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

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BERNARD FONTANA
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Sam Myers:

Today I'm talking with Dr. Bernard Fontana.

Bernard Fontana:

This is Bernard Fontana, who is the ethnologist in the Arizona State Museum, talking at the University of Arizona in Tucson, on Thursday, December the 18th, 1975. Having been in the oral history business for a long time, I always like to get that information on the tape. We were talking about Papagos, and my family and I have lived right next door to the San Xavier Papago Reservation for 20 years.

SM: Right out here southwest of Tucson?

BF: Right. Southwest of Tucson. It's about nine miles from downtown Tucson.

SM: Have you practically become one by osmosis?

BF: More or less, right. So that, when we moved out here we were only one of three non-Indian families anywhere near the reservation, and we were the only family with children, so that our kids have grown up with Papagos. Their only day-to-day, close playmates at home have all been Papagos. We first went out there because we didn't want to live in Tucson. We lived in town one year, and were anxious to get back out in the country again.

SM: Well, undoubtedly you've had interesting experiences, living with the people out there. Their reservation, what is it like?

BF: O.K. The Papago Reservation is really, historically, three reservations. There's the San Xavier Reservation, where I live, and that's about 70,000 acres. There's the little Gila Bend Reservation,
which is about the same size, and then there is the Papago Reserva-
tion proper, and when you add all of these together, you come up with
2,700,000 acres, making the Papago Reservation the second largest in
the United States.

SM: That's a surprise to a lot of people.

BF: And it's all under one jurisdiction. It's one tribal council, so
that the tribal council is made up of 22 members representing 11 dif-
ferent districts on the reservation, and the San Xavier Reservation
constitutes one of the districts, and it sends two people to the
tribal council. San Xavier was the first reservation set aside. It
was created in 1874, and the larger reservation was much later. In
fact, it wasn't set aside until 1916, and one of the results of that
is that the people who live at San Xavier, partly because it's been a
reservation longer, and they've been under our kind of bureaucratic
administration longer, and also because of its proximity to Tucson,
the people there, by and large, tend to have had more working deal-
ings with non-Indians than a great many Papagos on the large reser-
vation.

SM: Where is that large one?

BF: It's west of Tucson. You drive from Tucson about 40 miles, or 35 or
so miles, and then the reservation goes from there all the way to
Ajo, practically.

SM: Which is about 200 miles?

BF: One hundred twenty five. Then in the northern end it's just south
of the town of Casa Grande, Arizona, and it goes down to the inter-
national boundary. The Mexican-United States boundary is the
southern boundary of the Papago Reservation. Talking about the lit-
erature on Papago, the person who has done, I think, the best work
in describing traditional Papago culture, was an anthropologist named Ruth Underhill, and her book, *The Social Organization of the Papago Indians*, is a kind of classic in terms of describing an idealized view of traditional Papago life ways as these were probably around the turn of the century. And today young Papagos who are interested in their own history and culture have been very grateful to Ruth Underhill for having done this work back in the '30's, because there's so much that's in there that is gone now. They're very pleased that somebody came along and talked to old people then, and made a permanent record of it. But there's a little sleeper of a little book that she did once, which, to my mind, is one of the best Indian autobiographies that's ever been done. I think it's better in many ways than *Sun Chief*, for example, or a lot of the really well-known ones, and it's simply called *The Autobiography of a Papago Woman*.

SM: By Underhill?

BF: Well, yes. It really isn't an autobiography. It's an "As told to" autobiography. The woman, her name was Chonah, talked to Ruth Underhill, gave her her life story, and all Underhill did was write it down, and it comes out with a distinctly Papago feeling and flavor to it, and it has tremendous insight, such that Josephinus, who is a Papago and has been teaching Papago history and culture at Pima College, told me that the students could read *The Autobiography of a Papago Woman*, and if they really understood everything that was in that book, they would have a tremendous grasp of Papago culture.

