GENE DENNISON, Navajo

October 15, 1975

Gallup, New Mexico

Part II

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. 68

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Part II

Glen Rock, New Jersey
Microfilming Corporation of America
1978
Sam Myers:

We are continuing our conversation with Gene Dennison, Navajo. Gene, we left our story where you and your friends had come back from New Orleans, and you found yourselves in a pack of trouble back at Añasádi. Would you take it from there, please?

Gene Dennison:

So I joined the Marine Corps, and some of the other kids that I was supposed to graduate with joined up also. But just before we left they had a change of heart and gave us our diplomas, and it was funny, because I had made up my mind to do something else if I was going to graduate, but after we come back from New Orleans when they said, "Well, you're not gonna get it," I decided to play it all out, go home and wait.

SM: But you did get your diploma as a high school graduate?

GD: Right. I got out, and spent about an afternoon at the school, and went out that same day to San Diego, spent four years in the Marine Corps. I came back in 1962, back into Gallup.

SM: This has been your home center, Gallup and the reservation, hasn't it? Are your folks still here?

GD: My folks live 13 miles northwest of here. They still live in the old place where we used to travel to.

SM: Do you still get out there once in a while?

GD: Oh yeah, I get out there, do a few things. And right now I'm workin' here in Gallup.

SM: Now then, by this time you're in your 20's I guess, aren't you?
GD: Twenty-two, twenty-three, something like that.

SM: But now you're engaged in a whole new group of activities. What is your job here, Gene?

GD: I work for the National Indian Youth Council.

SM: Is that one of the BIA's programs?

GD: No, it's a strictly private outfit, private monies.

SM: Organized by Indians?

GD: Right, and they sponsor lot of manpower programs across the United States. The National Indian Youth Councils, their prime sponsor, is some of the manpower programs, such as your training, your vo-ed training and job development, skills up-grading, education, monies to be able to subsist on for those who really have the need. And some areas we're gettin' into here in Gallup is tryin' to be able to develop jobs, to develop job banks, skills bank, and tryin' to get these young people to get them motivated to be able to upgrade themselves in government jobs, and also the state jobs or the city jobs they have. We have a complete thing in Gallup about what they call, what is supposedly called the Urban Indians Center. Albuquerque, maybe Denver, Salt Lake, L.A., and possibly Phoenix, Dallas and some of your centers where Indians are a minority or make up a percentage of the population, it's not unique like Gallup. Gallup is strictly a reservation town. By that I mean you have Indians comin' in, that are strictly out of Gallup. There's a very few percent of Navajos that do reside in Gallup, that percentage is really small.

SM: Do you have any figures in mind of the population of Gallup, how it's set up?
GD: Gallup is half and half on the Anglo and the Spanish American population. The Indians that do reside right here in Gallup, that have homes in Gallup, they make up about 13%.

SM: And the rest would be split evenly between Anglo and Spanish. So that in spite of the fact that they say on the signboard down here, "The Indian Capital of the World", the Indians that are here are mostly from out of town who come in to trade or sell their wares?

GD: Or sell their wares, and what have you. And what the NIYC-CETA program is, is to be able to get some of these people to realize that there's not just a job alone that's gonna put them through, but to upgrade their skills to a point where they can become competitive on the labor market. Like the program we have here, the silversmith and the weaving program. Right here in the center, and in the last two and a half years--'course I've spent only seven months here--that it's been in existence, they've possibly trained about 200, 300 Indians in the fundamentals, the basic silversmithing.

SM: Let's stop and describe the situation we're in. The building we're in here, just north of the main street, is called?

GD: The Gallup Indian Community Center.

SM: Who runs this, who backs this?

GD: This is an outfit, it's a federal program, runs about three components. One is your family services and your juvenile services, and one is the supportive services. Then you also have another program, run by the American Indian Alcoholism Program. We have that division, that is also part of the center that's run through here, and you also have our program, the NIYC-CETA program, and we handle the job developments, and skills upgrading, educational programming, and also your silversmith program, which is training here, and also your weaving.
SM: So that gives us an overview of this center, how it functions, and how it's organized. It's the community center for the Indian people in the area. And your title, Gene?

GD: I'm in charge of the NIYC-CETA program, which is the manpower program.

SM: The manpower, the job-finding program, and that's your division of the center's work. And you've been at this work for the last seven months or so?

GD: I've been with this job for about seven months.

SM: And then you're also going to school at the university?

GD: Right. I'm taking evening classes.

SM: At the Gallup branch of the University of New Mexico, you have some other very interesting things going on that everyone might like to know about. You have this silversmith training program in the center, and you have looms where people can learn to weave, and then produce the famous Navajo rugs. They're still all women. In Navajo tribes men don't do this?

GD: No.

