I guess I'm saying is that I'm not sure what net effect that has on the kids themselves.
SM: On their learning?

LC: Well, that's what schools are all about. I think most adults forget that schools aren't there for the convenience of teachers and administrators and counselors, but to provide, you know, positive educational experience for our children. And that's the problem that I see, not only with our alternative schools, whether they're Indian or non-Indian, but also with the general school systems.

SM: In your own case, after you graduated and got through with the Catholic school up there, did you go on to school somewhere else?

LC: I went to prep school at St. John's, and then to the University of St. John's, and then picked up my bachelor's degree there, and a master's degree at the University of Minnesota after that.

SM: Master's degree in what?

LC: School of Social Work, Community Organization.

SM: And then what did you do next after getting through with your schooling.

LC: Oh, I've had a variety of jobs. I started out with the AFL-CIO in training community organizers. I went from that to deputy director of the first anti-poverty program for the city of Minneapolis, and went from there to the director of the city of Duluth's community action programs. I went from that to assistant regional director of the U.S. Commerce Department for ten mid-central states. I went from that to take over as regional director in the Southwest for the Commerce Department.

SM: Where did you work in the Southwest, Lee?
LC: I operated out of Phoenix. And then I had all the economic development operations for Commerce Department in Arizona, Nevada and eastern California. And then I went from there to Washington, D.C., in 1970. At that time I was in a position that used to be called the Assistant Commissioner for Economic Development, but we did kind of twist things around a little bit, and I was director of economic development for the Bureau of Indian Affairs nationally.

SM: So you worked for the BIA?

LC: Yeah. Yeah, but I guess I never dreamed of working for the Bureau. When Secretary Hickel had asked me to come to work there, I'd turned him down about three times, and finally he said, "Well, don't say we didn't ask you, as you're always talking about needing Indians in the Bureau to make it run and to make it do what it's supposed to do, and don't say I didn't ask you." So when he first asked me I thought he was kidding. I said for me that was like going to work for Custer, but I really hadn't ever thought about that. I'd never once wanted to work for the Bureau, and he finally asked me, you know, "What's it going to take to get you to come up here?" And I said, "Well, I wasn't gonna go by myself," I said, "The old time bureaucrats would kill me up there by myself." And I said, "If you could let us put a team together, which would be a whole bunch of guys, because what you need is really a whole bunch of 'FBI's' running around up there." And he said, "Don't give me that full-blood stuff." And I said, "That's not what I'm talking about."

SM: Now FBI's, you mean. . . .

LC: Yeah, I think he needed a bunch of big Indians.

SM: Full-blooded Indians?
LC: No. That's what he thought I meant. I said, "No, the word that I meant to use was a little profane for the "f", but I said, "You need a bunch of big Indians, just walking through the halls, and getting it together up there." I said, "Then I think we can make some changes. But you've got to do it with a whole bunch of Indians at the top, not just one or two spread around that place, because they'd never do it." So finally he said, "O.K., can you put them together, who'd be coming?" I said, "Yeah." So I called up a number of guys across country that went up with me to the Bureau—guys like Ernie Stevens, he's Oneida, Tony Lincoln from Navajo, Billy Mills, famous for his Olympic feats in track and field, you know, a number of other guys that went up with us to form what was called the Bruce's "New Team," you know, and "Twelve Angry Men" and "The Dirty Dozen." We had all kinds of nicknames before we got done up there. But anyway, when I was there I enjoyed doing what I was doing, until after Morton came in, Secretary Morton, and then the reality of the Nixon Administration came into being. I finally resigned. I got involved in the issue of water rights all across the country. I remember when I left Washington I said I'd never seen a bigger bunch of thieves and crooks together in my entire life.

SM: When was that?

LC: In 1971. And when I left people said, how could I be so harsh, and how could you call them crooks and thieves and that kind of thing, and I said, "They are." I said, "This bunch of people they got up here in D.C. now are something else." Well, anyway, as it turned out I was right. But I knew it, and I could see it, and that's exactly what happened. They were giving away, you know, natural resources of this country like they were going out of style—to the power interests and mining interests, corporate interests, the gas interests, the timber interests, what have you.

