ogene Dennison, Navajo
October 15, 1975
Gallup, New Mexico
Part I

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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LISTENING TO INDIANS

NO. 67

GENE DENNISON, Navajo

October 15, 1975

Gallup, New Mexico

Part I

Glen Rock, New Jersey

Microfilming Corporation of America

1978
Sam Myers:

Today I'm in Gallup, New Mexico, talking with Gene Dennison. Do you have another name in Navajo that's different from that?

Gene Dennison:

The one and only.

SM: But anyway, you're a Navajo? Navajo is a Spanish word, not really a Navajo word, is it? You had a different name in your own language for your people?

GD: Dine. [pronounced Din-eh]

SM: What would be the name for the land of the people Dine?

GD: Di-ne-bi-kay-ah.

SM: I used to think Dinetah meant land. What does that mean?

GD: Dinetah is "among the people."

SM: And you could see how that could be mistaken to mean the land. What clan are you from?

GD: My matrilineal is Ke-ah-hani and patrilineal, my father's side, is Toh-ekh-lini.

SM: And Ke-ah-hani, your mother's, that means the turtle clan?

GD: No, it means "the standing house." I imagine that supposedly when they came into the Southwest, it is one of the few original clans that came in, and possibly my grandparents and their parents had originally settled in an area where they still had ruins standing, and because of that they called it Ke-ah-hani, and Toh-ekh-lini is
a clan that's situated 20 miles north of here, directly north, and that's where my father was from. Toh-ekh-lini is "water coming up."

SM: Would it mean near a spring?

GD: It's a spring.

SM: That's interesting. Now, about yourself, Gene. Were you born here in Gallup?

GD: I was born in Tohatchi, a place 26 miles north of here.

SM: And you lived up there and in Gallup both as a child?

GD: We moved back and off the reservation, I don't know how many times. Mostly the early years we spent between there and a place called Rock Springs, that's where my parents were from. I was pretty small, about six or seven, when we actually moved closer to Gallup, because of the mining place called Gamerco out here.

SM: That's where they mined coal?

GD: Right. They mined coal, and they had people comin' in from across the United States--Greeks, Italians, Chinese, Japanese--actually people who knew mining, because it had opened up pretty recent then. They also had Navajo who had come into the area also to work in the mines.

SM: Was this a strip mining kind of operation?

GD: No, it's a deep mining, shaft, and people were coming back and forth. Initially they travelled back and forth on horseback, 13, 20, 26 miles a day just to work, and after a while some that were around the area began building small shacks.
SM: Up there around the mine?

GD: Right. Tents, and putting up shelters, have access to goin' to work.

SM: Did your father work underground?

GD: No, it was about the time of the war, and everybody was goin' in and my step-father, he was drafted into the Army.

SM: Was he in that famous Navajo communications unit?

GD: No, he was in the Army, and communications was the Marine Corps. So most of my aunts and their husbands and relatives and their husbands, they worked the mine. I think we resided there for about five, six years. I guess about the end of the war we moved into Gallup. I remember the war, the celebrations, you know, when it was over. We came into town just for that. Everybody was goin' crazy. It was really funny, 'cause I'd go into town on a mail truck with my mother, you know, to pick up groceries, and that time they were usin' rations and even today my mother still has some of those rations. She just got a bunch of them. I remember they used to trade off on that. It was sugar and some of that stuff was hard to come by. Coffee, and meat rations.

SM: Gasoline?

GD: Yeah, kerosene. See, we used to use kerosene lamps, and it was hard to come by, and we had a little trading post called China Springs, which was right over here, and that was, I guess, my association with, you know, white people, at that time.

SM: Was it a white person who ran the trading post?
GD: Yeah, he ran that.

SM: Do you remember his name?

GD: I don't remember.

SM: Do you remember a man named Newcomb out there?

GD: Oh yeah, Charlie Newcomb. He was a trader. That's a little further on past.

SM: Farther north?

GD: About 60 miles.

SM: There's a place up there named Newcomb now.

GD: Yeah, it's a trading post.

