LISTENING TO INDIANS

RUTH HANKOWSKY, Choctaw

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.

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Glen Rock, New Jersey

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Sam Myers:
Today I'm at the University of Oklahoma in Norman, talking with Miss Ruth Hankowsky. Ruth, you are a Choctaw Indian?

Ruth Hankowsky:
Half, the other half is Scotch and Irish.

SM: Would you explain the name, Hankowsky?

RH: My maiden name was Thompson. My father was a full-blood Choctaw, and at some point the Indian name was changed to Thompson. My father was a native of southeastern Oklahoma. My mother was a school teacher, and the daughter of a railroad worker. It was during the time when her father was about to be retired that they ended up in southeastern Oklahoma, where she met my Indian father, and they were married there, which would be about 70 years ago. After they were married in southeastern Oklahoma, they moved, and the four of us girls were born, and lived during the 60 years of their married life—prior to my father's death a few years ago—on what was his homestead. That would be his allotment of land from the government. But that was located over in Chickasaw territory, which was just west of Ardmore, Oklahoma. So I attended public schools during the first six grades, and then, when the depression hit, and when farming and ranching was not as prosperous as it had been, both my older sister and I were sent away to Chilocco Indian boarding school, near Arkansas City. Which is something that should not happen to any child.

SM: It wasn't a happy experience?

RH: No. For nine months we did not go home. It was a very regimented military-like kind of life at the time.

SM: Was this run by the BIA?
RH: This is a BIA school as of that time. They have changed much since then. By military I mean that you wore no civilian clothes—you wore all G.I. issued clothes, and you did chores as assigned, and so forth. So far as the academic part of it is concerned, I have to guess that that was fairly standard. I do remember that in my seventh grade class there were members of 37 different tribes at Chilocco, gathered primarily from the central part of the United States, with some of the southwestern tribes just beginning to come to schools in Oklahoma. I remember very vividly the occasion on which a Yuma girl named Susie Thomas roomed in the—we called them barns—because they were like a ward in a hospital. There were about eight girls in this room. And it began to snow, and Susie from Arizona had never seen snow before. Well imagine, trying to help a friend understand that snow is a natural phenomenon when you really don't understand a word in common.

SM: That's right, you had a language barrier.

RH: Susie and I got to be great friends, but I remember that on the occasion of the snow, which really frightened her, I was just at a loss at what to do. That was something I'd never forget. It was cold there. Another point about the language is where I was lucky in that I could not speak enough of my native language. I could not speak enough Choctaw to be punished for speaking Choctaw, because the students were always punished for speaking their native tongues. There were an awful lot of floors shined and chores done because the students were caught speaking their native language.

SM: Now in some of the schools, the opposite effort is being made to preserve the language.

RH: So I was only there two years, and then returned home to attend and graduate from high school in my home town. But my older sister stayed the third year, and was graduated from Chilocco. At that time the
government gave loans to Indian students who qualified by reason of going to the county seat to take an academic or scholarship test.

SM: Were you on the roll?

RH: No, I was not on the roll. I was not old enough. None of us were. My father's roll number is 6755, and at that time the rolls were last open just about 1903, so if you were not on the roll you went by benefit of record of being a descendant of a person on the roll. So since that time there's been a process set up by which, for example, I could apply by presenting my birth certificate and that of my daughter to the area office of the Indian agency, and get a certificate of descent for her. Because you see, consider the fact that my father was full blood, I'm half, my daughter is a quarter, and that's where, by legal definition then, she would be qualified, except that she isn't. Because even though I was able to get a loan and did a bachelor's degree, and started teaching when I was 19 and began to repay the government, by the time my daughter came along the U.S. Government was giving grants, not loans, but you also had to qualify for a grant by reason of being indigent. And so she could not. By that time I was teaching here at the university. And where the Hankowsky comes in, is that's a good Slovack name, and he's a petroleum engineer, and the means he provided just prevented her from any opportunities so far as the Indian is concerned. So that's the end of the Indian. Now my concern, which is shared with you, is that granddaughter of mine, who is now three. I'd like for her to be able to read and to study a much more accurate record of history, and to gain an understanding of the cultural heritage that is present on part of her lineage, than has yet been written. That's part of the need that I feel very strongly.