SM: Not only on Indian land, but generally?
LC: Everywhere, and it was all done as a matter of political expediency. It had nothing to do with the basic trust that the Interior Department has over basic resources. It had nothing to do with the general welfare of the country. Part of the reason that I liked going to work for Hickel was that I liked his idea originally of inventorying natural resources, because even before I went with the Bureau I had done a number of speeches and a number of seminars on energy, and tried to convince our Indian community that they really had to take a second look, and to be very, very sensitive about their basic natural resources in terms of energy problems. I said, "You know the country just can't keep exploiting it at the present rate without at some point reaching the point of diminishing returns," and I said, "There's just not an unlimited supply on this earth." And it's my feeling that corporations based on the profit motive can't take the time to think about perpetuity of people. They're concerned about now; they're concerned about profits today, and not whether society survives for a couple more generations, and in my mind that would have an effect on Indians. And I told them I think they ought to watch the leases when they come up. I think you ought not to re-lease, I think you ought not to extend those leases, I think you have to retain and maintain control of your basic resources, because they're going to become doubly important in the very near future. Well of course they thought I had rocks in my head, but anyway that again has turned out to be correct.

SM: I suspect that most of the people agree with you.

LC: Oh yeah, but at the time when I was talking about it, even when I was president of the National Congress from '71 to '73. . . .

SM: The National Congress?

LC: I was elected president of the National Congress after I left the
Bureau that fall.

SM: National Congress of American Indians?

LC: Yeah. Of course I'd gotten to know Indians all across the country. I've been on every reservation in this country, and in every city in this country. After I resigned from the Bureau and I was elected president of the National Congress, it was an interesting kind of a switch for me, because I remember when I was finishing grad school I ran for tribal chairman of my own reservation, and everybody thought I was too young and I was too progressive, I was too radical, and all that kind of stuff, and it was really kind of a switch for me that there were people that were saying, you know, when you get an education like I've got, or have had the experience that I've got, that you don't want to become all of a sudden alienated and disliking your Indian culture and your Indian language and all that kind of stuff. So it was really a kind of redeeming thing for me that when I was elected I was the youngest president ever elected, I'm the best educated, the first one to live off the reservation in a setting like Minneapolis. I was elected on the first ballot, the first time anybody was elected in history that way. But I remember when I was giving my pitch after I was elected to the people that were there--3500 Indians from across country--that it was a symbolic kind of thing; that we really were maturing, and really were saying that people like myself that have got an education and have got some experience really can be helpful and really can be accepted back by our communities, and we really like to do what we can to be helpful to our people, and we would hope that they would give us that kind of an opportunity; and that we really do love our people, that we really do love our language, that we really do love our culture, and we really want to help to maintain that, see? And prior to that, it wasn't particularly well-received across Indian country. People had the feeling it
was useless anyway. We went and got a college education and got our degrees and what not; that somehow we were alienated from them. Now, of course, most Indian students, when they get through school, you ask them what they want to do, they want to help the people, they'll say, "Why do they want to go back to work for their Indian communities?" And on the other hand, you've got the reservations now that are pushing hard to get new college graduates, to get the people out of the schools and back to the reservation, and that's a phenomenal switch in the last five or ten years, but a healthy one.

SM: Where's the national headquarters of the National Congress?

LC: The National Congress of American Indians headquarters is in D.C.

SM: And you had your office there?

LC: I had an office there, and I had my home office here. The National Congress, the way it's set up, it's the oldest and largest Indian organization in this country. It's the first national Indian organization, and still the largest and still the most viable. When I took over the National Congress, we were in a little bit tough shape. We had fairly severe indebtedness, and not as good relations with the tribes that we used to have, and not as good relations with the federal government, but when I got done I think we had the largest tribal membership, the largest individual membership. I've gotten them out of hock of $200,000 and put them back in the black; I think established the best relationship with the U.S. Congress that anybody has had for a number of years; got more legislation through the U.S. Congress in my time in the National Congress than anybody before. Most recent legislation, the Indian Financing Act, the American Indian Policy and Review Commission, the Education and Financing Act, the Self-Determination bill, and a number of others
came out of my term in office of a couple years ago.

