GREGORY FRAZIER, Crow - Sioux
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.

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LISTENING TO INDIANS

NO. 109

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Sam Myers:

Today I'm in Seattle, Washington, talking with the director of the Indian center here, and his name is Gregory Frazier.

Gregory Frazier:

Correct.

SM: Is that a French name then?

GF: Yes.

SM: Are you a Crow Indian, Mr. Frazier?

GF: Crow and Sioux, but I'm registered on the Crow Reservation.

SM: You're not supposed to ever be registered on two, are you?

GF: That is correct. One or another.

SM: As director of the center here, I've got the source of all the official information. In fact, in about an hour you have to face the press corps at a press conference, don't you?

GF: That's correct.

SM: Have they got any particular angles today they want to talk to you about?

GF: Oh, they're concerned with recent happenings in Seattle with respect to some concerns of local Indian people, and usually we keep our political differences within the Indian community, but recently some of our Indians felt that an opportunity to go before the public and therefore expose it might be to their betterment. And just philosophically, Indians try to keep things in their own house. I might read
you a quote I received this morning from the Sunday Telegram Family, that's a newspaper published out of Elmyra, New York, on October 12th, which is a little over a month ago, in which they quoted me as saying, "The Seattle area community is commonly referred to as the 'snake-pit of the nation,' admitted Greg Frazier, director of the city's Indian center. Generally the urban Indian is the most politically active ethnic group, while at the same time, the most politically ineffective." We fight each other all the time. And that's exactly what is transpiring here now. This was referred to the other night by a lady who said, "I don't like to get involved in power politics," but then she went right on and got involved. And that's what it is.

SM: Was the quotation accurate?

GF: Yes.

SM: That surprised me a little bit. I didn't realize it was that controversial a situation.

GF: Oh yes, yes.

SM: I thought the Indian people were working together better now, and trying to accomplish improvement for everyone.

GF: Well, we've been referred to as "a bucket of crabs." You get a whole bunch of crabs in a bucket and one of them starts to crawl out of the bucket and another one will reach up and grab him and pull him back down. And that's envy, just jealousy in most instances. It's apparent not only in the urban area, but on the reservations. The thing with the urban area is, like here in Seattle, we have 153 different tribes, and that represents about 153 different ways of thinking culturally and economically, just a way of looking at things. You throw that into the disruption that exists anyway when urban Indians exist in an urban area, and it just compounds it.
SM: It sounds very, very complicated, and a difficult situation. You come in for your share of criticism, I'll bet.

GF: Oh certainly, certainly.

SM: From both Indians and non-Indians?

GF: That is correct.

SM: But you understand it, you're used to it?

GF: Well, not particularly used to it. I'm used to it now. The agency that I'm employed by, the Seattle Indian Center, is a non-profit corporation, and when I came here, oh, a year and a half ago, we had a budget of about $300,000 to $400,000. Currently we have an annual budget of nearly $1,000,000 a year.

SM: That's improvement there.

GF: And in a period of declining economy, like we have been, it's been quite an achievement.

SM: Have you had to pretty much manage that yourself?

GF: Yes.

SM: Find the funds?

GF: Find funds. My job description reads, "Is familiar with requirement of funding sources and has ability in acquiring and maintaining grants from government and private agencies."

SM: With a record like that, a lot of people are going to be looking for
you. I'm not speaking just facetiously either, because everybody is looking for people who are able and capable of raising funds.

GF: Well, the side effects that demonstrate its success are people in the bucket of crabs that reach up and try to pull you back down, and discredit—a socially and acceptable practice within the urban Indian community—they do it all the time. Here we seem to do it more than anywhere else.

SM: Well, you have a greater concentration and a greater variety perhaps. One hundred fifty three tribes represented? That's the greatest number in any one spot I've encountered yet. Seventy, eighty, that's some of the schools. But that's a lot of different people.

GF: In our local area here we have about 15,000 Indians.

SM: In the city area?

GF: Yes. Well, we call it King County. And we have one reservation within that area, which is the Muckleshoot Reservation. We have one tribe that is not recognized by the federal government, because they don't have any land base, and that is the Duwamish Tribe. This was their area, but they were successfully pushed out by the non-Indian.

SM: Never did get a reservation?

GF: Never did get anything, and that's one of the unfortunate facts of life.

SM: There are advantages to having a reservation, aren't there?

GF: Quite so. It gives you a place where you originated from.
SM: And it gives you a tribal roll.

GF: A tribal roll, gives you recognition, recognition of your own people, your own people's philosophies. It also gives you a sense of pride.

SM: And then there's an intangible, that is, everyone has a base, they aren't so easily disbursed and assimilated.

GF: That's correct, although when you say base I think of a base of operations. A reservation is definitely, definitely not a base of operations, particularly from an economical standpoint. There are no economic advantages to living and working on a reservation versus living and working in the city. The unemployment rate on a reservation is about 60% of the work force. Our unemployment of our Indian people here in Seattle is about 60% of our work force.

SM: They're about the same?

