Listening to Indians

DEANNA CROWFOOT,
Blackfoot - Saultaux
October 27, 1975
Provo, Utah

This transcript is one of a series of interviews with American Indian people throughout much of the United States by S. L. Myers of the History Department of St. Louis Community College at Florissant Valley, St. Louis, Missouri, 63136.

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. 87

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Sam Myers:
I'm talking today with Deanna Crowfoot, a young lady I was fortunate to meet, because she represents two different tribes up north that I hadn't had a chance to talk to before. Deanna, would you tell me about your background?

Deanna Crowfoot:
My name is Deanna Crowfoot, and I'm a Blackfoot-Saultaux from Canada Alberta. I originated at Gleeschen, on the Blackfoot Reserve. That's near Calgary, Alberta. It's an hour's drive away, and there's ten children in our family and my mother and my father. We were bussed to a school called Carsland. It was an hour away from our home, and there we went to school with white people. There are schools on our reserve, but they are boarding schools, and they are all mainly Indians, and my mother didn't really want us to go there, because there are better opportunities in Carsland, because there was the right people there, and we could go in the same classes with them and learn the same things that they were learning, and then we'd have to compete so that we could get good grades along with them. And then we'd have to come home again. My mother used to travel around, and that's how she met my father, and back then you do not intermarry, and so therefore we are called half-breeds, we weren't called Indians. Therefore we were excluded somewhat from the other kids because we came out, I guess, looking a little different than they all did. And we'd go on the bus, we'd get beat up, you know, and this and that.

SM: By other Indian kids?

DC: By other Indian kids because we were half-breeds. And my grandfather really didn't appreciate my mother, and so my mother, she really took a lot, and she was fair, fairer than my father, because my father's dark, and so then, when they started to drink, they started calling her names, and they were calling us names, so we got it, you know, on
the bus. My mother, she'd always pray. For five years she prayed, "I want something better for my kids. I don't want them to...." Just normally what all the other Indian kids are doing on the reservation—they'd grow up, quit school, then they'd get married... well, some wouldn't all quit school, but the majority of them did. And then the Mormon Church came and we were all baptized except for my father, and from there we left on foster homes. Going back to what I can remember of my family is that we lived in a four-room house. And apparently, now that I study sociology and everything, we were in poverty, but I never knew that. Nobody told me that I was poor, and I didn't think I was poor. And I was happy because there was just my family and then our neighbors. We all got to know each other 'cause we played around. And all we had was the bare necessities—we had our clothes, we had foot to eat, and there was nothing else that really mattered. And then we'd go to powwows. Most people do not know about powwows. We have them once in a while, and this is when we all come and we dance in our traditional costumes. Mother would always bring us there, and always bring us back, 'cause there's a lot of fighting on our reserve, and she didn't want us to get beaten up or anything like that, 'cause that would happen. And I used to remember when I'd get off the bus, I came running home, and my mother would be cooking fry bread, and there's a beautiful smell, and just a warm feeling that was love there, now that I think about it. I just knew there was a beautiful feeling there, and I'd run home and I'd throw my books down, and my other little brothers and sisters used to be playing outside with the pigs, you know, we'd go and play around. We wouldn't really study; she'd never tell us, you know, "You'd better sit down and study." So we just put our books down and we'd play around, watch T.V. and play with each other, then we'd go to school the next day. And then my father used to go to town, and he used to buy one-cent candies, about twenty-five cents of them, and that was the biggest treat! I mean, it's so simple, but yet, he'd walk around really proud, you know, and we'd all follow him 'cause we knew he had these candies and he'd give us one. We'd think, "Oh man,
I got a candy," you know. And he used to have, I guess, self respect then. And my grandma, she used to sit us around her, and we'd all tell stories. She'd tell stories about the Indian way, and things like that. It was just good. And then I remember I came home and I was about in the fourth grade or the fifth grade, and there was something different. My father was drinking heavily, and I'd come home and the house would be empty, there'd be no feeling there, it'd be cold. I used to walk around thinking, you know, just feeling it. And my mother wouldn't be there any more, and there'd just be a few of us kids, 'cause the rest of the kids went on placement program, and that's when I decided that I want all my brothers and sisters to go on placement program, because I wanted them to come home to a mother, to come home to love, where there's somebody there and they could talk to them and everything. Winter came and we'd have to start the fires. When we were younger we were taught to help clean the house, to help. Like when I went to the white families, the kids didn't work. We all had jobs to do and we did them. So that's when the placement program came. The placement program is for the Mormon Church. And we all joined the Mormon Church, and that even made the Blackfeet hate us more, because we were Mormons now. It's a program and they go to the white families and they ask them, "Would you like to take a foster child in your home? They'll be Indians, and you'll keep them for ten months, and you'll raise them as your own, you don't get paid for this, and you treat them as your own. You buy them clothes, and you send them to school, and you buy them their books and you fulfill their other needs too, also, like hugging them and everything." And if they want to, they'll say "yes," and if they don't, they don't. Nobody looks down upon them. And so then they come to the reserve and they tell the people, "We have this program here, and you can send your children away and they can get schooling opportunities that you can't have on the reserve, and education is more advanced outside the reserve, there are better opportunities." So they have to get the signature of both parents,
and my both parents signed, but first they always asked, "Do you want to go?" And I said, "Yes." And my mother ... can you imagine giving up one of your own children, and you don't know who the family is, or anything about them, but you just give them up in trust. And so she gave us up and we all went on placement program. And I used to come home during the summer, and she'd tell me, "How are they?" My first foster home, it wasn't good then, 'cause I came off really bitter, because they had a stereotype ideal, and they tried to push me in their categories. 'Cause I remember I wanted to play outside later, you know, and at home nobody ever told me, "You be in at 9:00 o'clock." And there they had rules, and I wasn't used to it, and so I'd live by them because it was their home, but I remember one time I asked my foster sister, "Why?" And she goes, "Because she's scared you might get pregnant, 'cause Indian girls get pregnant." And I didn't even know how to get pregnant. And I thought, "Really?" And she just walked off, and so I thought about that. And she used to blame me for anything that went wrong in the house.

