Listening to Indians

JIM GRAY, Mohawk
October 29, 1975
Salt Lake City, Utah

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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Sam Myers:

I'm talking with a young Mohawk man today. Jim Gray, are you from New York?

Jim Gray:

Yeah. Akwesasne.

SM: Is that a name of a town? That's the name of a newspaper, I know.

JG: That's the name of our place, our reservation.

SM: And you're a student at the University of Utah. You're a painter too, aren't you?

JG: Yeah.

SM: Let's get to that later. I want to ask you about your Indian name, in the Mohawk language.

JG: Sa-koieh-tah.

SM: And what does it mean?

JG: It means, "He who wakes everyone up."

SM: How did you happen to get the name?

JG: Well, in the Iroquois we have the Ceremony of Mid-Winter, the Strawberry Festival and Harvest. These are three ceremonies where the children can be brought into the Longhouse and given the names, their Indian name.

SM: Kind of a naming ceremony?
JG: Um hm. During one of those I got it. I was small.

SM: You'd been waking everybody up?

JG: Yeah. Through my grandfather. He's the one who thought of my name, but to the Iroquois, it's a powerful name. They know it.

SM: The Iroquois people are quite famous in American history. They managed to hold on to that valley for a couple hundred years. One of the longest hold-outs of that kind in the history of the world. Did you ever stop to think of that?

JG: Yeah, I say that to western Indians when they talk about.

SM: Probably on that kind of note, the longest war in the history of the world would be the Apaches against the Europeans, because that went on for, oh, almost 300 years. Longer than all the Crusades put together. The Iroquois people were made up of several different nations?

JG: Six. Five in the beginning: the Mohawks, the Eastern Doorkeeper, and then there was the Cayuga, who were the younger brothers of the Mohawks. And then there was the Onondagas, who were known as the Fire Keepers, and then there was the Oneidas, who were the younger brothers of the Senecas, the Western Doorkeepers. And then later on, the Tuscaroras came to our council and asked if they could be admitted, from the Carolinas. They came up and asked if they could be admitted. We said, "yes."

SM: And that is the Six Nations. And the six Iroquois were pretty powerful?

JG: Yes.
SM: They kept the French and the English on two sides of them, and kept control of the valley for hundreds of years. Their influence spread as far west as Illinois, as far south as Kentucky at times.

JG: Farther south, farther. West into Wisconsin.

SM: They must have been very powerful, and part of their power was due to their highly organized league.

JG: Confederacy.

SM: Our League of Nations . . . they had one going then, in a sense, didn't they?

JG: Yes.

SM: Long before we thought of it. As a Mohawk, were you born back in that country?

JG: Yes, I was born on the reservation, Akwesasne. To the traditional people, we call it Akwesasne. To other people or the government we call it St. Regis Indian Reserve. In New York state and Canada.

SM: It overlaps into Canada?

JG: Yeah. The only reservation that does this.

SM: That's between two of the lakes?

JG: No, it's along the St. Lawrence River.

SM: You know they had a confrontation there a few years back.

JG: The bridge blockade. I was in there.
SM: We had a movie of that at school. Do you know who put it together?

JG: National Film Board of Canada.

SM: You'd think they'd try to not film it.

JG: The film board had Indian people from our reservation working.

SM: How did it ever come out.

JG: I don't think that much was accomplished.

SM: Still you accomplished making your voices heard. You got people to stop and listen. What were they after? The island was their land?

JG: It was our land the customs agency is on, and when we bring stuff from the United States they charge us duty on these things, and they are not supposed to.

SM: You're not supposed to pay the duty?

JG: Yeah, because the Jay Treaty says Indians can pass the international boundaries any time.

SM: The Jay Treaty provides this?

JG: Yes.

SM: Was that 1894?

JG: Yes, I think so.

SM: He was much criticized for making the treaty, but that was in there?
It was ratified so it's the supreme law of the land in the United States.

JG: And it's supposed to be in Canada too.

SM: Of course, Canada is a dominion of the United Kingdom with whom the treaty was made, so are they still having to pay the duties, or did they win that point?

JG: Well, I think we've won that point. They don't really bother us that much now.

SM: That was several years ago, wasn't it?

