JERRY FORD, Gros Ventre - Cherokee

September 30, 1975

Norman, Oklahoma

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. 49

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September 30, 1975
Norman, Oklahoma

Glen Rock, New Jersey

Microfilming Corporation of America

1978
Sam Myers:
I'm in Norman, Oklahoma, at the University of Oklahoma, talking to a young lady who is very active in Indian affairs. Her name is Jerry Ford, and her maiden name was Jerry Birdsbill.

Jerry Ford:
Right. It's a Gros Ventre name from Fort Berthold, North Dakota.

SM: And you're a Gros Ventre Indian?

JF: And Cherokee.

SM: The Gros Ventre from Fort Berthold, North Dakota. Did you go to school here in this part of the country?

JF: Well, I was raised in Albuquerque, New Mexico, but I went to school here at OU for the last seven or eight years. I got my bachelor's in '71, and I went to law school for one year, didn't like it, and I'm now working on my master's in guidance and counselling, and I'll graduate this spring.

SM: Did you ever go to a reservation school?

JF: No, I never did, but my brother and sister did.

SM: So you kind of know from their experiences the differences between those and the ordinary public schools?

JF: Yes.

SM: Did they have any problems when they transferred?

JF: Well, my sister dropped out of school when she was in the 10th grade
after going to Santa Fe Institute of American Indian Arts, so she never went back to school.

SM: Did she not like it there?

JF: No, she hated it there, as a matter of fact. Maybe it's changed. That's been about five years ago that she was there, but the administration had a lot of problems with the students. There always are a lot of drug problems and glue sniffing at any school, but this school, in particular, had a lot of people in there in the drama area, drama, voice, and a lot of artists, and being in Santa Fe, they attracted a lot of students that were more drug oriented than other schools.

SM: That whole area from Santa Fe north to Taos has been sort of a center that a lot of people have gravitated to, hasn't it?

JF: Right. Especially Taos.

SM: And your sister ran into enough of this not to like it?

JF: The administration tried pretty hard. I shouldn't say too much about it, because one of my relatives was in charge of the school. But anyway, they had a lot of problems with the students, with my sister in particular, and she eventually ran away from the school and got married. So she never did go back to school, but I always thought if she had stayed in Albuquerque after the public school that she was going to, she would have been a lot better off. There were very lax procedures there for keeping track of the students.

SM: In Santa Fe?

JF: Yes.
SM: And you thought if she had left there and gone to a public school, it might have worked out better?

JF: I think so. My parents would have at least had a better chance of knowing where she was a lot of times. And that's been the problem. The matrons have no idea where the kids are, don't really care. They just run wild.

SM: Your family lives in Albuquerque?

JF: Right. Sixty miles away. Then my brother went to Haskell, and of course he was in college by then, he was a freshman in college, but I understand that the drinking problems and the drug problem is really bad there too.

SM: Your brother's experience at Haskell wasn't all that great either then?

JF: Well, there was a lot of drinking, partying, and the students don't go to classes there. It's really changed since the '30's when my parents went there. It was very strict, and everyone went away with a skill that they could sell to ... wherever they were going to work. Mostly they would work for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, but now they're just having a big problem there. They're graduating students that don't know very much, and their drop-out rate is really high.

SM: That's a BIA school at Haskell?

JF: Yes it is.

SM: And the one in Santa Fe?

JF: Also a BIA school.
SM: Did this have something to do with your getting into the work you're doing here at Norman?

JF: Oh, partially personal experience, but just generally I was involved in working with American Indian students here on campus at OU, and I believe the drop-out rate is really high here at OU also. I worked last year at the Indian counselor's office as the assistant coordinator for American Indian student services, and that's how I got involved in working with students, trying to keep them in school. They had a tutoring program that we used to help the students in their classes, which the students didn't use that much, and we lost a lot of students, and I feel that this University Year for Action program has been a kind of a stop-gap measure between students going out and becoming laymen in the real world, working and staying in school, because this program helps them get credit, but at the same time they get practical, on-the-job experience out working for tribes away from the OU campus.

SM: This gives me an opportunity to mention that the first I saw of you was when you were on television over the whole state, I guess--you and another student.