GF: They're about the same. You see, the Indians were encouraged to move into the urban areas by a number of programs during the 1950's and 1960's.

SM: Relocation programs?

GF: Yes, that's correct. And, well, you talk to some of the traditional reservation people and they could care less about the urban Indians because they say, "Well, they moved off the reservation, that's their fault." They left. And it's very apparent. I talked to Indian leaders throughout the state, from the various reservations, and we have a good mix in the state of 19 small tribes and 7 or 8 large tribes here in the state of Washington, and some of them view it that way and they say, "Well, they went to Seattle, and that's urban area, that's off the reservation, we don't care. Let the city take care of them." And then you talk to the people in the urban area,
and they say, "Well, gee, we're a member of the so and so reservation out in South Dakota, we should be able to wire back there and get money so at least we can get home." And our ex-offenders are another problem, the Indians that are incarcerated. The reservations don't want to help them out, the state figures they're just the same as anybody else, except their jail terms are longer. Historically the Indians have been getting longer jail terms for similar crimes as would a non-Indian. Very obvious in Idaho, where you can serve maybe two to five years for driving while intoxicated. A non-Indian gets picked up drunk, he'll usually get a sentence suspended. An Indian gets picked up driving while intoxicated, there's a good chance he's going to go for the full term. These are the difficulties that face the Indian whether they're on a reservation or in an urban area. I am the president of a corporation called Indians for United Social Action, and that corporation's goals or objectives is just that—a group of dedicated Indians, united in an effort to develop good social action for urban Indians and reservation Indians.

SM: It seems sometimes the problems are even getting worse. But are we making some progress toward improvement—all of us, both sides of the cultural coin? Or is that one of those difficult or impossible to answer kind of things?

GF: I would say that the federal government has made short-term efforts, those things that the federal government is doing have a short-term, short-range impact. Like I have a program here which I totally support, and that is a health careers recruitment program for Indians. The idea is to recruit Indians in various health careers, but they've only funded the program for three years.

SM: And then unless it is refunded it will disappear?

GF: Yeah, and that takes an extension by Congress of the original act
that was passed, and those programs you work with the junior high or senior high child, and really where you should be working is down in the lower grades. Start their motivation very early, and try to identify the ones that really look like, in the long range, that's where they're going to end up. We have a very high turnover of people that go into one particular career in college, and after while they drop out or they change their major, and that's a wasted effort. I know myself, I did the same thing. I started out as a pre-med student, went two years in that, and then switched over to business administration and majored in finance.

SM: Well, that's serving you in good stead right here in this office, because of the financial problems, but then there are many other problems besides that, aren't there?

GF: Well, social problems too, but where I come from, or my background and training, was in social service agencies such as this. Between that time and now I worked in the field of management.

SM: Let me ask you a few things to introduce you a little bit more thoroughly. Did you come from the middlewest of Montana?

GF: Yes. I came from right off the Crow Reservation in Montana, Billings, Montana.

SM: Did you start school there?

GF: I went through junior high there.

SM: Did you have the experience of an Indian BIA school?

GF: Oh no.

SM: Only public schools?
GF: No, I went to a Quaker private school in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to go through high school.

SM: You had to leave home, of course, which was quite an experience in itself, at high school age.

GF: It was interesting. I was their only Indian student. Although Quakers are considered pacifistic type people, I certainly had to do an awful lot of physical defending of myself as I did work my way through the school.

SM: And you were the only Indian student there?

GF: Um hm.

SM: You'd think it might have been the opposite, that they would have sort of lionized you because you were different and unique.

GF: Well, not at that age level.

SM: So, after you went back to Pennsylvania then, you must have gone some place else to school too. Can you fill us in a little there?

GF: Yeah. I went to Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana, for two years. My mother's a Quaker and my grandmother's a Quaker, and logically I ended up in Quaker institutions. I was the third generation there at Earlham, and I spent two years in a pre-med program, whereupon I decided that that was not where I wanted to go. It was too long. I wanted to get out and do things, so I took off for a year, and started my own company and worked on a sub-contract basis for general contractors in the Philadelphia area.

SM: Construction?
GF: Construction and general home improvement.

SM: You met a lot of people and all kinds and varieties of people that way?

GF: Oh yes. Then I went to work for a social service organization, had three what we would call settlement houses, which were drop-in type neighborhood houses. One was a black settlement house, one was an Italian settlement house, and one was an Irish settlement house. And I worked for them for three years as their business manager. These were three separate houses, and we worked in a central office. During that time I also went to school full time at Temple University, where I graduated in 1972, and then I spent some time as a small business consultant. I spent a lot of time racing motorcycles.

SM: Ever get banged up?

GF: Oh sure. You fall off, but I spent two years racing motorcycles throughout the east coast as far down as Florida and up into Canada, New Hampshire, Ohio, Indiana. And I raced for the BMW factory a couple of times.

SM: You used their machines?

