GLEN EAGLE SPEAKER, Blackfoot

November 21, 1975

Seattle, Washington

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.

This transcript series was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and by support from St. Louis Community College.

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LISTENING TO INDIANS

NO. III

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

Today I'm at the Indian center in Seattle, Washington, and instead of a Northwest coast Indian I'm talking to a man from Montana, Glen Eaglespeaker. Is that right, Glen?

Glenn Eaglespeaker:

Yes. I prefer to say the Blackfeet Nation. This extends into another country, to Canada.

SM: United States and Canada both. I want to get your name correctly. Glen Eaglespeaker, all one word.

GE: Yes.

SM: And you're the artist in residence here at the center, aren't you?

GE: Yes.

SM: And you also teach art and singing, drawing, and so on, at the Blackfoot center?

GE: Um hm.

SM: Did you come from Montana?

GE: Yes. I lived here nearly ten years, and I eventually wound up in Seattle.

SM: Do you like the Northwest coast here?

GE: Oh, not at first, not at first.

SM: The weather here is different?
GE: Yes. You gotta get accustomed to the weather. It's damp, whereas more inland, the interior, is a little bit more drier. You have to get accustomed to the weather.

SM: Now as a painter, do you have a problem with the different degrees of humidity?

GE: Oh no, no. In this area you just about hafta stay indoors all year round. Your work is generally done from memory.

SM: Instead of going out to paint a horse in the field, you do it from memory?

GE: It's too cold. There's only a few short months of summer here, and the rest is damp.

SM: But it never gets very cold either?

GE: No it don't. That's what I like about it.

SM: It's rather an unusual thing when it freezes?

GE: Yes. Causes lotta traffic tieups.

SM: Icy roads?

GE: Oh yes. If you're not used to it, you know.

SM: I came down a hill here today, you couldn't do it on ice.

GE: Yeah, and it snows from time to time, and that causes quite a problem. I remember one year there was around three feet of snow.
SM: Really? Did it last very long?

GE: Well, it lasted about a week. That was a week!

SM: More about you though now. You were born in Montana, in the Blackfoot Nation, back there, and then you came back here later on. Did you go to school at a reservation school?

GE: Oh yes. Well, let me start by saying that I was raised on a reservation. You know, I often wondered when I was on a reservation, how it was like on the outside. I know all about a reservation. I grew up there. The hardships, you know, that if I talk about them today, some people might think I'm looney. Part of the time I remember I grew up in a tent in the wintertime. Thirty, forty below, down along the rivers. And I don't remember when, but I always see other boys sketchin', you know, pickin' up objects and painting with 'em, even on the ground, you know. Some are good at drawin' from hopscotch squares, drawin' on the ground or on sidewalks, on the walls, on a rock occasionally. And I know some guys are great, to me. They're older than me, say like when I was six or seven, I'd watch a guy draw a horse. Probably he'd be about 14 or 15 years old, and some are really good. That really impressed me. And within myself I'd think, "I wish I could do that. I wish I could." I was a little boy, and you know you wish you could do all these things. Certain Indian boys are just talented for this, and we had horses, and I guess at that time when I grew up Indian boys grew up with horses.

AM: Back on the Montana prairies?

GE: Yes. And you didn't notice it, but now I do. I grew up among horses, animals. And every time now I see a movie made about some guy, it says in some movies, so and so are raised with bears, amongst the wolves, all that, but let me tell you one thing, how about the Indians?
Take me for instance. Where did I get all my wild knowledge? I didn't get it by just passin' through Indian country, I lived it. I knew how to trap, yes I learned how to trap beaver. After I got married I found out trappin' was quite . . . it relieves some of the pressures of hardship.

SM: Well, then, you were still in Montana country?

GE: My great grandfather married into Canada, and that's where my father was born, and I'm just like followin' in my dad's footsteps. He married a girl from Montana. It's kinda confusin'. And then I was born and I grew up in Canada and I went back to Montana and I married a girl--she's a Blackfoot--but it's a whole nation, it's just divided by a border.

SM: It's all one people?

GE: Um hm. It's all one people. And so I went back and I married my wife. She's from a little town in Montana, and we lived out here when we got married, around Washington.

SM: Then you moved to Washington after you were married?

GE: Uh huh. I lived around here, oh, I don't know, four or five years. Then somehow our children started growin' up. At the time we had three, and I didn't live in the city. I worked out on ranches. We was always goin' back to Montana. Every time I get a vacation, we're gone, you know. Our hearts were still on the reservation. Then we moved to Montana, and I worked there, lived on a reservation, and then we moved to Canada.