SM: Where was it published?

BF: It was published by the American Anthropological Association as a monograph about 1938 or something like that. And interestingly enough, it's never been reprinted or republished in the United States, but only this year, 1975, the Secretaria Educacion Publico
in Mexico, which is equivalent, I suppose, to our Health, Education and Welfare, had it translated into Spanish, and it's now published in the Spanish version, with a very good introduction by a Mexican anthropologist, and it sells in a little series. They publish little paperbacks and sell them for ten pesos, which is less than a dollar, and I understand that it is very popular in Mexico, and hopefully some day we'll get it reprinted and republished in this country. It's a beautiful book.

SM: That version is printed in Spanish?

BF: In Spanish. Yeah. They translated it into Spanish and published it and it's just really doing very well. And if someone were to ask me about an introduction to traditional Papago values and culture, those are the two books, The Social Organization of the Papago Indians, and The Autobiography of a Papago Woman, taken together.

SM: Have you had any problems living out there on the reservation with the people?

BF: No. Oh no.

SM: They just aren't problem people, are they?

BF: Of course, I don't know what you really mean by problems.

SM: Well, anyone resenting you?

BF: Oh no. Goodness knows maybe someone has resented me, but if they have, I haven't heard about it, and the Papagos would consider that to be very rude if they did resent me to let me know about it. I couldn't imagine nicer neighbors. People who are kind and polite and open. It's been a wonderful experience living there, such that,
after a while, I found myself questioning a lot of my own values, and I'm sure that over the years all of us have adopted a lot of Papago attitudes without even thinking about it. Among these is--I'm not too hung up on time in having to get things done by somebody's bureaucratic schedule, and in that sense I've sort of adopted Indian time to the maximum extent possible. And Papagos, again, traditionally, are very generous people. There is an irony in that. Folks come out here to the desert and look around, and they'll say, "Goodness it must have been terrible to have made a living out here without all the trappings of modern civilization, and everyone must have really been hungry and starved to death, and what have you."

But, in point of fact, Papagos, through a minimal amount of agriculture and some cattle raising, and knowing what kinds of plants and animals were to be hunted or gathered at the right time, had a comparative abundance, really, of food, and their whole society has been one of sharing and generosity, and really a kind of society of abundance, so that people give away things. In the old days they used to gamble a lot. You say, isn't that terrible? But one of the things that gambling did was to distribute the available resources over a larger number of people, and so here was this kind of culture of abundance. By contrast, those of us who live in abundance behave as if everything were very scarce, and we live in a culture of scarcity, where we don't want to share anything with anybody else, we want to accumulate it all to our little nuclear family. And living there, you begin to see these kinds of things and feel them, and poverty--the word poverty--becomes a relative term, and you begin to feel how relative it actually is.

SM: Like someone said these people don't want equality, they just want to be left alone to do things their own way, and one of the parts of that is that they felt that they were quite wealthy oftentimes, and by some other standards they may not have been.
BF: Well, they were wealthy, much wealthier than we were in this sense, and that is that the greatest investment one human being could have is in another human being. It was much more important to have that kind of an investment rather than an investment in dollars in the bank, or a new automobile, or whatever, whereas we're less inclined to feel that way. We like to believe that we're rugged individualists, and that we don't need anybody else, and Papagos had a great wealth in one another and sharing through extended families, and through the village structure and the whole thing, and unfortunately, that's changed in the 20 years that we've been out there.

SM: You've noticed the change?