SM: We're working all over the country now towards correcting this, and I think that is why you're heading up this program, isn't it?
RH: Yes, it almost seems ironical that in a state with the greatest Indian population—now not the greatest if you consider full bloods only, there I think we'd have to bow to Arizona—but certainly the number of Indians of at least one-quarter blood or more, and you consider that in Oklahoma over 50% of the high school students enroll in college, which is high, compared to national norms. Now, out of this group of high school graduates, a large percentage of them are of Indian descent. Not enough, in many cases, to qualify for the Indian grant, but at least on this campus as of this date we have over 500 students, at the undergraduate level, who are going to the university with help from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Up until this time, nothing has been done by way of providing academic help for them. There has been counselling, and there's been some kinds of help to keep them here, but actually so far as helping them to study their own people, the omissions in history have just been there and remain.

SM: You are now the head of the Indian studies department?

RH: Yes. I've just been named the coordinator of the American Indian studies program, which is a change from the ethnic studies administrative umbrella that we had last year—that embraced both black and Chicano programs. I will teach half time, and half time will be given to coordinating that program.

SM: It is a program and not a department?

RH: It's a program. I doubt that it will gain department status. I doubt that it will become even a degree program, and I'm really not concerned that it become a degree program. What I am mainly concerned with is the quality of people, the authenticity of people involved, and I don't just mean by academic standards. If we're talking about a medicine man, then certainly we don't look for a person with a Ph.D. I think the most encouraging thing that made me accept what appears
to be a fairly impossible position - half time - is the recent resolution passed by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, in which they recognize the contributions by native Americans.

SM: They are recognizing them now?

RH: And this resolution was just passed, and with the AAAS, with its 130,000 members, this means that medical doctors and scientists all over the country are saying, "By golly, those Indians knew something about plants, much of our modern medicine is derived from what they knew." And so I think with that kind of help from the outside, there will be a more careful gathering of information than there has been in many times.

SM: I think the potential is really great now.

RH: I think so. Then another, maybe not encouraging note, but another factor . . . this is my 16th year here, and I was not aware of being Indian anyway, until HEW and its guidelines and influences, and so forth. But what I'm saying is that an Indian student could come here, make his own associations, develop his friendships, and go through college. But with the influence of HEW guidelines, students became aware of a problem in bi-cultural identity. Before they could become assimilated, or they could become acculturated, they could come to school and be Joe College all week, and go home to the reservation. Now then, as of '69, there was a prying into the personal background, and this duality of personality conflict, which I think is fairly difficult for some of the Indian students to handle.

SM: There are some people who have done it very successfully.

RH: My concern for the program is that it avoid the faddishness that has characterized so many degree programs, and I can think all the way
from the northern states and the eastern, all the way to the west coast. All at once being Indian was "in," that was vogue. Now that's going to wear out, and I think it's already reached its crest and is being perpetuated now primarily on monetary motives on the part of many universities and school administrators due to federal funding. So the wells are drying up, and before this is over with, they want to get all the programs started they can. I share the need for the program, but at the same time, I want it to be something that improves upon the records as they have been written in the past.

SM: You have a job cut out for yourself. Could you describe how you're approaching the whole problem?

RH: We'll have courses at all levels. I don't know that we'll have even a bachelor's degree program, but my view of the program is to make it an inter-disciplinary approach, or actually, a multi-disciplinary approach. I was just talking with the dean of education of the college of education, concerning a course on the education of the American Indian, historically and up to the present time. And I would much rather combine into a colloquium-like class, a member from one or more tribes who's been in an Indian boarding school along with the public schools, teachers along with the educational theorist who's on campus, so that you get a mixture, and you really get students in class involved with the ideas. I really think the lecture method is about the dullest and the least rewarding, and certainly for classes with Indian students mixed in with non-Indian students, I see no value at all in, and would not propose, an Indian history class to be attended by Indians only. I don't want them to learn history on that slant or bias any more than I can justify American history with the role of the Indian omitted.

SM: It would seem better to have them pulled together with everything included, even if we need more semesters of exposure. I think this
is happening to some of the Afro-American or black history courses. They will gradually re-merge and make the whole course richer, instead of being separated out as they have been in many schools.