SM: Took your kids and your wife?
GE: Took my kids. Well, all this time is a great span of time, we had children. By the time we settled in Canada, like I mentioned, this is a great span of time. It started when we had three children, by the time I got through we had nine children--five boys, four girls, and there I lived on another reservation.

SM: This was in Canada?

GE: Um hm. O.K., then, like all family men I knew I had a responsibility, and then I had a job drivin' the semi-trucks. I drove those for 12 years.

SM: You weren't drawing or painting yet?

GE: Oh yes, all this time. I never got over it. That's my first choice.

SM: You were doing it all the time when you had these other jobs, but you were doing it sort of on your own time as a hobby?

GE: Oh yes. Like if I come to a truck stop and I had time to kill, I always had a pencil, I'd find somethin' to draw, and that killed time. Anyway, all through these years I'm painting, I'm painting, tryin' everything, you know, and givin' my work away to people that I know through the years. They loved art. People I'd get in contact with every day, stockyard people, you know, ranchers, and if you're dealin' with people like that, they love animals and they work with animals, and here I work with animals, but only it's on canvas or paper, it's all on art, and sometimes when I'm drivin' truck I'd sell one or two, you know. Well, I'm drivin', you know, and I had a span of, oh 500 miles I'd go, and then I gave up truck drivin' when I injured my back from strenuous work, and then I was lucky, fortunate. I still had my license--you had to have special license for drivin' a truck--I got into school bus drivin', and I drove that for
eight years. So that involved me with education quite a bit, being around schools, pickin' them up. I was involved quite a bit, but all the time my children were growin' up, and I had a great opportunity, once in a lifetime. One of the colleges had a course—I must admit that I don't know everything about art, and I must tell you that I had to take a course mixin' paint, oil colors, anything. That's where I get stuck. How do you mix that? I wind up with blue or gray all the time. So before I learned how to mix colors, the class went in another direction. They'd have models come in, you know, and sit on the table. Well, that wasn't exactly what I wanted. I wanted to learn how to mix oils and water color. I knew everything else.

SM: What school was this?

GE: That was in Canada, what do you call these schools, a community college. Anyway, the art teacher was from California, and eventually I came to learn how to mix colors, blend them, how to thin them and all that. I finally learned how to mix colors. That is something that always, I always wanted to learn. That was a big obstacle for me, and today, if I didn't take that course—I believe I took it for four months—that's all I was lackin' in my ability as an artist.

SM: People would be surprised at the beauty of your work.

GE: There's one upstairs. Did you see it?

SM: Not yet.

GE: Now that one, I believe it's 14 feet long. You go down to the center, it's a long building, and the whole wall is a painting. Then I got one canvas there at one end of the building that's all about the Indian people from various parts of the country, Northwest area. I can't be painting on my tribe all the time, especially workin' here.
They'll say, "Oh, why don't he paint about the Northwest?" So I'm studyin' about the Northwest area, I'm doin' a little travellin' too.

SM: You're looking at some of the totem poles and some of the Northwest art that is new to you, comparatively speaking?

GE: And I have a bunch of slides that a gentleman mailed in to me for color, and I've been to a lot of places where these actual buildings are. We performed in some.

SM: Performed? That's another side of your activities. What is that?

GE: I must say that's my second ability.

SM: First of all art work you like, painting, drawing. Second is performing?

GE: Performin', teachin' the young people how to sing and drum, and I have a senior class of my age, our own singing group. Then we have what we call juniors--these are students of mine. And then we have a girls' group. The senior group recorded a recording, you could take one of these and take it back.

SM: Now they're over there in that center, aren't they?

GE: Yes. The Blackfeet center. And all the paintings are in there. What I painted on the walls, or any painting, is not forbidden. It's for the public.

SM: For everybody to see.

GE: What I know about Indian life, what I know about art, what I see in life, behind my eyes. And I'm very fortunate to be able to listen
to one of my elders tellin' me a story. And all through the years these stories remain with me. They're not written, they're all in here. And just take for instance this bare wall. If I decided to sketch something on there, all I'd have to do is sit back and select some old timer that told me a story, and from that I'll think about the story, and somewhere along that story a picture will flash, the highlight of the story, and that's how some of my paintings are.

SM: Well, you have the ability to highlight the story, but you also have the ability to carry it out and depict it then on the wall.

GE: Yes.

SM: Or on the canvas. And one of your paintings here on the elk skin.

GE: Oh yes. That's one of the stories about hunting.