JF: Jerry Bread is working on his Ph.D. and he'll graduate in May. He's the director of the American Indian Institute.

SM: And you were up there to explain. . . .

JF: His program and my program.

SM: Would you explain the program, how it got started, what it does?

JF: Sure. Like I mentioned, the program was designed to fill a gap between students that saw no reason to go to school, because they
could not correlate it with the real world. So this program, which is called the University Year for Action, enables 30 students from OU to work out in tribal organizations all over Oklahoma, and at the same time gain credit from OU, 30 hours over a year's period. And we are funded by Action, the same organization that funds Peace Corps and Vista, so our program is very similar to Vista--students working out in the field, solving poverty problems--but the difference is that they are connected with the University of Oklahoma and get college credit.

SM: And are they all Indian students?

JF: They're all Indian students.

SM: How long has it been functioning?

JF: It started in May of '75, and will go through May of '76, and we are submitting a proposal to have it refunded, and the limit is three years so we hope to be in operation another two years after this year.

SM: Do you plan to stay with it?

JF: I hope to.

SM: Are you the director of it?

JF: Yes, I'm the director, and I've got three students, volunteers, working with me, helping run the program. One of them is Donna Johnson, Miss Indian Oklahoma.

SM: You have been running since May, and so far, have you seen signs of success and value?
JF: We've had both success and problems. For example, we have students, mostly in the western part of Oklahoma since OU is more or less located in the western part of Oklahoma. We have two students working for the Kiowa tribal office. One of them works for the housing improvement program—he does house estimates and has a rather large budget that he works with. The other student, Angie Aunko, runs the Kiowa tribal newsletter. She's the editor. We have two students with the Comanche Tribe. One of them works with the Manpower office, and the other student is soon to be the new curator of the new cultural center in Lawton.

SM: Now these people are not all here at Norman, but they're all over the state too?

JF: Right. Our program is set up so that the students do not live in Norman. Some of them do by accident, but it wasn't designed that way.

SM: The idea is to try as far as you can to blanket the western part of the state?

JF: Right. And we've got one student with the Absentee Shawnee Tribe. We have one student with the Creek Nation—that's in eastern Oklahoma. He is developing their constitution and by-laws, all in the Creek language, which is going to be a big problem. He's got to get together a lot of translators and so on. Also in part of our program, the student salary is paid half by Action and half by their tribe. So the tribe puts up $2,000 for half of the student's salary, and $1,500 of this money goes to the student and the other $500 is held in a trust account for the student to call on his major advisor to come out into the field to help him on business; or it's also used to help the student solve a problem that, because of his level in college, he's not expert enough to solve. In other words, he can hire anyone from the University of Oklahoma, faculty or staff, to
come out and help him solve a problem. For example, we have had Dr. Childress from the finance department at OU go to the Kiowa tribal office and help set up a bookkeeping system for the tribe, because the tribe has never had one in this particular area--housing improvement program. We've also had Dr. Seaberg from the education department go over to Sallisaw in eastern Oklahoma to help the people there set up a pre-school program. So we have a lot of different things that the students can do, and they have a lot of areas that really need to be worked on out in the field.

SM: This appearance on T.V. the other day, that was explaining the same program. How does it coordinate with Jerry Bread's program?

JF: Jerry Bread runs the American Indian Institute, and we work together, and some of our things overlap, but he just started on the job, and he's just getting set up, but what his office will do is offer technical assistance to the tribes. For example, most of the tribes don't have one single person on their payroll that does strictly work with proposal writing, and so Jerry is going to have a lot of workshops this fall involved with how to write a proposal, and the tribes will come in and pay the University of Oklahoma a certain amount to attend this workshop which Jerry will set up. He's also going to have a lot of workshops in Title IV, Indian education, and Johnson-O'Malley implications. And, of course, with the new programs that the Bureau of Indian Affairs have been involved in, self-determination, this will be right down the alley of the way Indian affairs is going right now. That's basically what he does. Right now he went to Washington. He's got one project that he's working on called Native America, '76, and this will be a travelling troupe of Indian students in the fine arts category that will travel around from state lodge to state lodge in Oklahoma next summer, to celebrate the Indian version of 1776. It's been called Native America, '76, because, of course, this is a touchy issue in the Indian world. We don't want
to give the impression that we're celebrating America's birthday, because, of course, it isn't our birthday, but what we're doing basically is showing the white and Indian world that we, too, have something to celebrate, and this is our own youngsters. We're trying to get across the fact that we're not just working in powwows all the time; we also can do other things in the fine arts field, and this is what we're trying to do in this.