SM: And then another trader who's been out here as early as 1903, his name is Wallace--have you ever heard of him.

GD: Right. He was partners with some people here in Gallup when we moved in.

SM: How old were you when you moved into Gallup?

GD: I guess I was about eight, between eight and eleven.

SM: Now you had moved back and forth, but you moved in permanently when you were about eight. Did you speak Navajo, Gene?

GD: On the reservation? Yeah.
SM: And then you spoke English too?

GD: When we moved into Gallup, then I began to pick up the language. They had Spanish people, they had Italians, they had Greeks, all the people in the area that were all a mixture, and I had to learn the English quite early.

SM: Do you remember that being hard, do you remember struggling with it?

GD: I don't remember havin' any problems, because at that age you just naturally fall into one language, and it stays with you.

SM: I've heard that kids pick it up much more quickly than adults do.

GD: We moved into Gallup, I guess just at the end of the war, 'cause right after that my mother went to work for Gallup Mercantile, and that was one of the bigger outlets for rugs and Indian jewelry, 'cause they had a big shop just like we have back here now. A bigger shop. They had, I don't know, about 15, 20 people workin'.

SM: Then you were about eight years old and you moved into Gallup, and that's quite an experience, I imagine, because you spent most of your life out there in the wide open spaces, playing with the other kids. Did you ever tend sheep or do anything like that?

GD: When we were livin' on the reservation I tend sheep, herded sheep. In fact we had sheep camps, move here and there for pinion pickin'.

SM: Picking pinion nuts?

GD: Right.

SM: How did you like that? Was that kind of a good life?
GD: It's free. There's nothing compared to that. 'Course now it's a whole different world, but those days... you grow older, but those days, I don't think you ever take that away. I remember one year we went to Zuni, past Zuni, with my grandfather, you know. We went down there, and it was in fall, and we got snowed in, about six foot. My grandfather is pretty straight on weather, you know, 'course he had his sight then, and we started back, and he said we'd better get out. So we made some travois with the mules and the donkeys, and we started out. We started out early in the morning, and it was still storming, and the snow was falling, and as we got closer to Zuni it started freezing up, and I remember my mother, out of gunny sacks, made little snowshoes for me, and it started freezin', and I was runnin' on top of the snow, 'cause that's how fast it was freezin' up, and they were goin' straight through the snow, plowin' through. And just the other side of Zuni, about ten miles out, we came up on a Zuni camp. And we had nearly 800, 900 pounds of pinions, and we stayed there, and it kept snowin' and snowin' and my grandfather had a contract with the governor to be able to bring that pinion in.

SM: That's what you had gone for, to get the pinion nuts?

GD: Right. And all we had was the horses. We went light, we didn't take any wagons or anything. So we stayed there the whole winter with a Zuni family. We went huntin' with them, and cut wood, hauled wood. We stayed until spring.

SM: How old were you then?

GD: I guess I was about six. I was pretty small.

SM: But you remember it vividly, don't you?

GD: Oh yeah. When we started out my mother was real worried, my aunt too,
and her husband, and she said, "We're not gonna get out." We had another family with us. Two of us young kids went with them. And my grandfather said, "Don't worry, I'll get you out."

SM: So you made it.

GD: We made it. I had so much faith in him, you know. I didn't worry, I knew we'd get out. I knew my way around, I'd been with my grandfather, you know, in worse spots when he used to go by himself.

SM: They didn't have any weather reports in those days, did they?

GD: No, you'd go by change in the wind, and forming clouds, and change in the animal life, birds. Birds always have an inkling of what the weather's gonna be. They seem to know, and they change their chirping, their tunes, and they get flighty, they get nervous. You look for those. You look for animals, what they're gonna do and why. Like take a squirrel, you see him running around, and if he doesn't sense anything he'll take his time and ease on, but if he knows the weather's gonna change, he's gonna be pretty flighty, he's gonna be nervous. These are the things you look for.

SM: So if you see a nervous, flighty squirrel scampering around, maybe the weather's going to change?