BF: Oh, absolutely. The changes have been tremendous. When we first moved to San Xavier, there was no running water, nobody had any water piped into his house, they had to go and haul it in a barrel, and lots of the people didn't even have pickup trucks or cars. They used to have wagons and horses. And mind you, this is less than 20 years ago that this was the case. So they'd go over to the mission, or they'd go to our place or somebody else's place where there was a pump, and fill it with a hose and then take it back home. There was no electricity, so nobody had any television or electric lights. Everyone used kerosene lighting. Most of the houses were made out of sun-dried adobe, and they had dirt floors. Some of them were even wattle and daub houses, made out of upright poles with mud caked in between. And if you want to use those kinds of things as a measure of poverty, it was a very poverty-stricken place, and in terms of the annual income people were very poor, no question about it. Income levels were very low. So today everyone has running water, today everyone has electricity, there're a lot of automobiles and pickup trucks, there aren't any more wagons--those are long gone. They have virtually all of the amenities of our trappings, and yet, the social disorganization that's followed in its wake has been horrendous,
and measureably so, so that we know, for instance, that the per capita rate of suicides and murders has gone up at a staggering rate. Violent deaths of all kinds have just gone . . . a huge increase.

SM: That's surprising from these comparatively gentle people.

BF: Right. And we get back to something you said, in that it is the feeling of "we want to do it ourselves." And one of the problems with all of these improvements has not been that . . . all right, now they are brand new houses, built with HUD funds, or BIA funds or somebody else's funds, and the problem is not electricity, and the problem is not new automobiles. The problem is the way in which these have come about on the reservation, and they have all come about in a way which says to people who live there, "There's something wrong with you. You're a second-class citizen, but don't worry about it, because I'm going to take care of you. You're not going to have to do anything. The fact that you've been building your own houses for a thousand years doesn't mean anything, because obviously a mud house is no good. So if you'll just move aside for a moment, I'm going to give you a nice four-bedroom house, and you're going to have a formica sink, and you're going to have all of these marvellous gadgets. And I tell you what, I'm going to be generous enough that you can pick the color of the paint for the outside of your house, and, if I'm really generous, I'll let you tell me where you want the house built." In some reservations, of course, that doesn't happen. They build these houses for the convenience of the sewer system rather than for the convenience of the traditional settlement pattern of the people. In short, what's happened is that twenty years ago people were poor but they were in control. They really ran their own lives, for better or for worse. And the tendency over the twenty-year period has been to eliminate material poverty pretty much, but in doing that, they have traded autonomy and a feeling that they were in control, so that the outside world, the well-meaning bureaucrats,
the BIA or the Public Health Service or the Housing and Urban Development or Health, Education and Welfare, or whoever it may be, have gone into San Xavier and other small Papago communities and said, "Here's what you people need," so that we define the problems and we promulgate the solutions to the problems we define for them, and they know darn well that they haven't got any control over it, other than to say yes or no. And, of course, when you're living in a little mud house that has no electricity, and somebody says, "Wouldn't you like a big, fancy house with electricity in it" that's no choice at all. Of course anybody's going to say, "yes." And all of these programs, then, fostered on the outside rather than from within the community, and the whole idea of Indian self-government, self-realization, and so on, has just kind of gone down the tubes, in trade for essentially what's window-dressing for a white bureaucracy that does these things.

SM: That's really sad. And to see it happen, ironically, in the face of more material comfort.

BF: Yes it is. It's a very difficult message to get across, because anthropologists, as you doubtless know, are frequently accused of saying, "Well, you want those people to stay the same and to be museum pieces" when, in fact, nothing can be further from the truth. Nobody stays the same. People change regardless of whether anthropologists or anybody else likes it or not, and I don't know any anthropologists who are jumping up and down in favor of poverty, in favor of dirt houses for the sake of dirt houses, or the lack of running water for the sake of the lack of running water. And, in fact, those are artifacts, and the artifacts are completely indifferent, but, again, the hidden message in our bestowing these kinds of things on somebody else is to tell them that they're second-class citizens, and that they really are too dumb and too incapable of doing things for themselves and remaining in some kind of control. And that's very devastating in the psychology of every human being. I believe that we all
need to wake up in the morning and believe that whatever we're going
to do will have some effect.

SM: And is worthwhile.