SM: Now those paintings over at the Blackfeet center are murals on the walls, and you have a new wall here all cleaned up and painted in solid white so that you can put a painting on there?

GE: Yes, that's why it's bare. You see, this other wall's got all these pen and inks, and I don't dare touch it. Just any painting I have, all the frame and all the canvas is made at home, and I just bring it up here and rig it together and lean it against the wall.

SM: Now actually you have very little schooling in art. Most of it is self-taught, you learned it yourself, except for those four months when you learned how to mix colors?

GE: Yes.

SM: And that's the only schooling you've had?
GE: That's all the schoolin' I had.

SM: That's remarkable.

GE: I look at other people's art, beautiful work. I think they greatly explain myself about art. Take Remington, Russell, Catlin, if you happen to think the way I do for a moment, you'll find out that these great artists did their painting from the settler's side, which we call frontier artists today. And I, for one, admire these great artists. I paint from the Indian side. Your Remington, your Russell, they have knowledge about the Indians, you know. They painted a portion of the Indian life, but I went a little further and did it from the other side, the Indian side.

SM: Your paintings should be more revealing, then, of the true Indian way.

GE: Well I hope so. These stories are actually told ... I haven't really got into the actual Indian battle scenes. Before I get through with here I'm gonna do one of my masterpieces--it's back in my head, like it's comin' to color like.

SM: What is it going to be?

GE: I don't know. One of the characters will be me, through all the life I went through, not only bein' a truck driver at one time, but I worked on the railroad, worked on ranches, I worked in a loggin', trapped beaver. The most thing I miss about the reservation or rural life is hunting.

SM: You can't go hunting so easy here now?

GE: No.

SM: 'Course it's not far to the wilderness from here either.
GE: Well, it might be so, but there's no moose out there, there's no grizzly out there. It's too close to the city.

SM: Do you remember moose back up in Canada?

GE: Oh yeah, lot of moose back there. That's what I miss.

SM: Did you ever shoot one?

GE: Oh yes. Elk, we always reminisce, me and my wife, about all the quantity of meat we get, especially at this time, wintertime, generally on week-ends, after get through drivin' the school bus, I'd go hunting. I'd have to go about 30, 35 miles, and my people got to know me. I wanted to be a good hunter, and in order to be a good hunter, you gotta help your people too. And just think. In one instance--you must also remember that Indians can hunt anything, within the reservation. I brought three elk home and one moose. And that's a lot of meat. And we generally, as Indian people, we make dry meat. I hired all the old people that lived within our neighborhood, and I put all the elders, the ladies into one room, and the men cuttin' up chunks. And aw, you ought to see the people that chatted, old people, and they're cookin' at the same time. And I told them, "All right, you make a good job of it, you'll get these. Your pay will be like a hind quarter, like that, or a front shoulder, and there's choice morsels like liver, the heart and the tongue, things like that." And they cut up the meat for me, and we'd string 'em up like on a clothesline, and we'd dip 'em in salt to make sure the flies don't get at 'em.

SM: Is that what the salt does, keep the flies away?

GE: Yes it does. And then you hang 'em up like clothes. You put what I call a prop, you put it between where your dry meat hangs, you gotta
put a stick in between and let the air get in, just a little twig. And this is what I love to do, and eventually the old people, when I see 'em at the store, you know, anywhere, at the agency, anywhere, they'd say, "When you going hunting? Here's $5.00. Bring us some meat the next time you go hunting. Here's $5.00 for shells, or if you want it for gas." See, I got to know the people I wanted to know, the ones with the stories, legends, and here is all that friendship between my hunting and their work, and my greatest achievement was gettin' the stories from them. After a big dinner and the stories, even the stories the old people hear about long ago, how a big buffalo hunt . . . all these eventually came out. And these are some of the things I treasure. This treasure I have, nobody can see it, it's in my head.

SM: And you sometimes paint those things?

GE: When I get in the right mood, the right material, right here now I have access to all the material I need, like paints or canvas, but I'm gonna really try and please these people through painting.

SM: Paint something that they would like?

GE: Yes.

SM: As a sort of thank you?

GE: See, when a visitor comes in here, he wants to be able to feel relaxed. They've been lookin' for someone, you know, of my caliber, but I'm glad that I'm workin' here.

SM: You like it. You're doing what you want to do, aren't you?

GE: Like my first choice. I had many jobs in the city, but this exactly what I want to do.
SM: And now you've got this wall in your office ready to paint, so when people come in they can sit here and see it. Are those pen and ink drawings on the other wall?

GE: These are pen and ink drawings.