GD: You look for those. Sometimes you have to take two, three of the animals, say like a bird, maybe a change in the wind, a change in the weather. Average out, and then you'd know whether you get snow, whether you get rain. Mostly you can sense these about four or five days ahead of time. It really does. The weather changes, you feel it now, you know winter's comin'. Naturally you expect it's gonna come, but you feel it. Early in the mornin' you go out, all of a sudden you're breathin' all that frost. You know the weather's changing. Maybe have a couple more days of good weather, after that
you have to make up your mind. You have a sense of weather always in you. Maybe that's why the Navajos are so predominant in this country, so numerous because of their ability to be able to move around, adapt to conditions and change.

SM: You are the largest tribe in the whole United States now?

GD: Oh yeah, the largest tribe here in the Southwest, and nearly in the United States.

SM: Do you remember any other experiences like that?

GD: Oh, I don't know. Vividly I remember a lot of it. After we moved into Gallup I didn't know what the word school meant.

SM: When you came to Gallup you didn't know what schools were, and you were eight years old?

GD: Yeah, and I spoke Navajo.

SM: Now when you were down there with the Zunis that winter when you were six and you were speaking Navajo, they spoke Zuni. Did you have a problem communicating?

GD: I didn't have very much to do, my parents did all the. . . .

SM: They did all the conversing.

GD: A lot of Zunis speak Navajo when it's necessary.

SM: They're two distinctly different tribes of Indians, aren't they, the Zunis, pueblo people that have been there, nobody knows how long, the Navajos have moved in from the north sometime?
GD: Supposedly from the north.

SM: According to the archeologists, although some of the myths and legends say that the people have always been here, don't they?

GD: Well, it's pretty well established, you know, from an archeological standpoint that the Navajos are late comers, supposedly came down the eastern part of the Rockies, eventually moved into the area, and the pueblos were already here.

SM: Do the Navajo people pretty much accept that version of the situation now?

GD: No, we have . . . like legends and myth. We still have our own beliefs in how we came into the area.

SM: Every people in the world has their own creation stories. Some of the people still prefer their ancient legends, and other people, like you who have been exposed to more of this schooling, well, you respect both opinions?

GD: Yeah, I . . . live in two worlds. It's very hard to do, you know. But the transition was there, you know, and I took it, and that's how I got to be where I am.

SM: You adjusted rather readily at the age of eight, nine and ten, because you were young and adaptable, and I suppose interested in everything that was happening.

GD: When we got into Gallup, oh everything opened up around there. So many things to see and to hear. And what made it so interesting was the variety of things that was in the area at the time. Variety of people and things. You had trains, you had cars, you had wagons, you had different groups of people interactin' almost daily. You
had railroad workers, you had people that were working in mines. You had different other people, different professional people, tradespeople. It was so interesting, wide-open. You learned quickly. I've always been curious, and when my mother went to work, I just adjusted in my own way. I went out and just walked up to everybody, and tug at his jacket, and say, "What's this?" And they talked to me in Italian, Greek, Chinese. In fact the first three years I was here I tasted about every type of food you could find. They had different restaurants of each nationality, and it was very interesting.

SM: A lot of people don't realize that about Gallup. They think Gallup is 90% Indian and 10% Anglo.

GD: At that time it wasn't true. You had just about every nationality here, and you had different levels of people, and I went out and made friends, and before you know it, I was in and out of Gallup. They had school for the other children, you know, for the other groups, but my mother never encouraged me.

SM: So you hadn't been to school yet?

GD: I hadn't even got near a school. I knew kids went off durin' the winter. I wondered why. An interestin' story I'll tell you. When I was that age they had these wagons. 'Course Gallup wasn't as sprawled out as it is on the west side. The end of Gallup was probably right here at this bridge, and they lived in little bungalows, shacks, out there on the west end, that's where we lived. And on week-ends, and for days at a time, people would come in with wagons, you'd see that place all dotted with wagons coming in to trade, to camp out. They'd begin comin' usually on Thursday, and stay till Sunday night, or somethin' like that. And that time liquor was just comin' to the people, to the Indians.
SM: This was in the '40's?