SM: Is that why Ada Deer suggested I talk to you, because your efforts helped their effort for restoration?

LC: Oh yes. I did a lot of work for Ada, and of course I baited Ada and the Menominees when I first went with the Bureau. The first thing I did I remember was to bring what were then called their county supervisors to Washington. I really had a feeling for them, and Ada and her crew, of course, initially got angry with me, and they had come into town one day and I happened to be visiting with a number of young council members, young tribal council men and women from across the country who were in D.C., and when Ada and some of her group came by they got mad at me and said, "Why did you bring those people into D.C.? They don't represent us?" And I said, "Well, you know they happen to be the people that recognize at this point in time that I can't help that, but," I said, "I do know that the only way that you're going to change your present status of being a terminated reservation is here in D.C. You've got to work with the President, the Vice-President, the U.S. Congress, and I think it's got to begin here, and it's got to end here, and if you get anything done it's got to be done here." And we got into a discussion about their termination, and again they got a little angry with me, because I said that you can't say that people that I brought here were your county supervisors don't represent you. Whether they were elected or appointed, they still are, in fact, the recognized governing body. And she made a comment, or one of the girls made a comment, that they're just like other tribal people, they don't represent their people. Well the scoop that I had on the youngest council chairman and chairwomen and council members across the country that were sitting with me, and they jumped on their case and said, "Hey, don't say that. Don't tell me that I don't represent my troops." And I said,"Look, you know, part of the problem is a lot of you people that
were my age and your age were in school when that money came, you know, for the settlement. It was pretty convenient and pretty handy when you were at school, and you know a dollar in school looks like ten dollars when you're out of school and working, in terms of its value to you. But at any rate, the question came up. I said, "Look, the legislation said that you are no longer an Indian person. It said your reservation is no longer a reservation and you are no longer an Indian tribe, or an Indian people.

SM: The Menominees?

LC: Yes. In their termination bill. So I said, "Then how do you prove that to your children?" And they said, "Well, in our hearts we're Indian." And I said, "Well, that's terrific, but what do you do with your kids? I mean, how long do they believe in their heart that they're Indian? What do you show them, or what do you do to them to prove that they are, in fact, Indian?" And I said, "You know, it's like I happen to be a member of the Red Lake band of Chippewa Indians, and I know that Red Lake is there, and it exists and it's real. It's no different for Indians than it is for Irishmen or German or whatever. They say that they're German or Irish or what have you, because they still exist, and that's no different than the state of Israel for the Jewish community. Everybody has and needs some kind of land base; that's part of human nature and part of human history," and I said, "You know, you're no exception to that. When the Menominee Reservation's gone, so goes the Menominees, and as far as we're concerned, you'll no longer exist--that piece of paper said you were officially and administratively and congressionally destroyed--you no longer exist." I said, "You know, when I've talked to you guys about genocide taking different kinds of tacks these days," I said, "Where what used to be done to us with guns and soldiers is now done to us by law legislation and policy, and you've got to understand that." I said, "And you were
absolutely scratched. It doesn't make any difference whether it's done on a piece of paper or you were thrown in the ovens like the Jews or any others at Auschwitz, it's the same net effect--you are destroyed, you no longer exist legally.

SM: The word "termination" itself comes to mean that, doesn't it, in the mind of the people involved?

LC: Sure.

SM: Does the National Congress have a publication that we could get to keep up on these things?

LC: Sure. It's got two publications that come out pretty regularly. The National Congress is headquartered in Washington. The new address is, I think, 1436 K Street, but I'm just not certain. But anyway it has two publications. It has the National Congress Bulletin that is published about every other month, and it's got the National Congress Sentinel, that's a regular magazine that comes out once or twice a year.

SM: Would you say these are the two best sources for accurate information on the Indian people of the country?

LC: I don't think there's any one that's best--I think that's no different than saying which newspaper is the best in this country. I think they're trying to highlight those things that are happening in the Indian country, recognizing it is a national organization, it's not purely local in nature. They may have some special interest oriented in some of their issues, but generally they're concerned about national legislation, national policy, national programs, national issues, national concerns of Indians and legislation and lobbying that has to do with the national Indian community, and that's been the role
historically. They happen to be the historical lobbyist, chief legislative advocates or adversaries, depending on the legislation that's being proposed in the U.S. Congress.