SM: How old were you then?

NB: I was eleven. And there was just a strained feeling. Like, I'd walk in the room and then she'd walk out. Or else when she walked in I'd walk out. There was no communication whatever. They filled my needs like to eat and to go to school, and I used to go up to my room and cry 'cause there was nobody to talk to, to tell my problems to. And little kids are honest. And their little kids used to come and tell me, "Why don't you just go back to your little shack?" I didn't know I lived in a shack, and I didn't understand, and I'd think in my room, and there were just problems like that. There were really good times, but I remember those things that are imprinted in me. And when I left I was glad to leave. I couldn't wait. And my social worker only came twice, and I never said anything to him, because he was white too, and I didn't care for the white people, I hated the
white people when I came home. I would never talk to the case worker who did that to me. And then I didn't want to go, but I went anyways. I stayed home one year, and then I went again. I went to this other home, and everything was going really good, but apparently they wanted more wealthy things, you know, and I guess I was a burden to them, and they just asked me to leave one night. I just came home from this MIA, that's another organization in the church. She called me in her room, and she sat me down, so I sat there, you know, and she held this big newspaper up in front of her and me. I was looking at her, you know, and she just said, "Well, tomorrow you pack all your things, 'cause you're gonna leave. We can't have you here any more." I didn't ask anything, I just looked at her, and she said, "O.K., now you can leave." So I got up out of the room and I went downstairs and packed up my clothes. She came down there and she said, "Well, you can leave all the clothes we gave you. You just come with what you have." And so I did that, and then my social worker came and said, "What's wrong?" And I said, "I have no idea." And so then he would talk to them, but apparently they told all these lies, I guess you can call them. Like they said I asked for things, and to me, I never asked them for anything, because to me, they aren't my parents, and how can I go and ask someone that's not even of my family to ask them to give me something. And I'd never do that, and they said that, and I told them I did not do that. And then they'd say all these other things that I never even knew. And I told them that I didn't even know they were happening, I didn't even know we had problems. So anyways, they took me in this other home. And this other home was really good and everything, but I just didn't want . . . I felt like I burdened them down, that they were forced to take me, and I said, "That's it, I give up on this home, these white people." I went home bitter again. You know, I talked to my mother, and things were going really bad at my own home, because my parents are divorced, and they were going all through this thing, my father's drunk, you know, it doesn't bring out the best in him, like he'd try to say he was going
to kill us and things like that, and when we were on the reserve he tried to burn down our house, and things like that. But that wasn't him, that was the alcohol that takes over. So then I went to school, and my mother would never be home, so we had to raise each other up, and it's just an ordinary Indian story, because it happens all over. It's nothing unique when you talk to Indians. And so then I went to another home. My mother said, "Just try it once more." I said, "I'm quitting, I can't hack this any more." And she said, "If you quit, then you go make it on your own, there's nobody you're gonna get anything from, you gotta do it."