GD: A little after that, about durin' the war. And you'd see wagons with their canvas tops, and you'd see fires, and there was this old lady that lived down there, a Spanish lady, and she ran a bootleggin' joint. 'Course that time I was the only one around that area that had access to know these people, speak their language, and all that.

SM: Were you able to speak to all these different groups?

GD: Oh yeah, they were all Navajos anyway. So I got into her liquor business, you know, bootleggin' for her.

SM: At the age of eight or nine you were a bootlegger?

GD: Right. I was bootleggin' on the west end. And I'd walk among these wagon camps, you know, and they'd trade off maybe a piece of meat, a bag of corn, whatever they had, rugs, jewelry, I'd come back loaded. Then I'd go out again. And they'd always come to me. I ended up bootleggin' on the west end for about three years, and nobody knew it. Finally the schools here were beginnin' to clamp down on kids, I don't care what nationality they were, they gotta go to school. So they had a sheriff here, he was Italian, and he was a real good friend of my parents, because at that time he had owned a bunch of stuff out on the reservation, had access to some sheep, and people owed him this and that. He was sheriff, mayor and almighty, and he more or less let me have my way.

SM: Even though you were bootlegging.

GD: And one day he came by and said, "Gene, you gotta get in school, you have to." He said, "I'm gonna have to come back and get you sometime." So I stayed away.
SM: You kept out of sight?

GD: Right. I kept away when he was around. I mean, I was scared. So one day he came looking for me, and he took me off to school, and I was the biggest kid in school.

SM: How old were you then?

GD: Eleven. Close to eleven.

SM: Eleven years old and you hadn't been in school yet. What grade did they start you in?

GD: First grade, or in kindergarten, I think it was. I couldn't fit in those little small chairs. Kids are kinda vicious at that age, they really get on to you. At first I clobbered them, you know. I really laid to them, and I'd go home feelin' bad, and I'd get it the next mornin' from the principal. Finally I just got tired of it, and I went and looked up Mickey. I said, "Mickey, I'm gonna make a deal with you."

SM: Was Mickey the sheriff?

GD: Yeah. I said, "I'm makin' my own livin', and I don't wanna go to that school, I don't fit in there." And he said, "Well, you show me in one week that you can earn, and I'll get it done for you."

SM: You let the school go then?

GD: Yeah. So I went back down on the west end to this lady and started bootleggin', and by the end of that week I'd earned what people were earnin' here in town, general menial work, and he let me go. So I got out of school for then, for the next year and a half. And I was still bootleggin'. By that time I'd picked up the English language
pretty well. I could speak, and I knew Navajo and the English language. I didn't know how to write, I didn't know a thing about it. I learned some A, B, C's for the month and a half I was at school, but it was hard. I was curious, but it was just the idea that the kids, you know, really puttin' it to me, and made it so bad. It was so cruel.

SM: Kids are that way sometimes, they don't think what they're doing to the other person.

GD: There were other kids, Navajo kids, in the area that were goin' to school, but they were in their grades, and they more or less just let me alone, but the other kids, boy!

SM: How did you ever get started to school, because now you're at the university?

GD: Well, he let me out and I was still bootleggin', and by that time we were pretty well settled in Gallup, so one day we went back to the reservation. It was 1951, I remember that year 'cause that was the year that my older cousin went out to the Korean War. And I remember goin' back out there and we had a sing for him--a prayer to make sure that he goes through the war, and make it and hopefully come on back. Now that same year, in the fall, they were takin' a census, so I got into the school rut again. Now here it was the government sayin' that, "your boy has to go to school." Compelled, you know, or you go to jail, or something like that. So they got me and put me in that detention hall.

SM: They put you in a detention hall because you weren't in school?