SM: We simply categorize them as good and dependable, but not necessarily claiming a monopoly on those qualities.

LC: Not as far as the magazine. In terms of lobbying legislation, they've almost had a monopoly and they've been in there struggling by themselves for years, but there are other organizations now in Indian tribes and Indian organizations that work side by side in the Congress now in national legislation and policy.

SM: There's another publication that gets quite a bit of circulation--Akwesasne Notes?

LC: Akwesasne Notes, yah.

SM: Would that be a different kind of thing than these?

LC: Akwesasne Notes is a newspaper. These are more magazine-type editions from the National Congress. Akwesasne Notes is a newspaper like the New York Times and the Minneapolis Tribune.

SM: And it reflects the views of a different group of people?

LC: No, it reflects the views of all kinds of Indians because it's a newspaper. The National Congress is a bulletin and a magazine. It's like the Catholic Bulletin or the Commonweal magazine or the National Republic magazine and that kind of thing--they're magazines and not a newspaper. There's a real difference between a newspaper and a magazine. It's like comparing the New York Times and Time magazine, and that's the difference between the National Congress publications and the Akwesasne Notes.
SM: O.K. Now, the Menominees. Is there anything else we can add, from where you saw it as it took place?

LC: Well, I think it got what it needed in people like Ada and Shirley Daly and others that worked so hard and persistently and, I think, within the system. Not to say that that's always the right way to go, because I'm not particularly nuts about systems and institutions that are obsolete. But the kind of persistence, the kind of dog determination that Ada and others had, of the Drums group, in the restoration committee itself, was super. You know, it just took that kind of determination to believe that it could be done. I think what they exemplified was what I think Indians across the country really believed. If you look at, say what you know Indians are really interested in, grass roots type Indians, they're interested in, first, retaining the basic land base that we have today— not asking for the rest of the country, it's in too bad a shape— but just retaining what it is we've got that we presently own and retain. Secondly, that we get the treaties recognized and really carried out and fulfilled, the intent and purpose of them. And thirdly, the protection of the most fundamental of all civil rights, that being the right to survive as a people and as a culture in our own country. Those are the three fundamental interests that I see across the Indian country, and I think particularly the second one, the issue of treaties and the issue of relationships, that's crucial in the country, and I think the Menominees demonstrated that. They really believed that they could do it. I think they really believed that there was enough of a sense of conscience and sense of humanity in Congress and across the United States to support that feeling. I think there is today, and I think when we talk about the Bicentennial and all of that, that Indians are the kind of people that really believe that this country will come around and recognize the fact that it did make some agreements, they did make some promises, but that this country is big enough, hopefully, and human enough, and
understands justice enough, and has a sense of morality enough, and a sense of humanity enough to at some point realize that they're not going to make a new beginning in this country unless they recognize the treaties as postured. That's going to be a new beginning of the country.

SM: If the full intent and purpose of the treaties were recognized, what implications would this have for the country?