JG: Yeah, '68.

SM: May I ask how old you are now?

JG: I'm 20.

SM: And then you grew up there on the Mohawk Reservation or the St. Regis Reserve.

JG: Akwesasne, traditional people call it. Akwesasne means, "The land the partridge drum." The partridge . . . bird, partridge. Well, long ago our people went up into that country, and they heard the mating calls, I guess, of the partridge.

SM: Did you ever see it happen? It's quite a sight.

JG: No. You can hear it in the woods, and the banging of this, and that's where they named it, called it Akwesasne, for that reason, this country here, along the St. Lawrence River.
SM: Then did you go to school there?

JG: Yes.

SM: Was that a public school?

JG: Well, I guess it was supposed to be a public school, but I think all schools then were the same, boarding schools or public schools. You weren't allowed to speak your language, you know.

SM: That was probably a BIA school. Of course in public school they didn't have any people teaching or understanding your language, so I suppose it would be the same result?

JG: Yeah, it was a public school, within our reservation, though, up until the sixth grade.

SM: Then did you go to a different one?

JG: Yeah. I went to a nearby school at a town that's called Fort Carvington, New York. And I went to that school, and graduated from the public schools, which was half Indian—half Mohawk and half Caucasian people attending.

SM: Any problems there?

JG: I think there was problems. I think there are problems in every school, you know.

SM: Well, some more, some less. Some of the schools where all the kids are Indian, you don't have the white-Indian. . . .

JG: Yeah, but you have conflict with them too.
SM: You used the term white. Out here in the Southwest they usually refer to people like me as Anglo, but you say "white" because you're from the Northeast, really, aren't you?

JG: Yeah.

SM: How long have you been out here?

JG: I was here last year, and I went home for the summer, and I came back to school in September, but I'm leaving back for my reservation....

SM: Your home is really back there, isn't it?

JG: Yeah.

SM: So you're a Northeastern Woodland Indian?

JG: Yes. It's funny when I tell them out here where my home is, I say, "New York," and right away people associate it with the city.

SM: And there's a lot of little towns in New York that are just as quiet and everything as some town in Iowa or southern Illinois or someplace. So you went to school then in town. Was that your high school?

JG: Yeah, that was my high school.

SM: Graduated there?

JG: Yes.

SM: How did you do?

JG: Well... among Indians... the same level as any average Indian,
I guess.

SM: You say that as if that was different.

JG: I think it is taught differently, because I think more emphasis is put on a white person in teaching.

SM: Well, put on the substance, at least.

JG: Yeah.

SM: And then, depending on the individual, maybe they would give some favoritism to the whites, but some of them would give more favoritism to the Indian kids.

JG: A lot of times, I think, Indian kids get turned off from education because of the history, you know. A lot of times if they speak up in class the teacher corrects them right away, you know. The Indian child, he feels, well, maybe he shouldn't be saying anything, you know, 'cause he's gonna be corrected all the time.

SM: So then he gets to be hesitant.

JG: That's why he doesn't speak up in classes.

SM: Now, lately, at least some classes, some schools, are trying to encourage instead of hold back. I would love to have you in class, you see, 'cause you would add a dimension that we don't often have. It would be nice to have you there, we'd all learn more. It could be a valuable experience. But the sad part is we don't have Indian people there to talk to, so the students are waiting for me to bring you back on this tape so they can hear you at least, even if they can't talk back. They really are. They're interested. Now here you are, from New
York, and you are going to school at the University of Utah. How did you get out here?

JG: I guess it's just experience travelling, meetin' other Indians.

SM: You got out and wandered around the country and found a place you liked?

JG: Well, from my high school on, a person from my reservation came here. He's in graduate school, and he informed me to try and come up here, so I said, "O.K., it will be something new," so I got in contact and I came out here.

SM: When did you start here?

JG: Last year.

SM: In '74?

JG: Yes.

SM: So you're in your second year now?

JG: Yeah, this is my second year.

SM: Are you majoring in art?

JG: No, I never took an art class.

SM: I know you're a painter. I've seen your paintings.