GD: Yeah. "Hold him there for us, we're comin' to get him, he's gotta go to school." So my mother got me out, and we went out to, I think, Tohatchi, and had to go to Toadlena to register me there so I could
go to school. I didn't want to go. I just didn't feel like it, you know. Here I was so free, and all of a sudden the world was closin' in on me. I felt it. So she registered me. I figured that was it, they were just gonna register me and I was gonna come back to Gallup. So one day I was going back home, in the afternoon, and here comes the Navajo police. They got me. They asked me where my mother worked at, and I told them she worked for the Gallup Mercantile, so we went down there and they asked my mother why I wasn't in school. She said, "Well, there's no way he can get out there." They said, "We'll take him out there." So they took me to Twin Lakes that same day. I got a bag of clothes and I went out there.

SM: Was that a boarding school?

GD: It was a boarding school and a day school. And I got out there, and I don't know if you call it school, you know, you go to classrooms and you sing these songs. It was foreign to me. I couldn't understand it the first two or three weeks, but after I got to know the kids from that general area I got into it pretty good. I began learnin' a little of the written language. The first week I came back I didn't wanta go back. So my mother gave me bus money... s'posed to wait for the Greyhound, Trailways, goin' out there to Twin Lakes. So she watched me from the window, and the bus came by and I walked around it, it stopped, I walked behind the service station, and the bus went. So I went down town with the bus money and went to the movie. Along about 4:00 o'clock in the afternoon my mother was looking for me. She put me on the evening bus, and this time she made sure that I got on. So I went out there. The second week I felt a little comfortable, the third week I was beginnin' to know the kids and beginnin' to know my way around, and I guess about Thanksgivin' time it was really nice, and I was beginnin' to like it, and I was beginnin' to pick out some words, and I could read a sentence, take a little while. I still couldn't write, you know.
SM: How old were you about this time?

SM: I guess about twelve.

SM: And you'd already been surviving pretty much here in the town?

GD: Oh yeah. And that same year I came back at Christmastime, and kids were runnin' off, but I was determined to stay and see what this thing looks like, where it leads, how far it leads you. So I stayed at Twin Lakes for one year, then they transferred me a little further north to another school. That was Tohatchi.

SM: That was more like regular boarding school?

GD: Right. And this is where the older kids were.

SM: Now you had sort of jumped all those first, second, third, fourth, fifth grades in a year or so?

GD: Right. Like a quota. Send you up there because you were older, and they felt that you could deal with it.

SM: Did you begin to feel better because you were with your own age group?

GD: Uh . . . no. I didn't, because these were little roughnecks. They knew their way around the boarding school for five years, six years that I'd missed. They were bullies. So they tried me out, I handled myself pretty good, but in the classroom I couldn't. The first week I was there I ran off, walked all the way back to my aunt's place at Rock Springs, about 17 miles. I cut across mountains. My aunt hid me out for about three and a half weeks. She didn't tell my mother that I was gone. They finally notified her after two weeks.
SM: The Navajo police came looking for you?

GD: Um hm. They came lookin' for me. They finally went to my aunt's place, and she gave me up, and I went back. And I stayed for about two days and I took off again. This time with some other guys, and they caught us there by Powell's tradin' post, you know, that's 18 miles south of Tohatchi. They caught us there in the flats, and they run us down. They got some guy on horseback. I knew the police panel wouldn't come after us in those flats, and we were really makin' it towards the mountains, the hills. All of a sudden we saw these horses, three of them, comin'. So they caught us, grabbed us by the back of the neck, clothes and all, and pulled us up on to the police panel, threw us in, and took us back to Tohatchi. So they kinda begin to look on me as a troublemaker. They said, "This guy, better watch him." So I played it safe for about three weeks and I took off again. This time I was determined not to go back. I went back to my aunt's place again, and I stayed there. Two days passed, and I saw the police panel comin' down that road. Boy, I took off, went into an arroyo and walked clear to my grandfather's place, and I stayed with him. I hid out for about, I guess about a month almost. My mother came. She took me back. By this time I was gettin' to be a problem to her. She was missin' work. So they thought, well, they just opened up a new school up in Utah, a big one. "He should go there." So they made arrangements for me to travel, take me up there. So I went up with a group in December, 1952, I remember that year real well, because that was the year my oldest cousin was shot up in Korea. I remember them cryin' because they had just received a letter, or some guy from the War Department came to my aunt's place and told them about it. So they sent me off to Utah--there were about 800 of us from all the reservations, and they had Greyhounds taking us up there, and we went up into Utah. I'd heard about Salt Lake; I finally got to see it early in the morning, about 3:00 o'clock.