SM: I ran into an interesting situation in this same connection, or at least in connection with the Bicentennial flag up in Minnesota, where one of the communities said they would like to invite all the people, including the Chippewa people, to bring their flags and include them in the presentation of the Bicentennial flag to the city. And then AIM has an establishment nearby, the American Indian Movement, and so they had been hanging the U.S. flag upside down out at their ranch, as they call it. Some of the people saw it, and then refused to let them in, and that led to the Chippewa people refusing to participate, and they had a big, long hassle that went over weeks of time about it. Have you run into anything like that here?

JF: No, Oklahoma is a lot more conservative with regards to Indian politics. AIM has been practically thrown out of the state on a number of occasions, so really nothing like that has happened here, but we're trying to avoid it.

SM: Trying to avoid any kind of protest movements, riots, and all that sort of thing?

JF: Yeah, we haven't had anything like that.

SM: I've noticed there's a difference in Oklahoma's situation, because you don't have reservations here.
JF: That's the big thing. We've lost everything already, so I guess you could say we don't have anything else left to lose, except our Indian people have to live with the white man in this state, and that makes a difference. If you have to live with them the resentment is still there, but it's more hidden, it's deep.

SM: Well now, all non-Indian people aren't bad people.

JF: I didn't say they were.

SM: I just wanted to clear this up, because you were saying you have to live with these other people. In some cases some Indian people like that, or at least don't resent it, or don't mind it.

JF: I don't know. I can't speak for everybody.

SM: What I'm trying to say is that there are people both among the Indian population of the country and the non-Indian population who get along quite well.

JF: Well, on a national scale, we're not like the blacks or the Chicanos who want to integrate. The Indians have always been traditionally a group that wants to keep their culture. In some respects we want to stay separate from the white man. We don't want to assimilate, and I can't speak for everybody, but I think this is more or less a common feeling. However, in Oklahoma, like I say, we have no reservations, and we are required to live with everybody, so a lot of the deep feelings--our lands taken away, various treaties broken back in the 1800's, the run of 1889 in Oklahoma--these things we feel very
strongly, but we have to live with the other people, so we keep it down.

SM: In some of the areas of the state there is none of this intolerant attitude, or at least I notice less than I have noticed in other areas where there is a town adjacent to a reservation, where there's a particularly noticeable prejudice. Like "those so and so Indians better not show up here," that kind of thing. Now that doesn't happen here so much, does it?

JF: Not so much. It does though.

SM: It does happen?

JF: Yes, it does, but not nearly so much as North or South Dakota. I was there a couple of months ago, and you can't cash a check there if you're an Indian.

SM: What part of the state were you in?

JF: Newton, North Dakota.

SM: Was that out by the Pine Ridge or the Rosebud Reservation?

JF: No, it's in northwestern North Dakota, it's by Fort Berthold.

SM: That's almost over to the Montana border. Well, then, you too, in those kind of travels, have noticed a little difference in attitudes and opinions and problems as compared with the Oklahoma situation, which is unique, isn't it?

JF: It really is. This is the only state where everything was taken away and nothing left. So this is the state with the largest Indian
population and no reservations, so that's unique right in itself.

SM: The only reservation is that semi one of the Osages where they have the mineral rights, in the northeastern part of the state?

JF: And that's just trust land, it's really not a reservation.

SM: Everything taken away—that is, everything in the sense of a reservation or so on—but the individual Indian people and families have their pieces of land as a result of the old Dawes Act?

JF: They had 160 acres in eastern Oklahoma, 80 in some cases in western Oklahoma, which is just about all gone now, because it was not only inadequate, but the sheer numbers of the generations broke it up, plus lot of the Indians, in my own case my grandfather—his wife had an operation and he couldn't afford to pay for it, so the doctor said, "Well, I'll trade you for your allotment." And so he said, "O.K." So that is what happened to his.