JG: No, I never took one. Not in high school either.
SM: Jerome Tiger that I told you about, he was self-taught largely too, but a beautiful painter. He died, you know. You haven't seen any of his work?

JG: No, I've never seen.

SM: If you get over to Muskogee, there's a small museum there called the Museum of the Five Civilized Tribes, and they have the art work, the pottery, the carvings and so on, and all kinds of news accounts of the Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, Creeks, Seminoles, and they have a lot of Tiger's work, plus several other people too. It's a fine little museum.

JG: My major is history. I'm takin' up this major to get into law school.

SM: You're not going to teach it?

JG: No.

SM: You can take any liberal arts course you want for pre-law, can't you?

JG: Yeah.

SM: And then you're going into law school?

JG: Well, I'm leaving here, and I'm going to apply to the Institute of American Art in Santa Fe, and I want to attend there, and maybe give up the idea of law and better my painting.

SM: Well you are thinking seriously of painting then, as well as law?

JG: Yeah, um hm.

SM: And then maybe you'll go both ways.
JG: Maybe after I finish at Santa Fe I'll come back to history.

SM: Now you're going to finish your second year here, aren't you?

JG: Yeah.

SM: Santa Fe's a two-year school, you see, except that it's a specialized school. Here you're in a regular liberal arts university, right?

JG: Um hm.

SM: And when you go there, it's the Institute of American Indian Arts, with the accent on art. They have this new approach. It used to be an old BIA high school, but now it's the Institute of Arts.

JG: It's run by the BIA too yet.

SM: Some of the students didn't like the BIA, but they said the school is great. I said, "But the BIA runs it." "Well, O.K., so they run it, but it's still a great school."

JG: That's what I would say.

SM: So they still like it, although they didn't like the idea that it was run by the BIA. You see, the BIA has changed a little, slowly, because it's such a big bureaucracy. But it does change. And the director has lots of ideas about how to make it better. He wants to make it a four-year school.

JG: That'd be good.

SM: If he did, then you could go on there. Maybe you could even get an MFA in art, which is about as high as you can go in degrees. Do you like watercolor best?
JG: Oil.

SM: Do you do anything else, like sculpture, silk screening?

JG: I just used to sketch with pencil, and then I tried to get into art classes here, but I couldn't. They were all full. So I said, if I can draw I can paint. So I painted, and now I started on ink sketches.

SM: Did you have anybody to talk to about what kind of oils to buy and the brushes to use?

JG: No, all on my own. I don't know what mediums or whatever they're talking about, I just paint. I'm gonna do some carvings when I go home. Start on carving.

SM: Well, at that school over there, they should be able to help you all right, if you have missed here on the art classes. There are only between three and four hundred students in the whole college, and here, what have you got, 25,000?

JG: Yeah.

SM: Could you handle the switch from this big place to that little one?

JG: Yeah.

SM: I think you'll like it, don't you?

JG: That is Indian. Here we have 180 Indians.

SM: Yes. You'd have more Indians there than you would have here.

JG: Yeah, I'd think it would be just like at home, on the reservation.
SM: As far as I could tell, you're just as free there as you are if you lived at home. For example, one of the students was taking a test... and the instructor said he had to give this "rascal" an extra test on account of he had let him go elk-hunting last week. Well, with 300 kids in the whole school you can do these things, because everybody knows everybody else.

JG: And you can paint what you want, that's the main thing.

SM: There's some fine work there. That would be nice too for you, wouldn't it? To live in that atmosphere?

JG: Yeah.

SM: What's your ambition, Jim?

JG: To become a painter. To go back and get more of our kids interested in the Indian art.

SM: Teach it?

JG: Yeah. You know, maybe we could set up a night school back there, where the kids can come in. Indians, you know, they really can't afford these things. Maybe have them there so they can use them.

SM: And you can bring the Southwest influence to them too, can't you? You've been living here with it.

JG: Yeah.

SM: You go to Santa Fe, you're going to be in another accent of the Southwest. The old Spanish West.

JG: Predominantly Navajo and Pueblo.
JG: Pueblo, the whole pueblos up and down the Rio Grande Valley there.

SM: An interesting thing. At home now in New York is an incident called Eagle Bay. It's where the traditional Mohawk people went back and claimed the land in a former girls' camp in the Adirondack Mountains.

