Listening to Indians

GEORGE FAIRBANKS, Chippewa
August 11, 1975
White Earth Reservation, Minnesota

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

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

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

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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NO. 16

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

We're talking to George Fairbanks, often called "Joe Bush", who teaches Chippewa language to the students at the Pine Point School on the White Earth Indian Reservation, Chippewa Reservation, in northwestern Minnesota. Before you start, George, would you tell me where you got that beautiful wrist band? It's made of beads, blue mostly.

GF: It was made in blue, and my wife makes them and she sells them.

SM: How does she fasten the watch on? Is there a loop there?

GF: I will show you if I can get it off. In the meantime, what I'm doin' here, I'm tryin' to get this watch band off to show Sam how this thing sets up in here.

SM: It's a beautiful band; I've never seen one quite like that. You lace it on, tie it on?

GF: It's run through here. This is one strip right here and it runs in between those.

SM: You've got a leather strap that comes in and hooks on to the ends of the watch there, and then there's beads underneath the watch too?

GF: No, there isn't. I'll show you just as soon as I get this thing off.

SM: I'm sorry I put you to that trouble.

GF: That's all right. Everybody's always askin' about this here, and she sells these for $15.00 a piece, and belts for $50.00.

SM: Like the belt you're wearing?

GF: Um hm. See, that's all one piece right there.
SM: There's a leather strap that hooks into the band and goes on through between the beads and the leather backing, and it can't come out.

GF: You're tied on there.

SM: That's neat. It's an intricate design; it's pale blue with dark blues. And then the way she's rigged the edge, it looks like it's a quarter of an inch thick, when it's really just the leather plus the beads.

GF: Why don't you take a good picture of it.

SM: When we get through here we'll do it.

GF: And she uses this because this is a nickname, Joe Bush. And you ask anybody around here who Joe Bush is, and they'll tell you, 'cause when I went into Service the first time.

SM: Instead of George Fairbanks?

GF: Yes, that's just a nickname. All Indian kids, or people, have got a nickname, and we call Josephine over there "Josie."

SM: That's Josephine Clark?

GF: Yeah, and everybody's got a nickname.

SM: Like Joe Bush. I wonder where they got that?

GF: I don't know. They just picked it up here.

SM: Do you have some biographical sketch of Jerry Buckanaga, your principal?
GF: Well, I'll get back to Jerry Buck here. Jerry Buck, Jerry Buckanaga. Most people know him for his expertise on education, and his schooling on... well, education. And from what we understand on Jerry Buck, Jerry's really got it good on education.

SM: Do you know where he went to school?

GF: Well, he graduated from Park Rapids. You probably remember that because he was...

SM: I remember him and his brother.

GF: And from there he went to Minneapolis, and then he went on to Morehead; graduated from Morehead with a considerable hardship of tryin' to get through college. It took him almost about eight years in which to finish his college degree, and he come back here in 1968 as a teacher himself, and he was elected to the school board as a superintendent. At the time we had a Mr. Otto Cameron from Park Rapids that was a superintendent here. And Jerry Buck--a lot of people said that he wasn't qualified to do it because he was only about 22 years of age--but eventually he got the job as superintendent, and that was in '68. In 1970 he was determined to start his own school here, which we got now. And he did it, and we all backed him, and everything that Jerry does, the whole community always looks up at Jerry and says, "You're the one to do it."

SM: He's a respected leader in the community?

GF: He is. He is. And in 1970 was when they were gonna close our school down here, through Park Rapids. And there was a big write-up in the Minneapolis paper sayin' that Jerry Buck and myself, as an Indian teacher here, that we were teachin' hate against the non-Indians, and that is when it all come out that we were gonna fight. Jerry Buck didn't have nothin' to say about things like this here. There'd been
a lot of rhetoric thrown at Jerry because of his viewpoints, and his stand the way he's gonna run things. O.K., there's been a lot of, a lot of . . . should I say, lot of b.s. thrown at him.

SM: In other words, he wanted to run the school the way the Indians wanted to run it—for the Indians?

GF: That's right. Um hm.

SM: Not the way somebody else from someplace else dictated?

GF: O.K. All right now. From his viewpoint as to how to run the school, he uses the criteria of one step-two steps—three steps, until you get that star up there, and that star means something. And he'd gotten that star—all right, he uses an example of a little bitty kid that just been born. That's one step right there, and that little baby's gonna keep on moving until he gets to that star. And there's a lot of kids that drop out of school mainly for the reason that they can't hack it . . . goin' to Park Rapids or somewhere or other, because there's . . . I could've graduated myself, you know. There was a lot of kids over there that just dropped out their last year because they couldn't see it.

SM: Do you mean they couldn't see the value of the education?

GF: Yeah. They can't stand the pressure over there and the outside world as to what we teach here. But our own system can say that . . . those kids can go out there and say, "I'm better'n you are," because . . . as an Indian you look out the door each morning, and you say, "I'm alive." O.K. An Indian will say the same thing. Ask my mother. I was reared by her, and I'm gonna stick by it. And those kids'd go out there and try to do things through their educational system— they can cope with it—that's the reason why I told you they had a
big sit-down over there. That is one thing right there, and from Jerry Buck's point of view, as to the educational system here, the way it runs, there's a lot of people that go along with Jerry's system, you know, of running the school. And we all go along with it.