SM: Now how old were you?

DC: I was 15. And so then I tried it. Well, ever since then my mother left, and this man that she was living with didn't want anything to do with us, all us 10 kids, you know, except for the baby, so all of us didn't have a place to go. We were on placement program, but during the summer we all wanted to come home, and there was no home. And so my sister just got married, and she had all us kids, and there was really trial and error there. So I went and I lived on the streets. I bummed money for food, you know, and I tried to get a job, but you couldn't get a job. Like I wanted to be a social worker, but with my education, what can you do except, you know, be a waitress or a car-wash, and I did those jobs and I hated it. And so then I turned to drugs to get away, because when I came home, like my sister and them are going to the university and they're doing good. I couldn't figure out what was wrong with me. And so I tried to get a job, but I guess I'm just not an open person to tell how I feel inside. And so then I'd listen to them, and then I'd go to bed, and then I started on drugs, and then, when I came home, their lips would just move and their words wouldn't hurt me any more, you know. And then she told me one time, well, they found out, and I didn't care 'cause I was stoned at that time.
SM: What were you using?

DC: Just grass, nothing real big. Just to take the pain away, I guess. Then she told me, "Your babies are gonna come all deformed, and we're gonna tell your foster parents and so you can't go to school any more with them." And that really scared me, 'cause the only way I could see out was through an education that I could do anything what I wanted to do. I didn't want to wreck anything for my children, you know, on my stupidity to do anything to my children, and so I quit. And then I went back to my foster parents, and I went to school, and from then I just kept going to school, but there is problems within that family. I don't know, we just never talked. They are really decent people, it's just, I guess, you get slapped around so much you don't open up any more, and so I never opened up to them at all, but they tried, and I guess I was really rebellious then. You know, nobody was going to tell me what to do.

SM: Sixteen now?

DC: Sixteen. Nobody was going to tell me what to do. And the next summer they would say, "Well, do you have a place to go? Why don't you stay with us?" "No, I'm gonna go, I have a place to stay." "Where?" I'd never tell them what, I'd just tell them, "I have a place to stay." And so then I packed up my clothes and got a ride to the city, and I sat down, and I go, "Now what? Here I am." And so anyways we found a place, and there were problems and everything, so then we were living in this big house, and from there we tried to get a job, but the jobs we could get were nothing, except maybe cleaning houses. I don't want to clean anybody else's house. Well, I do it 'cause I had to, but I was thinking in the future. I don't want to do this for the rest of my life. And so then we ended up just thumbing around the country.

SM: We?
DC: Well, I had different friends at different times, you know, different friends that went with me through different periods of my life. And to me friendship is really valuable, 'cause that was the only people that I could talk to that, you know, I could hang on to, I guess, 'cause there is no family. And so from there I met this Indian guy, and he was really special to me. His name was Dennis and he's a Cree from near Edmonton, and we lived in Edmonton all this time, and so from there we went powwowing around, and he'd tell me what the Indians would say, and it really helped. And then when it was time for me to go back to school for my 12th grade, he says, "You know, you're way far in this education, white man's education, and yet you're nowhere on the Indian way." And that really hit home, and I'd think about it a lot. "Man," I says, "What is the white man's education, why do I want it? I don't like them telling about their history. You know, big deal. I don't care what they did. They don't care what I did, I don't care what they did." And so then, I'd think about it. And for some reason my foster mom came up to my room. She knocked, she said, "Why don't you go to BYU? You're almost done, you only have three more credits left and you'll graduate." And so I thought, "Yeah, why not?" And so I applied, and, I don't know, I guess the Lord really looked after us. My mother is always telling us to pray, the Lord will look after you, no matter what. And I mean, He can foresee everything, 'cause I was planning to quit, and just go and try it his way to see another way, learning about Indian ways and things like that. So anyways I got accepted. I got accepted really strange too.

SM: Even before you graduated?

DC: Even before I graduated. I don't know, just everything. And I got sponsored, and that was really rare, 'cause you really can't get sponsorships really, and so I came down here and I found a house right away, and I got all my classes, and I thought, "My heavens, I can't believe it." 'Cause it's supposed to be a big hassle. There wasn't
a big hassle at all. Everything just fell in place. And so I went, and I kept going, and then I went on summer tour, you know, The Generation. We toured the United States, the south part. This Lamanite Generation, that's a group of Indian students, and it's volunteer, you don't get paid for it and you put in a lot of time, and you do shows during the semester and on summertime you tour for two months, and there again, you don't get paid for nothing. You pay the money for your personal expenses, but they'll feed you and they'll lodge you. And there's about 43, and there's people always coming in and going out, new talent always coming in and leaving. And so, anyways, I made it into this group, and that's really helped me a lot, like, spiritually, and to find out exactly what's happening, to see what there is. So we toured around, and then I came home and I went to school.