SM: Where was the school?
GD: A place called Brigham City. Intermountain. It was a big old Bushnell hospital, Army hospital. The Navajos, at that time, they didn't have facilities readily available to them. They sent a huge amount of young people of school age off to school. The BIA probably contracts this thing out with the tribe, and sent a whole bunch of them up there. I never saw so many Navajos in one place. I got up there about January and stayed until spring—they had about 2,300 Navajo kids. They had kids rangin' all the way from 7 on up to 23 or 24.

SM: Regular adults.

GD: They had different programs for them. They had what they call five-year programs, seven-year, ten-year programs, sort of a general education, and the rest was devoted to vocational training, and that was a big crash program that the government had at the time. I was one of those that was sent up there.

SM: Was that a high school also?

GD: No. Elementary and a vocational school. I got up there in January of '52, and I stayed until spring, and I never felt so miserable in my life, because that country up there is strictly fog, high country, and I didn't know anybody. These were kids from all parts of the reservation.

SM: Were you homesick too?

GD: Oh boy! Was I ever homesick! Regimented. From 6:00 o'clock in the morning until you go to bed at night, everything was regimented. You get up, you do this, you do that, do that, do that, so I begin makin' plans to run away again. I took off seven times in that spring, and I was successful four times. I went back each time. There were some funny stories. After I grew up I kinda reminisce, and I say, "Oh, that was funny." So I stayed there two and a half years.
SM: You finally did stick it out?

GD: I stuck it out, and I got interested in books, reading. And after the seventh try I just gave it up, because I knew eventually I was gonna stay there.

SM: Do you remember when it happened that you began to get interested in books? Was there a teacher or some incident that occurred?

GD: There was a teacher there. I spoke English real well, and over 90% of those kids never had spoke English, so they took to me to interpret for her.

SM: You were kind of a helper?

GD: Well this one teacher particularly, she got me interested in books. You find some of those people like that in Indian education.

SM: Would you call her a good teacher?

GD: I think she's tremendous.

SM: Is she an Indian teacher?

GD: She is Anglo. She took a particular interest in me because I was so outgoing. The interesting thing about her was that she was so interested in making sure that the kids she had had an idea of what is goin' on in this world, what was happening to us. And she got me interested in books, and I begin to read.

SM: Do you remember her name?

GD: Louise Bonnell. She reached me completely, and it changed the whole
life for me. And I could read textbooks, you know, stuff that you were supposed to learn from. What got me interested in reading and beginnin' to take a real interest in books, was those novels--Zane Grey, some of the other western paper-back books--and I read them and devoured them all, complete. They had a library, a big library, and I completed every one of them in that one year, and she'd still bring me books, and I read and read and read. If I found a word that I didn't know, I'd look it up. My only interest at that time was just reading, 'cause it gave me something to do, because I felt that I could never possibly do what the classroom work there was, and I had a problem from the beginnin', you know, writin'.

SM: Is it hard for you to write yet?

GD: It's hard for me to be able to conjugate a bunch of black and white into somethin' that's meaningful, 'cause I grew up bein' a Navajo, and for me to speak intelligently in English, it's backwards. Most language is like that. It's hard for me to be able to convey a thought, or convey an idea, even to this day.

SM: Do you usually think in terms of the language you're speaking?

GD: Right. My thoughts are real different. I can express myself in Navajo a lot better even now, to this day. And reading is also an outlet for me, because I still can't begin to mingle with some of these other kids very well.

SM: That's an interesting story where a young Navajo boy with first his sort of freedom, running wild almost as you were out there, in the wide open spaces, and having lots of freedom here in town, and you didn't like school; you ran away endless times, but finally a teacher and the whole situation and your own maturity, I suppose,
combined to the point where all of a sudden your life was changed.