SM: And then you have other training programs going on right here in the school?

GD: Well, we also use part of the Navajo Tribe's training facilities, which is skills upgrading, and that's located here in Gallup, and off and on if we get enough people in, people that are already employed, like young ladies or young men in clerical fields, what we do is we schedule class sessions for them to be able to improve on their
skills, to be able to do some of the things that they lack in. We provide these available, it's free, they don't have to pay a thing, all we ask is that they do it on an honor system, and that they are interested and sincere about it.

SM: How is it working, Gene? Pretty well?

GD: It works from time to time. Of course, you have to advertise and schedule it where you accommodate at least 12, 13 people.

SM: Do you realize the switch that you've described? The boy who ran away from school countless times is now running one?

GD: Well, after while, a man comes of age, maybe at 12, or as young as he might be. I've been very fortunate in being able to blend the two cultures, and being able to at least have an idea of what I want in life.

SM: You're comfortable in both, aren't you?

GD: Oh, I don't have no problems.

SM: You seem perfectly poised and comfortable talking to me, and I can imagine when you're out there talking to your grandfather, other people out there, you're just as comfortable with them.

GD: Oh yes, there's no problem there.

SM: Some people do have problems with this, though, don't they?

GD: Some do. Some places you run across, it's very evident. What's in oneself, if you have the confidence, and you have the ability to present yourself.
SM: Is that what it is? A personal sense of confidence maybe?

GD: Confidence is hard to describe. It's a blending of what you know, what's at hand, and what you can use.

SM: This is a very real problem with a lot of people. Self-identity, the sociologists call it, isn't it?

GD: Identity is... I know what I am basically. I'm Navajo. I have no doubt about it. I probably can trace my lineage pretty far back. I know who I am. I have a clan name, both matrilineal and patrilineal, and if you have it, I think you can build your confidence around it. I see lot of young kids comin' in, they have this problem of tryin' to walk a rope, you know. On one side they feel they can't cope--on the other they're rejected because they become a problem. The problem you run across with most young people that I've dealt with when I was working with the public defenders office was that a lot of them couldn't cope with the realities of life.

SM: Now would they have had problems like that if they had not been involved with two cultures?

GD: They would still have problems. They would have still had them to begin with, 'cause if they couldn't cope with their own culture, why bring on the other?

SM: It just adds problems by bringing on another one.

GD: I don't think there would be any problems if the educational program was patterned correctly from the beginning.

SM: It could be overcome then?
GD: It could have been overcome.

SM: How would that be?

GD: I think you have to go back and revamp the concept of what is education for the Indians, especially a large Indian tribe like ours. But then you have to go back and tell the government that. The government is not gonna really say, "Yeah. These guys want us to change the whole system." So there you run into a whole new area. Then other than the government, you have the state education, then you have your private institutions--by private I mean church-oriented institutions. There's a blending of everything. Right now we're goin' through a transition, you know, and tryin' to find, particularly the young kid, tryin' to find out who they are. Before the '60's there was stress on education, just strictly education, and I went through this at an early stage, and I asked myself that, "Why? Why is education?" I learned that years ago. I know what it means to survive. I know. All I want is the basics, then I can decide for myself. At the time, of course, it was very simple to live. Not as complex as it is now. But you have a blending of these different schools, different learning institutions that are in this area strictly for the Navajos and the Indians, and it's hard for them to comprehend just where they are. It's hard for the teacher to tell them, "This is what you want. This is what you need for yourself, or to put yourself on a competitive level in a very changin' society." And it's even hard for me to comprehend some of the things that are movin' in so rapidly, and I think within the next five, maybe six or seven years, the educational program geared for the Navajos, especially, is gonna just be so out-dated it's gonna be chaos, and you're gonna have more problems then than now.

SM: I ran into one school where the Indian people are running it themselves as an experimental school, and all the students and all the teachers
and the teacher aides are all Indian people of this particular tribe. Do you think there might be some value there?

GD: We've had some schools built along the same lines. I imagine they'd be probably what you're talkin' about, bi-lingual, bi-cultural program within the state, McKinley County schools, and the Bureau has their own pilot projects in bringin' about and revivin' some of the cultural aspects of it, what has been, which is very good, but Navajos are very adaptable people. They change so readily, they like to modify, they like to incorporate other ideas to where they level off, and blend in the best of the two to achieve what is basically what they want in the long run.

SM: Would you say they are on the whole, as a total group, doing pretty well?

GD: I would say so. Thriving in numbers.

SM: Somebody said you have the largest and the richest of all the Indian tribes in the United States, because, I suppose, of the oil and everything else that has been discovered on the land.

GD: I don't think that money has anything to do with . . . I run across white people who say the only thing rich about the Indian people is they're easy to get along with.