BF: Yeah. And maybe we don't. Maybe it doesn't have effect, and maybe
in fact we're not in control of our lives, but we have to think we
are.

SM: Can you see any solution to this, any way out of it?

BF: Yeah, in the long run. Of course, the problem comes from our bureau-
cracy, and we need to go at it from two directions—one is to promote
the kinds of bureaucrats who will sympathize with this, and who will
say, "All right, I'll be able to get a promotion even though I may
not leave 50 new houses in my wake as a BIA administrator." But the
other thing that needs to be done, and I think it's beginning to
happen with young people, that is young Indian people who are coming
to have an objective understanding that this is indeed the situation,
and they're going to begin to insist on their own rights and their
own prerogatives, and they are the ones who are going to be able to
stand back and hold some of these institutions off at arms length,
and say, "O.K., we'll call you when we need you, and if we decide we
need some housing, why we'll work with you, but it's going to be on
our terms, rather than on your terms. I'll give you a recent example
of this. At San Xavier right now, by February there'll be 50 brand-
new houses out there. The reason there are going to be 50 houses is
because the money was allocated in such a way that there had to be 50,
and, in fact there were probably only about 20 families that wanted
new houses. But it meant that those 20 families couldn't get a new
house unless the other 30 houses were built. So they had to go off
the reservation and recruit, begin to look around to find, preferably
Papagos, preferably relatives, preferably people who had some historical
connection with that community. But when you finally get down to it, if
they couldn't get 50 of those total, then they'd have to settle for any Papago, even Papagos who have no kinship or any other kind of tie to the community, and, I suppose, in dire straits they would have settled for any Indian, regardless of whether Papago or not. So now we're going to have 50 houses, there are going to be about 30 new families moving on to the reservation. When you figure it's a little community with about 700 people total, men, women and children, and you bring an influx like that, well, there're bound to be all kinds of problems and new adjustments to be made by everybody. Now that's what I mean by lack of community control. If they wanted 20 houses, there's no reason they shouldn't have had 20 houses, rather than be told that they have to have 50 or none.

SM: By an inflexible bureaucracy.

BF: Precisely. Because of the way the funds are allocated and the whole machinery is set up.

SM: I saw a glimpse of hope this morning. That young woman you introduced me to is majoring in political science, and she is well aware of all this, and she is taking the political science degree deliberately because she feels that's the one that will make her most able to cope with it all.

BF: That's right.

SM: So that's a good sign.

BF: Yeah, I think that's the hope, in the Juliann Ramons of the world, and this is another thing to me that's very exciting on the positive side again. In 20 years that change has been staggering, and, I forget the figures, but roughly 20 years ago, on the whole reservation there were only about 10 Papagos who had finished high school, there was one Papago who had maybe finished one year of college and then
had dropped out, and I don't have the figures at hand now, but that's changing very, very rapidly. And what's exciting to me about it is that particularly the kids who hang in there and get on to college, they become culturally aware, so that even all of that schooling is not succeeding in, you know, eliminating their Papago-ness, and, in fact, in college if anything, it comes to be reinforced. Because then they back off and they have an intellectual understanding, as well as an emotional one, of their own upbringing, and they get very enthusiastic about knowing more about their language, speaking their language, and what have you. And looking at problems of these kinds in a kind of stand-off, objective fashion and saying, "What can we do about it?" Because the solution, finally, has got to be their solution. Nobody else can solve it for them.

SM: That's how they'll restore their self-confidence and their feeling of not being second-class citizens.

BF: That's right.

SM: Many young people have expressed similar attitudes, going into law, medicine, consumerism, political science, with the express aim of going back to work on these very problems, recognizing they're there, recognizing that, "we're different, and, O.K., let us be. We don't resent you, we can live together."

BF: You bet we can.

SM: You're proving that too, yourself.

BF: That, and the Hopis are a beautiful example. Of all the tribes in the Southwest, somehow the Hopis have been the most able to manipulate the non-Indian system to their own ends, and they really succeeded in this admirably.
SM: Preserving as much of their culture as possible?