SM: This is one of thousands of ways that the Indians lost their land.

JF: Were cheated out of their allotments, whereas if it had all been kept together as a reservation, this couldn't have happened. But it did.

SM: Is there any movement or attempted one back towards reservations here?

JF: There's a bill before the Oklahoma Legislature to return certain lands, I believe in western Oklahoma, to reservation status, but I doubt seriously if it will ever pass.

SM: Well, it is not an impossibility as in the case of the Menominees.

JF: Yes, I know. I know Ada Deer, she's a very dynamic lady. She's a great lady.
SM: And after finishing up this restoration, which is almost concluded—it's in fact concluded, but there are details left—then she plans to go back to law school.

JF: That's where I met her.

SM: And then after that she would perhaps travel among the people of the country on a consulting basis, I suppose, because she certainly has a wealth of experience. She says you had to pay the price, though. You have to pay the price in order to accomplish these things, but you can do it. She's very forceful about that.

JF: She single-handedly almost, lobbied so many years until the Menomines got their land back.

SM: She's very modest though, and won't claim credit. She said so many people helped.

JF: She really is the one. Well, this hasn't been the case in Oklahoma. We haven't had anybody lobbying to return the land over a period of years like Ada did, so we will be at a disadvantage. We have too many tribes.

SM: She was working with one, and that was a monumental chore, even to keep them together, and Indians have never been famous for cohesiveness in an organizational sense.

JF: Right.

SM: So, yes, you do have a different problem.

JF: Like I said earlier, I doubt seriously if it will ever pass.
SM: There has been some progress, though, in some areas, of Indian peoples getting their land or some lands back, or winning cases in Claims Court, and so on.

JF: The Taos Indians got Blue Lake back. That's their sacred grounds where they have their ... in fact, today's the day, September 30th. They have their feast up there, they walk up to Blue Lake. It's closed to the public.

SM: It's a pretty place.

JF: Yes, I've been there, it's real pretty.

SM: Were you there since they got it back?

JF: Before.

SM: Has it been damaged in any way?

JF: I don't know, I don't think so. I think it's about the same. We were going to talk about what kinds of things you wanted for your classes. Is that right?

SM: Your conversation is what I want. In my classes what we want to achieve, if we can, is greater understanding, so that when we all understand each other better the problem should become somewhat smaller. Do you think so?

JF: Oh, definitely.

SM: In fact your whole effort, what you're devoting your whole life to here, is greater understanding, isn't it?
JF: To increase understanding between my little area, to expand and increase cooperation and communications between the Indian tribes and the Indian students and between the OU faculty, and I, in particular, try to increase the OU faculty's knowledge of American Indians in Oklahoma by their travels to the tribes, and by talking with them personally, and by having these Indian students in their classes, and by exposing them to Indian culture and Indian thought and Indian ideas.

SM: Now that's an interesting thing, because where I come from we look at the University of Oklahoma and we think they are the people who know about these things.

JF: They do not!

SM: The University of Oklahoma press, for example, is famous for books about the West, the best ones. But your problem is to get your faculty, your staff to understand better?

JF: That's right. This is supposedly the Indian capital of the world, Oklahoma, but the OU faculty knows very little about Indians. It's true. It is definitely a fact. I think maybe in the '30's or so it was less true. There was more knowledge then, but a lot of those people left. Of course the OU library and the Phillips Collection and the OU press is famous for knowledge on Indians, but as individuals, the OU faculty knows very little about Indians. In fact, Dr. Childress from the finance department commented that he's learning more than his students by being with this program.

SM: That would be rather easily accomplished because I learn a lot from my students, and then I'm learning a tremendous amount being out here talking with all of you. This is where the value is, I think, plus startling things, like my assumption about OU, which was sheer assumption.
JF: In fact, OU has very little programmed for the Indian studies program here at OU which is being set up this year. We have a Choctaw woman, Dr. Ruth Hankowsky, who would welcome any suggestions to implement her program in the Indian studies program.

SM: Maybe through this effort we can increase understanding; and now we must close, Jerry, thank you for your help.