RH: Out of the over 600 faculty members on this campus, I can name four Indians. There's a young man in law who is a native Cherokee to the state, who was working on a Ph.D. in political science, and was offered a law scholarship to Harvard, so he went to Harvard, and completed his jurisprudence degree, returned, joined the faculty, and since that time has completed his dissertation in political science.

SM: He has a doctorate in two fields now?

RH: Yes. The other young man is a native Cherokee, in social work, who received quite a lot of publicity because--I'm not sure of this, but the publicity said--he was the first Oklahoman to leave Oklahoma, get a Ph.D. in social work, and return to the state.

SM: Most of them have not returned?

RH: Right. I have a cousin who is a native of Muskogee, Oklahoma, who was one of the first Ph.D. candidates here in the history of science program, and went from here to the University of Minnesota, where she was associated with the American Indian or native Indian studies program there, and is presently at the University of California in Berkeley in the American Indian studies program.

SM: They have a big program in native American studies at Berkeley?

RH: Yes, and a degree program at Minnesota.

SM: Have you seen the catalog from Berkeley of the native American studies?
It's quite an impressive program. 87 courses.

RH: Now I think, in order to get this accomplished and to preserve some of the kinds of materials that are getting away, that we're going to have to have an across-the-nation exchange of materials, and break down the semester barriers, and be able to more or less work through a clearing house, which means that some of these people can circulate and teach on maybe even less than a quarter system, so that you have a social worker from Oklahoma, followed by maybe a medicine man from Upper Michigan, but a student enrolls in what may be a survey of the American Indian culture.

SM: A series of modules?

RH: Yes, which would be one way of getting some people on campus who would not want to be there for a whole semester.

SM: That's a fascinating idea. We tried this module program in American history--we took five subjects and worked it out for one semester. Now if that could be carried out with a modular program worked out across the country, at least in the major centers like here and St. Louis, Berkeley, Harvard, Minnesota, where they're interested, that could be tremendous.

RH: Well, I think the means through which that could be done would be a kind of clearing house that makes use of the National Indian Education Association, with its headquarters in Minneapolis. I was in Minneapolis last week, visiting on campus there at the university. I saw the Indian Center. There was a one-man show going on there at the time, an artist, and there's so much in the way of art, history, well, you name it. Whether you want to study crafts or whatever, it's fascinating.
SM: You have freedom to move in different directions here, don't you?

RH: Yes.

SM: It isn't crystallized into anything yet?

RH: No. It's under the administration of the college of arts and sciences, but is not confined within. Which means that the coordination will go on with the college of education, with the college of engineering, and I'm eager to get up to the health sciences center. Our medical college is in Oklahoma City, so they have some interests--the microbiologists and so forth.

SM: Can you give us a thumb-nail sketch of what you have in mind now?

RH: It may be rather premature, but I think, looking at the university and the program set into it, that along with the liberal education there will be at least a group of courses which may shape into a minor, along with a social studies or a history degree, depending on the person's interest as to how much they want of it. Or, it may just be that people will come, and I'm not thinking now of the typical college student, freshman through senior level. It seems to me that the legitimacy of a college program for the future is going to mean that it has appeal for the adult who is out in the community; who wants to come back, or to keep up, or to get something that was not available at the time they were in school.

SM: Someone who wants to be a history major could also come here for that purpose, but with the idea that they would be able to pick up some additional courses in American Indian background?

RH: Um hm.

SM: So you're going to have a program that will be quite attractive to a
lot of people from other schools too.

RH: I think so. My interest in it, and the encouragement that I feel, is due to two kinds of resources—people, the fact that there are Indians around, and secondly, the library resources, which are unique. All of the records of the Five Civilized Tribes, and that word "civilized" is resented by Plains Indians, you know, but historically it was significant at a point in time back there. But all of their records now are housed in Oklahoma City, in the Oklahoma Historical Society building. And in our library we have, thanks to Doris Duke and her estate, many tapes made by members of the tribes with the elderly members of the tribe. For example, my father, who was full blood, went with me during the summer of '65, and we drove through southeastern Oklahoma and taped American history from the Indian's point of view.

SM: That's all in your library here?

RH: Yes.

SM: Has it been transcribed?

RH: Yes.

SM: Do you also have music?

RH: Yes, Indian music.

SM: Indian poetry?

RH: And Indian art.

SM: You certainly do have the potential, if you can only find the time and support to carry out an exciting idea. I thank you for taking this time to explain it.