GD: I don't know about runnin' wild, you know.

SM: Well, maybe that's the wrong choice of words, but you had lots of freedom to do as you pleased.

GD: Well, you still live within the framework of your life, you know. You can't do some things. You still have control. I still had some control. When I was here in Gallup and out in the country, I still had some control. And I don't know what you'd call wild, but within my framework, my life, I still had things that I shouldn't do. Like runnin' away, that came naturally, because, "What am I doin' here? I'm of no use. I can't really function. Why can't they realize this? Supposedly they're educators, and they know how I feel. Why keep me here? I'm not an animal by choice, you know. I have a life and I very definitely believe in the same thing they believe in. Why hold me?" That's the way I felt.

SM: So you felt quite justified when you ran away?

GD: Oh yeah. I didn't think runnin' away was . . . I was runnin' from myself, but runnin' away, realizin' those things, "Why keep me here at this age?" And there's some people that I'd grown very fond of, because at that early age--like the sheriff, and the lady, you know--they knew what I was and my makeup, and they understood me, and they let me go at my own pace. And when I did show something, they channelled my energies in the right direction.

SM: Then eventually you did get into high school. Where was that?

GD: They used to have achievement tests in those boarding schools, and I wanted to get out, so I worked at it.
SM: So that was a way to get out of there?

GD: Right. And see, if I achieved a grade level of 7.5 or 8.1 in certain specific areas, they'd put me in a different category, and I'd be on my way. So that time the government was changin' their education program, and I got into that area. They knew what was comin' off, I didn't know. I thought by workin' hard, really workin' at it, that I could get out of this school and be somewhere else. So eventually I made it. I was one of the first groups to get out of there, but it was for the purpose of goin' to high school. So I went from one boarding school to another boarding school.

SM: When that finally dawned on you, how did you feel?

GD: Oh boy! I felt funny. "What did I do this for?"

SM: You worked so hard to get out, and all it did it got you into another school.

GD: Oh boy! You just don't have it, you know. So they transferred me to Oklahoma.

SM: You went way back there?

GD: All the way to Anadarko. I went from '54, all of '54. By that time I've got into the learnin' bit a little, I begin to take some of the things seriously about the school, but I just didn't . . . want it.

SM: You still didn't like it, but you were getting used to it, and you knew how to handle it.

GD: Right. I just didn't wanta read textbooks, stuff, you know. "What are those?" I knew that when I was livin' with my grandfather. I
learned about nature, I already know it. And I would read only those things that were adventures to me.

SM: Like the novels you liked?

GD: Right. It was just another boarding school. Quotas--seeing that you get through. The government believes in numbers, you know. And that was their biggest kick at the time. Just so long as it justified their existence. And lookin' back on it now, I knew there was a power struggle in tryin' to get the Bureau and the Department of the Interior in their separate departments. Well, the Department of the Interior won out, mainly because they shuffled so many people, numbers, you know, through their system. And it was funny when I graduated from that school. Well, I got to Oklahoma, and I liked it, because it was just like Gallup again. You had different tribes.

SM: A mixture of people?

GD: I just loved it, because of the change, the exchange, and the different people, you know, and the exchange in the languages. I liked it right off.

SM: That's interesting. Most kids like to be with people like themselves, but you thrived in this atmosphere of variety, of different groups.

GD: Right. I liked it, and I got out of there and got into the varied curriculum program. There was nothing really formal up to that time, nothing whatsoever. I still didn't know how to write, how to compose an essay or compose a composition. I just didn't know. I was never taught that.

SM: But you could read.
GD: I could read. Then four years of that and I figured they'd give me a diploma and I'd get out of here. The pressure from the group that I was goin' with—really gung-ho Kiowas, Comanches, Arapahos, Cheyenne, Kiowa-Comanches. We even had some Alaskan Indians, and they also had some Indians from Oregon. 'Course they had the Navajos and some Zunis, so it was a whole mixture of them, and I went through those four years like a breeze, it was nothing, everything was just tremendous. And then I got out, and I didn't know what to do. Everybody was planning for different things, everybody wanted to go to college or vocational training or some field, you know, and I applied for a scholarship. Well, I got an athletic scholarship to Kansas and Oklahoma State.