SM: That's up in the mountains on a lake?

JG: Yeah.

SM: Have they got the land now?

JG: It's in court settlements right now. We're hopeful that we'll win this case.

SM: There are cases where it's happened, you know--Blue Lake, Pyramid Lake.

JG: Yeah, but once this happens, see, we're claiming the entire Adirondack Mountain, 9,000,000 acres, and once this happens we're gonna gain more back, and try to live as our ancestors did.

SM: Do you want to do that?

JG: Yes, I'd like to.

SM: Do you want to give up your eye glasses, your cars?

JG: If you have to. But I don't think it'll come about in my time.

SM: Some people say, "Yeah, we would like to keep the old ways, the old cultures, but we don't want to give up the conveniences that we have borrowed from the Anglo culture either." What do you think about that?
JG: Well, my view is . . . I feel that a lot of it is here to stay, such as glasses and this.

SM: Then the oils you use, you know. Instead of going out to find the pigments and mix them, it's easier to buy them, isn't it?

JG: Um hm.

SM: Well, wouldn't it be kind of practical to use them to preserve the cultural values?

JG: Well, what I mean is going back to our old lands, you know, and living there, hunting without the government saying you can't hunt and fish there. We're doing this and livin' together, havin' kids speak their own language, you know, instead of going through the schools and forgettin' the language that we're taught.

SM: There are places where the people make their own laws. The Navajo Reservation, and the Red Lake Reservation in northern Minnesota, and the Nett Lake Reservation in northern Minnesota has voted to go this way.

JG: Well, the Onondaga Reservation is headin' toward this way. Yes, you know, state police, they can't come on to the reservation. We have our police at St. Regis too.

SM: If you want to fish in Red Lake in Minnesota, you have to get a permit from the Indians.

JG: We just go fishing all over our reserve.

SM: They fish the year round and they also sell fish commercially, which the white people can't do. Up there the popular fish is the walleyed
pike. Do you have them in New York?

JG: Muskie, great northern.

SM: Let's go back to your plans and your thoughts for the people in the Adirondack Mountains.

JG: The Mohawk call it Adirondah, which was taken to say Adirondacks. I guess it means high mountains.

SM: They're very beautiful, aren't they?

JG: Yeah, they really are.

SM: The White Roots of Peace. You've heard of that?

JG: Yes, they're from my reservation.

SM: Your own people are the ones who do this, aren't they? Where does the name come from?

JG: Well, among our tradition, the Peacemaker came and planted a great tree, pine tree, and we called that the Great Tree of Peace, and from that sprang four roots, one to the north, one to the east, west and south. And those were the four great white roots of peace, and that's where the name came from those four roots.

SM: The White Roots of Peace?

JG: Yes.

SM: The white roots formed the tree of the people?

JG: The tree of peace, of the confederacy.
SM: Then the Mohawk people, this is from their background, but the white roots then create the tree of peace that is the whole Six Nations Confederacy?

JG: Well, the white roots are said by the Peacemaker that anyone could follow these roots to its source and live under the laws of the Confederacy of the Iroquois, and the only thing was they were to abide by what the Iroquois had. We weren't forcin' them to, say, follow our way of religion. You can have your Catholic or Protestant or whatever and keep that, but live in peace and bury your weapons under this tree, and we'll be the ones who watch over you as we did to the colonists in Albany. Albany was wiped out. It was wiped out once by the French, and some Indians were killed too, and so Mohawks went up to Luchien and destroyed Luchien, and lost two people who stayed behind and got drunk and were killed.

SM: So from that time on, because of the French making friends with some of the Iroquois peoples' enemies up north--the Iroquois were always anti-French, weren't they?

JG: Yeah. They were Algonquin. The Algonquin were our enemies.

SM: And a couple of others?

JG: Hurons were Iroquois, but they were our enemy too.

SM: Then, while you didn't side with the English, you tended that way, and eventually sided more and more with the English instead of the French. O.K., then the White Roots of Peace. I'd like to understand that better. Like, for example, now the group goes out to a college campus, and what do they do?