LC: Well, the country's gone through some turmoil of recent date, and it's about to celebrate its 200th birthday party. It's talking about a new kind of beginning, a new sense of morality, and what is in store for the next hundred years. The Bicentennial celebration, it means if the country's really going to set some new goals and some new priorities and some new kinds of designs; if it's going to grow and it's going to be successful, that certain fundamental issues have to be discussed. In my mind the country can't take a new beginning and it can't do anything right, until it really accepts its responsibility that it made to the Indians, and that treaties are as valid today as they were when they were written. The country makes a big to-do about Article III of the Constitution that talks about treaties being unique in all the world—our treaty-making powers; that treaties are the supreme law of the land; that once established they supersede all municipal and state law, and that our provision for those is unique in the whole world. We talk about that a lot, and it's a lot of rhetoric, and only in my mind when the country owns up to its responsibility and debt to the Indians can it begin a new beginning for the next hundred years. All I'm saying is that the treaties mean that; that they can't be shoved under the rug; that the destruction of Indian country and Indian people isn't any less real than were the destruction of the Jewish people by the Nazi government. Except in this country we tend to place Indians in history and not part of reality. We like to think of them as part of history, and that's part of the difficulty—the Indians can't
generate the kind of momentum that blacks did in the civil rights movement, because the average person really thinks of the Indians as part of history, the cowboys and Indians days and the old frontier days and all of that, and Pilgrim days, but not part of reality. And reality says that this country made some commitments and some agreements. It has something to say about this country's sense of morality and about this country's sense of justice and this country's sense of humanity. And until those are recognized, then all the kinds of promises and all the kinds of goals and all the kinds of things that this country wants to do really won't make any sense unless they settle back and say that once and for all they're going to do something about the treaties they made with Indians. And I just think the kind of expedience that this country's operated on is going to continue; the kind of existentialism--what's right and what's wrong, what's good and what's bad--is going to continue until the country owns up to its wrongdoings, owns up to its immorality; owns up to its injustice; owns up to its lack of social responsibility, and all of that with Indians. And then I think it can really say that we really are going to take and begin a new kind of morality and a new kind of sense of justice in the next hundred years. That really has something to say about the maturity of this country, and, you know, I think the treaties are very much a part of that. I think that's part of the purpose and intent of the American Indian Policy and Review Commission that's presently in operation. It's to review the implications of treaties to see whether they're real today--and they ought to be--whether they came up with the conclusion that they aren't and they aren't valid and they aren't viable today. And that policy and review commission is going to take a look at the trust relationship, and they're going to take a look at the special relationship of the federal government and Indians; they're going to take a look at whether the government has a responsibility to the Indians no matter where they reside, both reservation and non-reservation Indians, you know, lots of kinds of questions; whether or not
the Bureau of Indian Affairs as presently structured is a vehicle that ought to be destroyed, that ought to be buried and something else be created to provide for the delivery of federal funds to Indian people.

SM: Do you have any suggestion in mind for a substitute or replacement?

LC: Well, I think I'd like to see something like the independent federal corporation structure that Tennessee Valley Authority has, rather than the present structure of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. I think the system is obsolete. I think it's ineffective, and I just think you need a whole new kind of delivery system where Indians are really involved in and really can talk about self-determination and all of that that has to come from them, and I would suggest that kind of a structure similar to TVA, and I think it would work. I think we have Indians capable of running that kind of an organization, and I think it would provide for a much more effective and efficient delivery of services and funds to Indians, and we need that today.

SM: You did say a moment ago that you didn't expect to take all the land back because that wasn't very practical?

LC: Right.

SM: But, on the other hand, do you feel at all hopeful that this progress might begin to take place—the progress toward better handling of the whole situation that you were just describing? Is there hope in your mind and heart?

LC: I think there has to be. I don't like to believe the adage that, "He who lives in hope, dies in despair." Too many Indians have died in despair already, hoping that this country will come around. But I think it'll happen. I think it's got to happen. I've got enough,
I think, confidence in the people of the United States to recognize that they've got some responsibilities, and that they really do have a sense of humanity and they do really have a sense of morality, that they've got to re-establish and they've got to re-demonstrate, and re-affirm. People talk about the Bill of Rights and the Article of the Constitution, and all that, but nobody really understands it, because everybody operates on a system of existentialism in terms of morality and sense of humanity and all of that. Everything in this country, no matter whether you're a priest or a minister or a judge or a congressman or whatever, or a school teacher or a policeman—everybody operates on a sense of expediency. And that simply means that what's right and what's wrong, what's good and what's bad depends on what happens to be practical politically, or financially expedient in any given moment of time. And until that's changed, until you get some consistency in all of those, the country is got to go bananas, you know, it'll never pull itself together.

SM: You've got a lot of support outside the Indian community for this same sort of attitude, don't you?