SM: And then the color photo. Is that you?

GE: That's me up there.

SM: In an Indian headdress. And then these other pictures. Do you remember one of the stories from those old days that the old people told you, that you could relate to me?

GE: Well, I can just pick one out of random. Like this man. I told this the other day. A friend of mine came in, she's studyin' about Indian life, she's Apache herself. She's like me, she's kind of a newcomer to the area, but she wanted to learn something about, you know, from me, and I'm learnin' something from her. And I told her a story that was told to me. It makes you wonder, you know. It makes you think whether it's true or not. It seems like I don't think it's too long ago where it involves wagons, you know, harness. This man lived by a lake, him and his wife, and whenever he's goin' to travel he has to round up his team. And by doin' that he has to seek out his team. They'd wander off, across the lake or, you know, back in the brush. This one day, late in the fall, he informed his wife that he was goin' to town. He told his wife, "You comin'?" She says, "No, I'd rather stay home." So, O.K., he told his wife, "I have to find the team." So he went out, looked around early one mornin', didn't see the team anywhere, but way out in the distance, across the lake, horses out there, livestock out there. He could see 'em. Well, he went around the lake. As he went around the lake he could hear ducks and geese, you know, chattering, and he got around the other side of
the lake he seen these . . . they were horses. Well, he found his team there, and they were so gentle he just went up to them and put the rope on 'em, or halter, and took 'em home. But as he started home, he went closer to the edge of the lake, and without lookin' he could hear the ducks, you know, they were migrating. Anyway, for some reason he got too close to the edge— it was kind of soggy— and he noticed the ducks didn't fly, or the geese, and he glanced at 'em a little closer, observed a little closer. Here their feet were frozen, and if they wanted to fly they just flapped their wings, and they couldn't fly. So he went home. "Oh," he says, "I'm gonna make a killin', I'm gonna make money today." So he went home and he hitched up his team to the wagon, and he headed down to the lake and drove alongside of the lake, and he started collectin' these geese, ducks. And he just kept loadin' 'em in, you know. I suppose he wring their necks, you know, in order to put 'em in. And his wife was in the house. She'd look out and see her husband. "I thought I seen him comin' from the lake," she'd say to herself. Here he's makin' two, three trips from the lake. The wagon was loaded with ducks. About the third load she looked out. "Here he comes again from the lake." And she must have very dim vision, you know. She'd peer out the door or window. "He's up to something," her husband. And pretty soon she heard the wagon next to the house. She opened the door and hollered out for him to come in, and he came in. She says, "What are you doin' out there? I see you comin' from the lake two, three times." "Oh, we hit it pretty lucky today. We're gonna have lotta meat this winter." "What is it? Buffalo, deer, elk?" He says, "No, we got ducks." "Well, it's not really cold. We can't freeze 'em. We don't have nothing of them modern conveniences." And then he had three wagonloads, and he didn't know what to do with 'em. He could eat maybe a dozen, in the span of a week. He got to thinkin' what he was gonna do with 'em. So he came with a plan. He informed these people that he was gonna have a dance, and they had a duck feast at a dance, and that lake was named Duck Lake. He shared 'em with his people.
That's one of the stories.

SM: Interesting, isn't it?

GE: Yes. You see, things like that, people should sit back and examine their life itself. Even at a stop light, you got possibly 20 seconds, and in 20 seconds you could go back, you could be elsewhere, before the green light comes on. And I've gone home from time to time from here, from the city, and gone home where we enjoy our Indian days back home, and enjoy friends. But my main purpose is goin' home--I alone know this--and somehow my friends back home would tell me, "What do you want to go to them old people for? Come on, let's go to town." The general thing, you know, what young people do. But back o' my mind, I'm collectin' material, and for quite a while, a number of years, I guess, my wife wondered what I was doin'. It takes love, it takes patience to collect material like that. In order to do that, you have to live amongst the people. And on top of that, to get the material, things that are never written, you have to use kindness to the elders. And these are some of the things that I paint.

SM: The things that you have in your mind, that you've collected over the years, talking to the older people, experiences that you've had?

GE: Some of the paintings I do--I got one at home--I call it "Forty Below," and people here would wonder why I called it "Forty Below." Because you gotta experience extreme cold, out on the prairie, and these are buffalo hunters, they're on horses, and, as an artist, you have to visualize the extreme temperatures. These hunters, especially they trained themselves to be hunters, and when they make a big kill, big haul, this is their greatest accomplishment, and share it with their people. And while I'm here, I'm tryin' to teach my people that the monetary system is not the greatest thing.
SM: In other words, when you're painting, then you feel you're sharing too? You're giving people of your experiences in pleasing color, or colors that teach?