GF: I used their machines twice. Unfortunately we came to different opinions on who was to tune the machinery, my mechanic or their mechanic. I just didn't feel safe with their mechanics, I didn't know what they were doing to the motorcycle. And then I went to work for the American Indian Management Institute in Albuquerque, New Mexico, which is an economic development administration funded program to provide management training, technical assistance and consulting to tribal leaders, tribal managers, Indian small businesses, Indian organizations throughout the United States. We held seminars
in Albuquerque, we held seminars in the field. Some of them were six-week long seminars, some were three to five days, and we contracted out two organizations that wanted specific consulting from one of our staff. We had a staff of six. Travel was quite extensive. We ended up in some very desolate places in the middle of the winter, but we did meet a lot of people.

SM: Was that in any way connected with the University of New Mexico?

GF: No.

SM: What is the main over-all problem in this particular part of the area? Is it employment, financial?

GF: That's the surface problem, the obvious problem—employment. But beneath that, the root of the problem, is education.

SM: The education that people don't have?

GF: That's correct. The average education level of an Indian man in the lower 48 is 10th grade.

SM: The educational opportunities, aren't they there? Don't they exist if the students are able and aware and desirous of taking advantage of them?

GF: Not on the reservation.

SM: In some cases, like the Navajo Reservation, there are literally dozens of schools of all kinds, different kinds. But the typical reservation just doesn't have many educational facilities?

GF: Correct. My reservation has just a small, early childhood school.
SM: So then the children have to leave at an early age to go someplace else if they want to take advantage of educational opportunities?

GF: Yes, and that's dependent upon funds, family financial position, and then where they end up is another whole story.

SM: Besides a lot of them are reluctant to leave home, I suppose?

GF: Well, you know, I don't know how many studies have been done on Indians, you know. We're always under a microscope some place, looking at us this way and trying to solve the problems this way. My personal opinion is that the education field is where our biggest problem lies, and if that can be overcome, then we have an opportunity to meet what President Nixon labelled as "self-determination." Let me go back historically a little bit. The federal government has viewed the Indians with a number of policies over the years, the first of which was extermination. And had it not been for the churches' intercession way back when they had our people down to ... less than 200,000 total population, which at one time was about 3,000,000 here in the United States, we were just about gone. That policy wasn't very effectively carried out by the government. They put the Bureau of Indian Affairs under the War Department to start with. And then a long period of sort of bubbling developed what the Eisenhower administration called "termination," in which, if you terminate a tribe, they become non-Indians assimilated into the non-Indian economy and culture. This was not successful to the tribes that were terminated. The Menominees for one, the Klamaths for another, took termination in a number of ways. The Klamaths took a large payment. And when an Indian gets a windfall payment, which is what that is, we have a propensity to spend that faster than any other ethnic group in the country. The average period of time to spend a windfall in the United States for an ethnic group is about 13 months. We, as Indians, can go through it in about eight. And subsequently, after the money's gone, what do you have? You don't have anything, and you are no
longer recognized by various federal programs. You have to remember that the American Indian is the ward of the federal government, which subsequently has a responsibility under the various treaties it has signed to assure the Indians various things in exchange for this large piece of property that the federal government and the non-Indian sector took. It may not be the people that are here now. I met a man yesterday who said, "I'm a native American too. I was born here." Well, he certainly doesn't have the same ties that we do. He can't claim that his people have been exterminated, terminated, put in the Bureau of Indian Affairs schools. His family's never had to go through anything like that. So termination was not effective. We now operate under a policy of self-determination, which Nixon defined. The policy of self-determination was then handed down to the Department of the Interior, in which the BIA is in, and they drew up their rules and regulations as how to implement self-determination. HEW drew up their rules and regulations as to what self-determination means, and quite naturally they both differ. They have some similarities, but there are inconsistencies between the two. Self-determination means that we should be able to determine our destiny. This means that, rather than the federal government provide the services on the reservation, say like my reservation, the Crow Reservation— they have a hospital, they have various BIA programs, the hospital is funded out of HEW, Public Health Service, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs funds our law enforcement and various social programs, land management, and what not—the tribe, under self-determination, should be able to go back to Washington, D.C., say to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, "Look, we have management capability, let us administer those programs. You just contract with us, and we'll staff it with our people or whoever we think will run it the best." The problem lies in the fact that many of the tribes do not have the resources, the human resources, to carry out the intent of self-determination. Our problem is, you know, education, experience. I think there's, oh a very small number of Indian Ph.D.'s in the country, a very small number of people that are
graduates of colleges. Fifty-one doctors in the country. My grandfather was the first Indian doctor in the country, so I'm very well aware of that health-related field.

SM: Hasn't there been some progress in this educational field lately, with a greater proportion of people in higher education?

GF: Short term.

SM: A lot of drop-outs?

GF: A lot of drop-outs and the funding just isn't around. If the federal government were to take a serious look at it, they're going to have to work over a one or two generation period. That doesn't call for a three-year program by HEW.

SM: Greg, our tape is running out, and you have the press conference in a few minutes, so our time is up. Thank you very much for your time this morning.