SM: Would you say that the Indian person is not demanding equality in the sense that other minority groups have?

GD: Right. We don't want equality to a point where I compete with you for the new car. It's not material to me. Navajo philosophy, and my basic philosophy, is just let me be what I am. I know what I am. You can spout my name all over the place, or say that I got an Indian friend, or I got this. For a while the trend was, the ultimate goal
of the white man was to have an Indian for a buddy.

SM: That was noticeable here?

GD: That was noticeable almost everywhere a while back.

SM: Going back a little bit further, it was the opposite.

GD: Yeah, and why? Some things I can't understand even though I've grown up with just about every people from all walks of life. And it's funny how it always comes back. I just wanta be . . . just leave me alone. I don't want equality, I don't want to have the same amount of money in your bank. I don't wanta drive a new car every year. I just wanta be me, do the things I want, and be free, and be able to smile and breathe a lot of good air. That's all I want.

SM: Do you think we are making any progress toward that kind of goal?

GD: I don't think so. People are still encroachin' on, and just love to get their hands on the reservation. Even Indians that I know of, my parents and their parents and relatives and what have you--I'm talkin' about the Indian that is on the reservation--he comes to town and trades for a few things, and what is essential. And he goes back on the reservation, he lives, he is comfortable, he doesn't pay, he doesn't live in poverty. Poverty is only a state of mind. To them, to live, to get up every day and to be able to say that you lived another day is all they want.

SM: That's success.

GD: That's success to them, 'cause then you can pass on what you have--the riches of life on to those that are around here.
SM: This comes out in some of the ceremonials and the chants and so on that the Navajo people use.

GD: Oh yeah. When I get in a bind, when I get all uptight, business gets out of hand, when I can't cope with it, I go back to the reservation and look for a sing, or for a Squaw Dance, and just kind of lay there and listen to the songs. It's therapy for me to feel that I'm still secure, that I know where I'm at. I feel good when I do that. Some people go to psychiatrists, some people go to hospitals for one reason or another. I go back home 'cause I know where I'm at.

SM: Achieving the kind of self-understanding that you have has made your life a pretty good one, hasn't it?

GD: Oh yeah, I'm comfortable, I feel confident that I can get along anywhere in the world, and I don't have any qualms about leavin' a job, lookin' for another one. I can work anywhere. When you're that confident ... I don't think it's maturity, I think it's confidence, being able to be what you are, and supposedly that comes near to being very mature.

SM: The activity you're pursuing here now in the center with the manpower program is going to help other people who need it. These two buildings out in front here, they're being erected in the form of hogans, and one of them is going to be a workshop?

GD: One is going to be a silversmith workshop, the other is gonna have a showroom, a display room there, and hopefully . . .

SM: Now the looms, the weaving, that's done in another area?

GD: We don't have room in those two hogans. Probably we will keep them
in the Indian center, and see if we could get some of the older Navajo weavers into town and see if they could possibly weave on a 50-50 basis to get a rug out.

SM: Anything else, any other things that they'll be producing?

GD: Arts and crafts. Your sashwork, maybe Navajo skirts and blouses. These are for ceremonials, you know, people like to come in and order.

SM: Will they be not only for Navajo people, but also for the people coming through, the travellers?

GD: Oh yeah, if they want to order a set of Navajo costume, we'd probably be able to do it.

SM: In other words, if somebody wanted a Navajo rug with a particular kind of design, some competent weaver would try to produce the nearest thing to that possible?

GD: That's between the customer and the weaver.

SM: They'd have to work that out, because there are no two rugs exactly alike, are there?

GD: No, uh huh.

SM: They're individual creations.

GD: Design is very unique with Navajos. They work on it. The good weavers are ones that weave strictly from the inside. There are some commercial weavers, they just weave just to put out the stuff.

SM: Well now, if I went over there and made an arrangement with one of
the weavers, that would be a commercial weaver, wouldn't it?

GD: Well, it would depend on what you'd want.

SM: If I asked them to try to weave me a rug that expresses how they feel, that would be a sincere thing, but if I said, "Now look, I want it just like this and like that so it will impress my friends in St. Louis," then that would be a commercial project?

GD: That is like goin' out and askin' your wife, sayin', "I want a baby this big, this wide." You can't do that. It's a whole creation all by itself.

SM: And each piece of silverwork is too, isn't it?

GD: Oh yeah.

SM: Some of it is beautiful. Is most of it made on the reservations?

GD: Some of those are made in assembly lines, and some are made what they call piecework, where a trader would like maybe a hundred rings, two hundred bracelets, and they go ahead and create it out of the silver and the stones, just your regular assembly line.

SM: They work for somebody else?

GD: Right. Traders. Each individual is given the responsibility of tackin' on what comes down the line until the finished product comes out at the end.