GE: Um hm. I hope one of my boys becomes ... all the materials is there, it's say, like he's beside me every day.

SM: How old are your children now?

GE: Well, I have a boy, he's in the University of Santa Barbara. He's comin' home, he'll take the rest of his education at UW.

SM: Washington University?

GE: Um hm. And he's studying to be a lawyer.

SM: You're going to have a lawyer in the family too.

GE: I need a mouthpiece. Especially livin' in the city, you know.

SM: You're an artist, and your son's going to be a lawyer. And the other kids, how young are they?

GE: Well, I got three daughters that are married, and one daughter, the youngest, still going to school. She's going to the university next year, the youngest daughter. And I have two little boys. The youngest, he's 11, and the other one, I think he's 14.

SM: They're the ones that are still with you mostly?

GE: Yes.

SM: That you are hoping will pick up the interest in art?
GE: Well, I have a boy that sort of dropped out of school, and, I don't know. Let me point something out to you. The Indian people don't use ... we don't use the word love, like, material objects. We don't say, "Oh, I love coffee." You very seldom hear a true Indian say, "I love coffee," or "I love the sunlight." My children, especially, they know I love them by being with them, raisin' 'em, but it's not that we hate the word love, we just don't use it. We use it by feelin', like other ethnic groups. Every other day I hear somethin' like, "Oh, I love to ride the bus home," things like that. The word has ... I don't know.

SM: Lost a lot of meaning?

GE: Yes, a lot of meaning. But like me, say, let's use the word love where you could understand the feelin' I have for art work. I love to do my art work. I love to teach my people, although I don't get paid for teachin', singin' and drummin', I've been doin' it for years, and it involves young people, all ages, and I have children. I like to see young Indian children participate. And here we have families, parents, grandmothers, grandfathers, all busy makin' a feast. Like a while back we had a Halloween, and in a few days we're gonna have a Thanksgivin' dinner. Now within this city there's Indian families preparin' for Thanksgivin', and this involves all their children, and we come together from the city into this one center, where the room itself is all painted, my paintings, and here the Indian feels at home, and laughter comes out better. I don't know why. But then we have other Indians that are born within the city, that have no back­ground of our culture, heritage. They are born in the city, and these people have begin to come out and participate. They're learning. I know this because, right now, tonight for instance, I'm goin' out to Arlington, out here about 50 miles, and I just got a phone call I'm goin' out to Fort Lewis, there's an Indian group out there, they want me to go out there and help them with their Indian
group. Right after that I gotta go up north of Seattle here 50 miles, all the same night, and then tomorrow night I gotta go up to community college in Ballwin Community College. I gotta help them students out here.

SM: Well, you're a busy man to try to do any work here.

GE: Here I'm practicin', I'm teachin' my children, all the people that are involved with me, that money is not everything. Supposin' there's a big blast here in the city. Who's gonna survive? The one with all the money in the bank, or the family that has the knowledge of survival out in the wilderness? But my people hear about me, and people from our reservation, our Blackfeet people, come to town, and they seek us out, you know. There's a girl came from our reservation, but she lives up in Yukon, and she heard about us up there, way up there. You know, we have our local papers, the Indian paper, I guess it goes all over, and she came in the other day, and I seen her someplace before, years ago. And she came in, and she had one of her young boys, and she said, "Do you know me? I told 'em, "I know you speak my language, because I was talking to you in Indian." I answered in Indian, and as soon as she answered back in Indian, I knew. You know, it just came to me who she was, although she changed, through the years and all. And she left the reservation too, she went up in the Yukon.

SM: Some of these things are some of the rewards for the efforts you make

GE: Well, like I say, everything's not based on money. This is the best thing that I know, to approach friendship with anybody.

SM: Do things for people.

GE: Right. Of course you've gotta live too, you gotta have money in the
pocket and in the bank. We realize that, but beyond that, there's other things. Like I've been just approached to design an Indian village for a Bicentennial project, and I gotta draw up plans for this, and various people from the Indian community will work the actual project, you know. So I'm lookin' forward to puttin' up what we call a plateau house, longhouse, adobe.

SM: Oh, several kinds.

GE: Yeah. A tepee.

SM: That will be interesting. Where will that be?

GE: It's a suburb out here a little, a community they call Mountlake Terrace.

SM: That will be something to see.

GE: Oh yes. They got all the money, I don't.

SM: Thank you very much. It's been great talking to you. You've added more to our understanding.