SM: And have you found that the students graduating from the school here have been able to compete then in the world satisfactorily?

GF: They have, they have.

SM: They're doing all right?

GF: You're dog-goned right they have.

SM: So when they're not put down by prejudice, they do come along?

GF: They do. But if they get that one step ahead of the non-Indian, they got it then. But it's this thing, you know—now we're goin' back to Jerry, you know—now Jerry, when he started this school in 1968—in 1970 we had a big fight here—and then we had another director from Tahlequah, Oklahoma.

SM: He was an Indian?

GF: He was an Indian too. And he was a director here for one year, and you probably know of—probably heard of—Roger Kemp. He was teaching in Park Rapids and he didn't like their system either, as to how they were goin', and how they were runnin' everything. So he come back here and we got him, and durin' that time Jerry went out to Harvard.

SM: Jerry went to Harvard?

GF: Yes, he's got his master's now.
SM: From Harvard University? That's a prestige school.

GF: He finished. That's why I said that with his education, and his education in law, he's the one that we're lookin' up to now.

SM: So he's, you might say, the leader of the school and the community both.

GF: He is, next to me. (laughter)

SM: Next to you. Actually from what I've gathered, everybody here thinks a lot of him.

GF: We do. We'll stand behind him, and back him in everything he says.

SM: And the school is working out better now than ever?

GF: It is good.

SM: It's an attractive place. It has taken on a personality it didn't have.

GF: When you stepped in the school here, what kind of a reaction did you get?

SM: That you've been giving it some loving tender care.

GF: Well, see, we had some educators from St. Paul, Don Christenson, and he said, "When I walked in the school," he said, "That's all I felt, was an air of love for the building itself."

SM: In fact, while you were gone a few minutes ago, I tried to take a picture of the hallway because of all those colored panels and the way
you've used it so effectively. I hope it comes out well. It's dark, but if I can get it, it will show how colorful the school is, and I also took the liberty of taking some pictures of the signs in the room over there, that room where we first started talking.

GF: That dining room up there?

SM: The dining room, yes. And you have some interesting signs and symbols on the wall.

GF: Yeah. Well, I just hope that we can keep on functioning the way we're goin' now.

SM: There is one other thing I can leave with you, so that we never have to feel that we have come to an end with this effort that we're engaged in--making these recorded conversations. I'm sure you have tape recorders here too, and if ever you have something that you want to put down on tape that I can use in my classes, put in our library tape bank, and then that's open to the public really, just like a library book is, you could make a tape and send it to me and I'll include it, so that you know that you can go on when something comes to mind. When Jerry Buckanaga comes back, and you and he talk things over, and if there is something else you would want to add, I'd be pleased to have that to include with this other material to tell the story the way you want it told.

GF: O.K. And I hope that your studies help you with this thing too.

SM: Well, it's helping me for one thing, and I hope it helps both the Indians and non-Indian people understand each other better, so that we can overcome some of these kind of pressures that caused that friction in Park Rapids, for example, or at Wounded Knee, or wherever it's happened. Because there's no reason why we can't live together in a
country like this, with each person keeping his own characteristics and still everybody respecting the other person.

GF: Mr. Myers, this morning before I had to step out of there—I was talking about AIM, that American Indian Movement thing. O.K., now, they had two schools going—one in Minneapolis and one in St. Paul—the little red schoolhouse, and they were doin' real good on that. And then they come back here, as we of the RBC [Reservation Business Committee] endorsed them, you know, to have their powwow, and then they stayed. It was kind of a big friction, you know, 'cause AIM was up here, and AIM doesn't have that much power, you know, what they wanna do. O.K., they stayed here then, and what they wanna do is get a school goin' similar to what we've here, a survival school, which they call a survival school. O.K., now, the RBC took the liberty of sayin', "O.K., we endorse it," because we have nothing against AIM. What they're tryin' to do is set up a school over there similar to ours, but they haven't got the teachers that we have here.

SM: You've got a good staff here.

GF: Yeah. And we got a lot of backin' in the community here sayin' that this school's gonna keep on runnin' too.

SM: You know, the whole area looks better already—the housing, the school, and the attitude of the youngsters that I've met in just coming and going. So I think you're making real progress.

GF: Yeah. It could be a good melting pot later on, you know, if things are not goin' be met the way we wanta see 'em, mainly our housing, because we got a meeting up here Friday, and I've invited Senator Mondale, Congressman Mondale, Humphrey and Berglund, and all the people of HUD. This is gonna be a big meeting this time.

SM: About housing on the whole White Earth Reservation?
GF: No, just here.

SM: Oh, just here at this end.

GF: Um hm. Because they're tryin' to take our people to court here, which . . . these are all my constituents here . . . and I'm standin' up for these people, so it might end up with a big battle or somethin'

SM: I hope not.

GF: I don't think so. A lot of people in Washington said this morning that they would be here, and they're gonna check into what our housing administration is gonna do and all.

SM: Well, now, if you think of anything else, George, would you let me know?

GF: I will.