LC: But that's the thing I'm counting on. I think that people in this country really want that. I don't think they really like the expediency. I don't think the average John Doe, citizen, appreciates being treated differently than John Doe, banker, or John Doe, judge, or John Doe, politician, in their churches or in their schools, or by the courts or by any institution in this country. And I think people want consistency, they want to be treated alike. They don't like the favoritism, they don't like nepotism, they don't like to be treated differently, they don't like to be treated as a matter of expediency, and I think all those things coming together are going to have an effect on how the country does in fact recognize its Indian community, and how it's going to live up to those responsibilities, I really do.
SM: Well that gives me some hope too. But now, let's go back to your own personal experiences, because there are interesting things about you we haven't touched on yet. Can we pick up there where we left off and trace you up to your present activities?

LC: Well, I love politics, and I understand American institutions well enough to know that politics has a tendency to make the world go round, and much of the activities in this country are dictated by politics. When I left Washington, I made a decision that wherever I went, I wanted to get my feet on the ground, get settled down. I'd done enough moving around. I had made a decision after I finished school to spend ten years working for Indian people, and then I was going to take care of myself and my family, and I figured I had both a personal as well as a moral responsibility to do that. Last year was my 10th year in spending my life working for the total Indian population across country.

SM: And you're not through yet?

LC: I'm not through in the sense of my working directly for Indians. It's a private Indian housing corporation, an Indian housing development. It was one, I guess, I took because I had a difficult time saying "no." I had decided after leaving D.C. to get into politics. I was either going to go back to Arizona where I came from, because I thought I could have run for Congress and won out there, or come back to Minneapolis which was really my home base, and to get settled down and begin to get involved very actively in the political process here, which led me to doing a number of different kinds of jobs since I've been back in town the last couple of years. I'm presently self-employed. I run my own consulting business, a business consultant business, and I took over this housing project, I guess on an impulse, because it was an Indian project. It had been threatened with foreclosure four months ago--it was in deep
trouble financially; lots of problems that weren't directly related to the Indian community as much as to the original sponsors who were a lot of do-good people that had what I call "a public housing mind set." You buy a nice house and you take care of the rest of the amenities yourselves. Well, that's not the way it happens, so when I took over the place it was badly in need of repairs--it's only a two-year-old project--and the rumor was that the reason it was screwed up was because Indians and blacks were running it, and that I was gull's meat, but anyway I took it over and nobody in town nor with the Department of Housing and Development ever thought I'd put it back together again. But I did it. I said I'd do it in three months and I did it in three months.

SM: You have it running and it's a viable concern now?

LC: Oh yeah. It's running well, the books are organized, the books are reconciled, the place is fixed up and everything's operating that should be operating.

SM: Do you still have your consulting business too?

LC: Yeah, I still do that, and I've got to get back to that. And while I'm doing this I'm running for city council here in Minneapolis. I think I'm going to win.

SM: That's going to be a novel situation too, isn't it?

LC: Yeah. Oh, yeah. But I think I'm going to win. If I do win, it'll be unique from a number of vantage points. In the first spot, I'll be the only person sitting on the tribal council on one hand, and a different kind of an elected governmental position on the other.

SM: The council and the largest city in the state also.
LC: Right. And what it represents in terms of being Indian is that I'm really exercising my dual citizenship. But, on the other hand, from a practical vantage point, here in Minneapolis it will be the first time any minority person of any kind has ever been elected to the city council. They've just never had a minority person on the city council.

SM: Never at all?

LC: No, and so I think I'm going to win, and I think this is a pretty sophisticated city. I've had a lot of experience here in town, and I know the city very well.

SM: You're running for councilman from the 11th ward?

LC: The 11th ward.

SM: So only that ward's population can vote for you?

LC: Right. That's a pretty conservative ward, I think. There are only about four or five Indian families in the whole ward. It's a largely white, fairly conservative neighborhood.

SM: There are quite a few Indians in Minneapolis, aren't there?

LC: Yeah.

SM: But they're not in your ward?

LC: No. No, I live in a ward that tends to be conservative, that's largely white, middle-class people. It's got . . . maybe 10% of its population is black, the Indian population is next to nothing. As I said, we've got about four or five families there.
SM: Where is it in the city?

LC: It's in the south central part of town, and runs from parts of 42nd and 44th Streets on the north side, across to 62nd Street on the south side, and from Lyndale to Cedar, east and west. So it's a big ward, it's a conservative ward, but it's a ward that I've been actively involved in in lots of ways that should be helpful—active with the parks system, I've been active with the school boards, and I've been active with neighborhood organizations.