SM: Do you mean the University of Kansas, or Haskell?

GD: Kansas University. I was pretty fair in track.

SM: Is that what you were participating in mostly?

GD: Track and then football.

SM: What did you do in track, Gene?

GD: I run the 440, and run the sprints, and most of your relays I run on.

SM: You got an offer of a scholarship from KU and Oklahoma both. You must have been pretty good.

GD: They said I was, but I never got to the state meet. That's the government again. See, we got out in May of each year, and the Oklahoma state track championships are held after school in June, so my last two years I was there I never got to the state meets.
SM: You mean you'd be going home?

GD: Yeah, I'd be back on the reservation. So those summers were spent in fiddling around on the reservation, running, and checking out the area. By that time I was pretty well set and I could function. I come back into Gallup, hitch-hike across to Shiprock, see my cousin.

SM: You were a teen-ager?

GD: I was about 16 when I got out of high school.

SM: You'd been through a lot of experiences already.

GD: Oh, I'd been through it. I knew it all. Or so I thought I did.

SM: Well, you had too, more than a lot of kids.

GD: My last year was really wonderful then.

SM: At Anadarko?

GD: Um hm. I breezed through that, no problems, caused no problems. At the end of the year everybody was makin' their plans, and I figured, well, I'm gonna try college. So instead of lookin' at the two scholarships that was offered to me, KU and Oklahoma State, I wrote back to the tribe askin' for a scholarship.

SM: If you wanted a scholarship under the BIA you'd have to get it through the tribal roll?

GD: I wrote back to them, and they sent out a bunch of people and we all signed up, and you had to write out a little narrative, and some goals you set for yourself, what you're gonna do. Well, the trick to the whole thing was you were supposed to say that after
you get an education that you're gonna go back and help the tribe.

SM: Did you know that then?

GD: I had an inkling of it, because my friends were always saying, "Well, do it that way, you know. Get it." "No," I said, "I don't want to help the Navajo people yet. I want to help myself first, and then maybe I'll think about it after that," and I didn't get my scholarship. Another blunder. And here I was, an outcast, just a dumb guy. So the next thing that came along was maybe the Service. So one day they had a recruiter out there, towards the end of the school year.

SM: This is during your last year at Anadarko?

GD: About February, March some time, recruiter came around, they had the Army recruiter, the Navy, the Marine Corps, everything. But I didn't know what to do really, so I put a little introductory card into the Marine Corps. By that time they had the Mardi Gras too in New Orleans in March, so one day we decided we were gonna go see that.

SM: You and some other students?

GD: Yeah. Four of us.

SM: Cut your classes?

GD: Yeah, we just cut out, said, "Heck with it." My old freedom again. And we hitch-hiked down to the Mardi Gras. We were on our way, and this one kid, he was from Alaska, he wasn't really decided on what he was gonna do, but he said, "Hey, let's join the Foreign Legion." I said, "Yeah, really? How do you do that?" He said, "In New Orleans, that's where they sign those people up." I thought he was pullin' our leg. He said, "Come on, I'll show you." So we got to
New Orleans, and we were there one day and he said, "You guys still wanta go?"

SM: This is the French Foreign Legion?

GD: The French Foreign Legion. So we went over there, and we walked in and we see some officers there, tough-looking guys. We said we want to join the Foreign Legion, so they signed us up, it took about six hours. We were supposed to take a physical on the third day, and anyway, they billeted us in one of those big hotels with meal tickets, rooms, use of that, and so we spent about three days usin' their free tickets to see New Orleans. When we got through, we split. I don't know what happened, how we got back, but we got back and we were in terrible trouble. They weren't about to give us our degrees, we'd pulled a real good stunt. So eventually, we just kinda, "Well, heck with it."

Part II of this interview appears on a separate transcript.