SM: You went to South America too, didn't you?

DC: Yeah, and then I went to school for the year, and then this opportunity for South America, and there's only half of them would be chosen, and then I got chosen to go, but before that there was a pageant, you know, and I was on Millie Cody's . . . she used to be Miss Indian BYU '74, '75, and I was on her committee for pageant, and then a week before she said, "Why don't you run?" I said, "I'm on your committee." She said, "No, just run." And this man came up to me and he said, "I really think that you should run." And I go, "Well, maybe next year." And he goes, "The time is now." And then he walked off, you know, and it really hit me hard, "the time is now," so I really started thinking about it, 'cause I was asked to run last year, the year before that. So anyways I ran, and I put my talents together like half an hour before, and everything was really weird. So anyways we ran, and I was second attendant. It was a beautiful experience to run, because, I don't know, there's just a spirit there. And so I was second attendant and it didn't hit me until way later,
and I told them, "Man, I'm second attendant." They go, "Why not first?" And it just crushed me. I thought, "Big deal." So, well, I went to school, and we went to South America, and things kept happening to me, and I knew, "Man, there's something gonna happen, all these trials keep coming at me." And so then I got a blessing, and then I went on tour, and when I got off and I came back to school I was Miss Indian BYU, and I walked in the room and they announced it and I dropped all my books, I couldn't believe it. And so, to me it's hard, because different people have different ideas of a queen, and I'm just me. I mean, I'm willing to improve, but then I want to remain me too. And I want to do a lot. Like I want to be a social worker or a counselor to go back to our creative counseling services, that's in Canada.

SM: Would you go back up there?

DC: Um hm. I want to. But then, also, in the Indian way, you go with your husband, and if I get married then I go with my husband, but as a single person I want to go back to Canada. But then if I get married, then I go where he wants to go, but I will marry a Lamanite, that's a Mexican-American, or a Mexican or Polynesian or Indians. It will be one of them, 'cause they're all one. It's what we believe, and they are our people, so I will be going back to my people. And Chief Crowfoot said, to rise there has to be an object.

SM: That's your great grandfather?

DC: Um hm. Oh yeah, Chief Crowfoot was my great grandfather. And he said to rebel there must be a wrong done, or to do either, it must benefit us. I think that's so true. And to me, right now, like we go and travel around and we show people our Indian-ness, I guess, and they look at us. I don't mind doing it in a show, like I went to this Fireside last time, and they want you to know about Indians, and I did
sign language, you know, in my traditional clothing, and I really had to fight myself, because I didn't want to do it, because I didn't want them looking, 'cause I guess way past they kept mocking, and they don't really care, and I don't want to share it then. But I know that the only way that they're going to come to a better understanding of us and to see our way is to show them, and be open with them, but also, I have to fight myself, because they haven't been. And so, maybe they are now, but I keep telling myself, "Come on, you have to go and do it." And I don't like them looking at me, and looking at my clothing, 'cause I think, "It's none of your business," you know. "I don't want you to look at me." Then I fight myself and say, "You have to, because how are they ever gonna know?" And also I feel at times really bitter against white people. I think, "Oh, they just bug me," 'cause ... I don't know, because of my high school years. I went to this town, and when I first went there I thought it was a hick town, 'cause they used to talk about Indians with really disrespect. And they used to say, "Oh, I went and I laid an Indian girl," 'cause there used to be a reserve just near there. I used to look at them and think, "Yuk, you dirty old white men." And they used to say, "Oh, we're not prejudiced" in the classroom, you know. I put up my hand, everybody goes quiet, you know, 'cause I guess I was the only Indian student there. And I'd say, "The people that say they're not prejudiced I usually find that they're the most prejudiced." And then everybody went quiet 'cause all these kids are saying, "I'm not prejudiced." And my mother has taught all of us a lot. And she would always make us talk on the phone, like when we were little, 'cause it was a big experience to go and ask for something. She'd say, "Go and do it. When you get older you're gonna appreciate this." Right there, "Oh, you're being mean to me, you're gonna laugh at me," because she was really a character. But I'd go and do it, and we'd do it, but it benefited a lot, 'cause now when we go about asking for things, I'm not scared. Well, there is a little bit, but not like I've seen other kids that are just ... oh, you know.
SM: How are things going here at school now?