SM: People are getting to know you?

LC: Oh, most people know me, I think, not getting to know me.

SM: You've been in the news a good deal too?

LC: Oh, I guess I've been in the news around here for 15 years.

SM: All of this is going to make votes, isn't it?

LC: Oh, sure. Like when I was in Washington, I went three months every day without a miss for something in the newspaper here, and that's a fact. But I think generally just the kind of things I've been involved in, I think people understand that I think I'm capable, I think I've got a sense of integrity, I don't lie to people, and I don't like to be lied to.

SM: Can you get out and see a lot of the people personally?

LC: Oh yeah. I door-knock every day for three hours, and I door-knock week-ends for about eight to nine hours.

SM: That'll probably do it.
LC: I think that's helpful. I've got 12,000 houses in my ward, and I've door-knocked 3,000 at this point, and I'll door-knock every house in the ward before I'm done.

SM: If you can meet the people and talk to them, I can't see how you can miss.

LC: Well, we'll see. I hope so. I tend to believe that. I think I've got a good campaign organization, I've got a good campaign family, I've got lots of good friends, and so far I'm ahead of the game. And I think we're going to pull through. I think we'll do it, and I think it says something about the community that I'm a part of in general, but I think a part of the ward as well. But I think it'll say something for Indians. You know, in the back of my mind is that I'd really like to be elected for lots of reasons. One, because I like Minneapolis, and have been first in lots of things for Indians, but it would be neat to be first for the city of Minneapolis to elect an Indian to the city council. I think that would be more than an appropriate way to begin the next hundred years in this country, to have an Indian elected to the city council.

SM: When will the election take place?

LC: November 4th. So it's going to be unique, it's going to be an interesting thing, and I think it means a lot, not just to me, but to the community at large, and to the Indian people particularly.

SM: Your own family—you mentioned a good political family. Do you have a wife and children?

LC: I have a wife and three children, a 12-year-old daughter, an 8-year-old son, and a 3-year-old daughter. And they're good troops. They campaign with me, they door-knock with me, and my wife's a good
tough trooper, and she's been through a lot with me, and she takes it pretty much in stride.

SM: Is she from Red Lake also?

LC: No, my wife is not Indian. My wife is white, super tough, and as far as knowing Indians and understanding them, she probably knows more about them and understands them better than many Indian people understand about themselves.

SM: This has been said by other people in positions like yours.

LC: She really can't help that. She's been with me through the National Congress and through my Bureau of Indian Affairs days and my days in the Southwest with Indians, and all of the Midwest, and people in my reservation think she is a super gal. In fact, at her birthday party last year the tribal women presented her with an absolutely gorgeous handmade shawl. And she's thought of very highly, she's very capable, and gets along well with everybody. You know, for me she's a really terrific partner.

SM: Great

LC: And then, I was orphaned when I was seven years old, so I have, I guess, a different kind of respect for having a family than lots of people do. And I really put a lot of value in family life, and I never had much of one myself, but I just feel guys like myself can go through life and do a lot of things for the world, but if you lose your family I really don't think you've accomplished anything. I tend to believe that, and if ever I did anything that in my mind would affect my relations with my family, or alienate my family from me, I think I'd give it up, because they're super, and I still think the family is basic to a healthy society, and you need healthy families to have a healthy society.
SM: That was basic to the ancient Indian community as well as today, wasn't it?

LC: Yeah, I think it was basic to every community's existence, Indians and non-Indian's alike all over the world, and I don't like to see that deteriorate any more, or dilute it any more, than it's been in this country. I think it has to be a renewal of the import of family life, you know, just strong families. You get alienated enough in this society just in the normal course of events without working at it and having it happen to your family too.

SM: Of all the things that have been going on, has there been any particular activity that would be working against your success in politics here in Minneapolis or nationally, for that matter?

LC: No, I don't think so. You know, I've had a funny kind of existence. I really don't know any personal enemies that I have. Every place I've ever been I've maintained my friendships with everybody that I've ever known, and I tend more to make friends and keep them than I do make enemies or to lose friends.