BF: Absolutely. With almost that being the purpose, so that their whole strategy has been a kind of an adjutative one, where they have not just adapted to white man, but they have made adjustments in the mutual . . . well, originally the Hopis were probably the most adamant about not wanting their kids in school, in white man's schools. And finally when they said, "O.K., if we're going to be forced to go to school, we're going to be forced to school," so that now there are more Hopis in school where it's become a very positive value. But the reason they go to school is not to learn how to be white men--they're going to school to learn about white men so that they can continue to be Hopis, and they've just used that to an nth degree.

SM: That sums up almost what Juliann Ramon was saying this morning, that's she's getting her education so she can go out there and help more, and fend off some of this, use it, and so on.

BF: And it takes guts on their part, real missionary zeal, because again, on a reservation, lot of these kids are greatly mistrusted, and there're traditional matters involved here too. After all, the elders are still supposed to be the spokesmen, and the first to speak, and the younger ones are supposed to be the last to be heard from, and there are a lot of things that students will come back and advocate and vote for, but the older generation will be very mistrustful of this. And there are a lot of older Papagos also who would just as soon not be Indian any more. If you ask them if children should be learning the language and so on, they'll say, "Why? We live in an English-speaking world. What's the advantage of speaking Papago?" And a lot of those parents went to a boarding school someplace, and really had it taken out of them, and they're a little confused now to find this younger generation turning it all around and saying, "We want to be Indians. We want to be Papagos. We don't want to be white
men." And there are a lot of Papagos who would say, "Baloney. I've never gained anything by being a Papago. It's been nothing but a pain in the neck and a disadvantage, and the quicker we forget about it the better." They're in the minority, but they're there.

SM: The pro-Indian, or the I'm-glad-I'm-an-Indian sentiment has really been growing the last few years, hasn't it?

BF: Yes it has.

SM: And, for example, now I have lots of students who say, quite proudly, "I have a little Indian blood in me." Fifty years ago they wouldn't have said that.

BF: You mentioned on the phone the other day something I would like to comment on, and that is the fellow telling you the non-Indian, regardless of how sympathetic he may be, can never really get a handle on certain attitudes about Indians. Well, in short, there is nothing absolutely in the genes of a human being that is going to make him sympathetic or unsympathetic, or make him knowledgeable or not knowledgeable, so that somebody who is biologically, let's say, an Indian, but who has grown up in the white man's world, and who doesn't know the native language, and all he has managed to learn about Indians, Indianness, really, is what he's gotten out of a book, is going to be no more sympathetic, no more understanding, really, of a particular situation than any other non-Indian doing it. You know "Indian" is a cultural definition. And furthermore, even somebody who is a perfectly good Sioux, let's say, and who knows how to speak Sioux, and has grown up on the reservation, is not necessarily, regardless of all that, going to know very much about Havasupai, and he's not going to be able to write Havasupai history or Havasupai traditional culture, or Havasupai anything, any better than a non-Indian totally would be able to do. Now where you begin to get similarities is that any American Indian today who was born and
raised on the reservation, shares that experience in common, and there's no doubt that there is a kind of reservation culture that transcends particular cultures and particular languages, because of the BIA bureaucracy and the structure of it. But one of the sad things that's happened is that again we, who are white, have invented the concept of "the American Indian," which is at heart a racist notion, and this has resulted in such institutions as Indian preference in hiring, so that you might get a Sioux Indian as the administrator on the Papago Indian Reservation, which from a Papago point of view is just as useless as having a non-Indian administrator on that reservation, so that there really is no such thing, or was no such thing as an Indian, until we began to take people who were racially similar, who were Mongoloid in appearance, and a certain skin color and what not, and lumped them all together and said, "You're Indians."

SM: We are reminded it is time for your next appointment, so, thank you, Doctor Fontana.