DC: At school? After that summer tour my attitude is really changed, 'cause I've done a lot of thinking and praying, you know, about things, and to me, I really love life, and there's a lot of opportunities here that I know that my people back home don't even know, and the kids my age, they're going nowhere 'cause there's really nothing there on the reserve, and all they know is the reserve. And I come back and there's opportunities like you can go a semester abroad, and I'm going there in the fall. There's survival, I'm going to survival. Like I never thought I'd ever go to South America. I always think back to my childhood and I thought, "I can't believe I'm doing this." South America, you know. And I think of my childhood, and I just think, "Thank you," for my mother and my father, for seeing the insight. You know it hurt her so much then, but she knew it would benefit us so much more. And to go home and to tell them, "Hey, look, there's opportunities out there that you can grasp, but the only way, you've gotta go to school." And my cousins, they all drop out, they're 16, they're already married, gonna have babies, they wanna go back to school and finish their grade 11 and 12, and I think, "No, you just gotta have the foresight to see the opportunities. You just gotta look ahead," and for me there's opportunities, and I know there's opportunities, and I'm willing to grab at them. To me, I guess I wanna be somebody. When you look at people, you see what kind of parents they've had, and to me, I want to be good, so people will look at me and I will bring respect to my parents and respect to my grandfather, I guess, respect for my ancestors. And I know that they're always around watching us, and you know, they'll help us if we ask them, if we really need them. And the same with our Father, He'll never leave us, but we have to make decisions on our own. If we make wrong decisions then we have to pay the consequences, I know that too. Like if I bomb out of school here, there's nobody to fall back on except for myself, and if I fail, it's my own fault. Then
nobody's going to be crying, "Oh, you failed. Come home," 'cause you have to make it.

SM: You're going to make it all right, aren't you?

DC: I'm going to make it.

SM: You're going along very well now?

DC: I really am going to make it.

SM: What year is this for you here?

DC: I'm a sophomore, but I'll be a junior in winter.

SM: You've got it almost half done already to that degree as a social worker, if you want it.

DC: I know. I just go at a pace where things I can grasp, and I'll take them, but then I can't dream of things way, way far ahead, that are not in my grasp. Some people can, but I know I can't. But people see different things, different situations differently. They see with different eyes, and this is the way I see, and I have roommates and they are very... I can't believe how much white people do not know about Indians. They really don't. And I sit there and I try to tell them, but they really have their stereotype ideals. To me they're not ready unless they come and ask you, and if they ask you, and really are sincere, then I'll tell them. Like my roommate, she says, "Tell me everything, since I have all these ideals." I go, I says, "Forget it, I'm not telling you anything." And she goes, "What, I'm asking you." I go, "You find out for yourself. If you really want to know you find out." But then we tell her a little bit when she's ready for it, and she used to go, "I don't know how you can even
stand being an Indian. Look at your race, all drunk and everything else like that." I turned around, and I says, "You know, I mean, I see that too. I see them drunk, I see them hungry, I've lived with it," but to me, I look at the Indian, and there's so much depth to them, they can give so much, but the white people, their culture is empty. They're materialistic, and they base everything on their material wealth--how I succeeded. Yet the Indian is spiritual, like, "I feel good inside, because, you know, the Lord is good to me." I don't really hear that many white people say that, and I guess they just look at them with different eyes, 'cause I'm very proud to be an Indian. So what if they do that, they drink and everything. It's a problem now, but I know they're gonna conquer it, and there's just depth to them. They can offer so much, but yet they won't, because, I mean, they've been slapped in the face so much. Walk around them cautiously. At least I do, and I always watch what I say, and sometimes I get really ignorant to them, 'cause they are ignorant, and so I just get sassy, which I shouldn't. And some people, like they're walking by, and they go, "Look at that Indian. What a bum, just sitting under that tree. No shame," you know, but yet, that Indian is sitting there, thinking, "Well, look at this tree. I wonder how long it's growing. It's real beautiful."

SM: Understanding is what you're after, isn't it?

DC: Right.

SM: And you're helping.

DC: I fight myself, but I know I try to help.

SM: But you're helping now. You're helping other people understand right now.

DC: O.K. God bless you.