SM: The activities of some of the other organizations, AIM for example, would that tend to help you or harm you in any way in your political aspirations?

LC: I've never been really involved with AIM. I've been supportive of some of its activities; I sympathize with a lot of things they've done. I understand, I think, where they're coming from and what they're about, but I've never been a member of AIM, and I'd work for them, I've worked with them, I've known the guys involved with AIM for a long time. It's not that I don't understand the organization, but, you know, I've never been an active member of it, but I understand what they're about.
SM: Trying to keep your business going, this center going, this housing operation going, and your campaign going, it must keep you a little bit worn out, doesn't it?

LC: It's a little hectic, but then...

SM: You're young and strong.

LC: Yeah. I enjoy being busy and I like to work, and I guess that might make me a little different than lots of people.

SM: Well now, these tapes go into our library where everybody, the whole student body, can have access to them. Is there any other comment or message you'd like to add in conclusion?

LC: I've talked to so many groups. I've talked to lots of college audiences, and I like college people. I sometimes tend to be a little distant in terms of how they function in society, but I think, nevertheless, they're still going to be the future policy makers, and the future influencers of this country's direction. My feeling is to a college audience, that I think, well, with all the discussion of the way this country is going and to where they believe they're going, I'd just like to leave them to understand that Indians are a real part of society; that you may find them in your churches, in your classrooms, and in your schools and in your neighborhoods one day, even in St. Louis. I know we've got Indians in St. Louis, as well as throughout Missouri. And to understand that we are real, that we're not part of history, and that when Indians talk about things that happened 150 years ago and all of that, that's true. If you understand that the Bureau of Indian Affairs was created in 1825, that's 150 years ago, and so they all say, "Well, you can't blame us for things that happened years ago," but at the same time, it's not a question again of expediency or existentialism, it's a question of accepting reality. You can say that you weren't a part of the
original articles and by-laws of this country either, but we still live with those, and we've got to continue to live with those things. But to understand that the treaties were real, that they were viable; that Indians are real, and I think they're viable in today's society; that we're going through a transition; to understand that the activism that you're seeing on the part of the Indian people, in my mind, is healthy. You get a little tired of talking about Indians from the vantage point of where they fit in the socio-economic status in this country, and that is the highest drop-out rates in school, the highest suicide rate, the disproportionate level of alcoholism, the unemployment rates, the substandard housing, all that. Indian activism, hopefully is, in my mind, a new kind of transition Indians are going through to say that we are going to survive, that we are going to participate, and we're going to become politically active, we're going to become socially active, we're going to become active in politics, we're going to become active in the schools, we're going to become active in athletics, we're going to become active in music, in arts, and all of that's going to take place.

SM: The population is growing too, isn't it?

LC: We've got the fastest growing population in the country, so that Indian activism, in my mind, is going to have an effect, a net effect, in not too long. We're going to see a decline in all those things---a decline in alcoholism, decline in suicide, decline in unemployment, a higher level of graduating members from high school and colleges. Just that alone. When I was in college 10 or 15 years ago, we had a couple thousand of us in the whole country that were in college. Today we're looking at almost 25,000 to 30,000 Indian students in college, so it's making a difference, and you're going to see a difference. Guys like myself that get a little tired in the business...the problem of being over-employed, too many demands, too many things to do, that we haven't got enough Indian college grads, Indian technicians and Indian professionals to do the work that people want us
to do and would like to see us do. So that we've got a long way to
go, but at the same time, we're making a lot of quick progress. So
not to be surprised at Indian activism—I think people ought to be
surprised why Indians haven't become active before, why you haven't
had Wounded Knees and why you haven't had Gresham, Wisconsin, and
why you haven't had more take-overs and more militancy on the part
of Indians. But I think Indians have a fundamental belief that
people are fundamentally good, and that people fundamentally want to
do the right thing, and hopefully that's what will come out of some
resolve on the part of this country in deciding what it's going to
do and where it's going to go in its next hundred years.

SM: That's a beautiful summary of the whole situation, Lee. I want to
thank you very much, and hope we have a chance to hear of your
success.