JG: They tell of the great law and this, and they have speakers and tell
what their life is, I guess in the Longhouse, what the people are. They sing and they dance for them, show 'em that there is Indians in the East, you know.

SM: They get permission?

JG: Well, usually they're invited.

SM: Does it last two or three days?

JG: Yeah. Usually. Sometimes it's short, can be shorter or longer, you know. They usually have arts and crafts too.

SM: What is their basic purpose? To teach people about the Iroquois people?

JG: Yeah, I guess that would be their basic thing. To come out and show 'em. . . .

SM: What we are like? What we believe?

JG: Yeah.

SM: And it's all peaceful, and it's pretty religious in a way, isn't it? Educational but also religious?

JG: Yeah, it comes from the Longhouse.

SM: This could include all the Iroquois peoples, but it's the Mohawks who actually go out and do this, isn't it?

JG: There's Mohawks, and I believe there's some from every. . . .

SM: All the Six Nations?
JG: There's some Senecas in there, and Onondagas, but it generally started from Mohawk, from Akwesasne. Well, here last year we brought in Tommy Porter, who travels with the White Roots of Peace, and he's a sub-chief of the Iroquois Confederacy, and he's a spiritual leader of our people, and he came durin' Indian Awareness Week here and spoke, and has done that for the past three, four years.

SM: He spoke at a meeting here?

JG: Yes.

SM: The Akwesasne Notes would be able to tell me where the next one's going to be in my area?

JG: Yeah, the paper usually has a schedule where they're travelling to.

SM: Do they come down in the South in the wintertime? A lot of it is outdoors, isn't it?

JG: Yeah, probably in the South in the winter, North Carolina, Georgia.

SM: Have you ever been able to attend one?

JG: With the White Roots of Peace? No, I haven't. I may join them next year or this year doing art work or such. I may be dancing or singing with them.

SM: That will be quite an experience, won't it?

JG: Yeah, it will, but what I've mainly done is going to the Longhouse, you know. On our reservation it is Catholic and the Longhouse people.

SM: Now the Longhouse people, you mean that is the religion of the people themselves, the old way?
JG: From the beginning, from creation.

SM: And they call it the Longhouse religion?

JG: We call it Hodinonhsonih (Hoh-dë-në-shën-ëë) which means "people of the Longhouse."

SM: People of the Longhouse would be the name of the religion?

JG: I don't know if it's a religion, you know. That isn't really what it's called. We have the Handsome Lake Code too, which is read, which we follow, but the Longhouse is the traditional way from creation of our people, and we call ourselves "the people," and not Mohawk. Mohawk is a French name which means cannibals, and we call ourselves "the people." You see, Navajos, they call themselves "Dine" which means the people. All the tribes have this.

SM: Most of them do. The Sioux or the Dakota is a term which means, like friends or allies.

JG: And then there's the human being. They call themselves "human beings."

SM: The Cheyennes, wasn't it?

JG: Um hm.

SM: But it means essentially the same thing—we are the people, and that's the name we have for ourselves in each of the languages. There are what, 357 tribes or so, and then if you count them a different way, depending on all the breakdown, there'd be around 1,600, and all with different accents and cultures and backgrounds, although then you can combine these in bigger groups again too. Like all the pueblos, for example.
JG: Like the languages, you know. Iroquois and Cherokees. Cherokees are Iroquois.

SM: They're the same linguistic group?

JG: And Algonquins and Shoshone and Athabascan.

SM: The Sioux group is a large one too. Now that doesn't mean just the Sioux people. The Siouan language includes a lot of others, like the Osages, for example. It's a vast field of study that probably none of us will know all about, ever, but we can keep trying, can't we?

JG: Yeah, I guess so.

SM: So then you kind of are leaning toward art more and more?

JG: Yes.

SM: Because you can express yourself in oils and colors.

JG: What I feel and what I see around me. Our main artists back in the Iroquois were Ernie Smith, a Seneca, who has paintings in the museums back in New York. And then there was Orrin Lyons, who is an Onondaga chief, and he's, I think, a professor or assistant professor at the University of Buffalo, New York, in art. Ernie Smith was a great artist, but he just died recently, last year, and now his paintings are valuable.

SM: Like Jerome Tiger. His work is priceless.