SM: If they were making a ring, someone would make the band and someone would make the bezel, someone would set the stone, and so on?

GD: Right. The same techniques that you use for a finished product.
SM: And they tend to get a little more similar than if each one was made
completely and separately by a person?

GD: Right.

SM: Still it would be genuine Indian-produced silver jewelry, wouldn't
it?

GD: Right. Depends on where you use the word Indian.

SM: But it isn't what one has in mind when you think in terms of a silver-
smith out there in one of the hogans working on his own, and creating
something beautiful by himself. But we never know, those of us who
go around to the stores, we never know which way it came out, do we?

GD: No, not really. Most of your jewelry that's sold east of Albuquerque
you're gonna have to rely on someone that's very knowledgeable in
jewelry.

SM: Or have to have faith in somebody that knows.

GD: Right. Or you get someone that's been in Indian country that would
be able to tell you that it is authentic or production-made, and of
course, you have many different peoples doin' that. But even the
quality of stones is getting to be where some of those are bein'
imported from the east.

SM: Persia is a source of turquoise.

GD: Right. And they tend to me or to some people, they sort of look
artificial, and if you really want good Indian jewelry, go to someone
that's dealin' strictly with Indians. Traders buy jewelry that's
pretty fair, but the prices he asks are nearly enough to choke a
horse.
SM: Now your own silversmiths that are going to be working here are going to be all Indian silversmiths?

GD: Yeah, we train enough of those to be able to accommodate anyone.

SM: They will be working there, and then if someone wants to buy a piece of jewelry that they're making, that's going to be the genuine thing?

GD: Right.

SM: No doubt about it, and it isn't going to be any more expensive?

GD: Probably less so, because they're goin' on the assumption that we're gonna be in business, not to make a profit, but to turn over and improve the quality of the silversmith, to improve his work, and possibly have him see the light at a point in time to get into a whole new line of silversmithing. He's gotta change. He just can't have the old Indian jewelry anymore. It can't remain static, you gotta go and change with the times and what the demands are. Sometimes you'll create possibly some pressure on individuals to change. What we're doin' here, we're not only teachin' them beginnin' silversmith, we're teachin' how to see how an artist is to get upset in his way. One might be interested in strictly shadowbox work. We like him or her to improve on this skill until it becomes a trademark for him. Or someone might come in and just make conchos. Now these are the type of things we're lookin' for--quality. We're not so much interested in quantity, but eventually we're goin' on that basis pretty soon, because people are gonna start orderin' silver, small stuff like rings, bracelets and chokers--these things we probably do them on orders.

SM: Here again, it will be the production of an artist or a master craftsman.
GD: We go along with the assembly line thing for this reason—let's improve the silversmith's ability and his confidence in working with different types of jewelry, so that, in time, he will begin to create his own type of jewelry that he wants to make, sort of like in apprenticeship you always have levels in any kind of trade or any kind of skill.

SM: Do you have any of these things available now to the public?

GD: We have some samples available. We have some jewelry the co-op bought, we got them on hand.

SM: They're out here in the front part of the building?

GD: Right, and they've gone to some shows.

SM: Some prize winners out there?

GD: No, not really, because we've dealt only with our smiths that have come through the program, and their work is not quite up to par to be able to be competitive at these shows, and what we're doin' right now is to make sure that these people keep an interest in silversmithin' until they do acquire that particular skill in that particular item where you don't have as many flaws as you had in the beginnin', so that it becomes a piece of work that can become competitive on the market.

SM: The weaving and the silversmithing and so on, this is a co-operative movement, isn't it?

GD: Right.

SM: And that's separate from your program that you're all involved in?
GD: We're all involved in tryin' to get it goin'.

SM: And this is going to be right here. Let's tell the people that listen where it is. As you drive through Gallup on the highway, you are going to be on the north side, that is on the right as you go west, on the left as you go east, the north side of the highway.

GD: It's the middle of town, the only road headin' north.

SM: It's on Highway 66 going east and west.

GD: And all you do is turn north on 666.

SM: And when do you expect to have this to the point where someone could stop by and look at some rings or some rugs?

GD: Well, we got 'em on hand now.

SM: On hand already, so they can stop by tomorrow or this afternoon; and also next year you'll have these two buildings all completed and in operation. They're going to be quite colorful. They're made of logs, aren't they?

GD: Right.

SM: Just like the bigger hogans out on the reservation. In fact, your capitol at Window Rock is made in that same design, isn't it?

GD: Right.

SM: A very striking building.

GD: And the council chambers are made in the same fashion.
SM: Gene, this has been a very interesting time I've spent with you. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

GD: No. It's been a pleasure doin' this.

SM: I appreciate it very much, so, thanks again, Gene.