JG: I have copied Ernie Smith's work, his paintings.

SM: You've got some of your paintings here, a couple of pieces that you're half finished with? May I take a picture of them?
JG: Yeah, I guess so. I have sketches too, if you'd like.

SM: The eagle with the flag, that's about half done?

JG: I'd say less than half. I have to finish the eagle, and put clouds in, and probably mountains into it, and the rope and the poles and such.

SM: Now what's the symbolism of the eagle grasping the flag like that?

JG: On that I'm adding a chain with a broken link on it, which ... freedom, I guess.

SM: Are you going to put more stars in?

JG: Yeah, I have to finish that.

SM: I thought you left them out on purpose.

JG: No. I have to put them all in. And the thing is, among us, it is put down in our history that Washington came to our people and asked to borrow the symbol of the eagle on top of the great tree of peace for their symbol, until they found an appropriate symbol for themselves, and then they would return this, but it's never come true yet.

SM: He never returned it. We're still using the eagle.

JG: And those arrows are the symbols of the confederacy, five arrows that the eagles holds in your symbol.

SM: And so that's borrowed from the Iroquois people too?

JG: The chain that has to be added will be the broken link of freedom, and
I guess the eagle attacking the one that had it captive, the American flag. So that's mainly the idea behind that.

SM: When you do a painting like that, then you put the story of what it means on the back, for example, so that people who don't understand might know?

JG: Well, no, not really, because paintings are usually hung up without ever seeing the back, and so I just put it there, and maybe if I sold it, I'd have a title to put on to explain it, you know.

SM: There are cases where sometimes the story of something that has a lot of symbolism that people wouldn't understand is printed out and pasted on the back for those who want to know about it. And then you have this, is it a pen and ink drawing?

JG: Yeah, it's ink, just strictly black ink, from pen.

SM: Would this be a Mohawk man?

JG: It's just an Indian, not really Mohawk. It's my first sketch ever with ink.

SM: Do you like working with ink?

JG: So far, since I first did it, yes, but I think ink is really hard, because if you make a mistake you can't really cover it up.

SM: In oils you can, and in pencils you can?

JG: Um hm. You can erase and such.

SM: You've got a good start, so if you go to Santa Fe they'll probably ask you to take some drawing courses. You expect that?
JG: Yeah, I expect that.

SM: They might help too, who knows? Are you going to finish here next spring?

JG: No, I'm leaving here at the end of this month. I'm leavin' early.

SM: Oh, are you on a quarter system?

JG: Quarter system.

SM: The end of the quarter comes this month?

JG: No, next month.

SM: Why don't you finish the quarter?

JG: I've had problems in my classes, you know. I had gotten classes too late, and it was too hard to catch up, so I decided to go.

SM: You'll lose them, you won't have any credits. And you're going to Santa Fe?

JG: Yeah, I'm going to Santa Fe.

SM: Well, for a person interested in art, it's a good place to go.

JG: It's the best place for American Indian art, you know. In fact, I think it's really the only place.

SM: It's concentrating its energies on young Indian artists.

JG: It's what you can express yourself as an Indian in your paintings,
instead of following a system that such universities have where you have to do these funny things, like . . . I don't know.

SM: College studies maybe?

JG: Yeah.

SM: Maybe they have you do those there too.

JG: Yeah, but I think it's generally that you can do your own work.

SM: They have all kinds in their little museum there.

JG: But this is Indian art that is there, you know.

SM: It's all by Indian students too.

JG: And it has meaning to the student who paints it.

SM: Well, there's an atmosphere there you'll like too. Where everybody is interested in art of some kind.

JG: And where you can get help, maybe, from different artists.

SM: And live in dorms and you can be talking with people. These are young adults, that is, 17, 18, 19, 20. And they go of their own free choice, and they said it really is great to be able to have people in the same dorm where they get to know each other and talk over their problems, even talk over their work.

JG: Yeah.

SM: And some of them are pretty outstanding. They'll be able to help
you, and you can contribute to them. It should be a good experience.

JG: I hope so.

SM: And it has been a good experience talking to you today. I do hope you have the best of luck in your career.

JG: I hope something gets accomplished from this, too.