DENNIS JEFFERY, Navajo

October 24, 1975

Provo, 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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LISTENING TO INDIANS

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Sam Myers:
Today I'm talking with a young Navajo artist named Dennis Jeffery. I'm sitting here looking at a painting you did. It shows an eagle head; it's kind of fierce, isn't it?

Dennis Jeffery:
Yes.

SM: And then it's a burial scaffold here, like the Plains people use. Did the Navajos ever use a burial scaffold like that?

DJ: Yes they have. They used similar type of burials as Plains Indians, but they don't practice it nowadays.

SM: Do they use burial now?

DJ: Yes. More burials.

SM: Instead of the scaffold-type thing.

DJ: Probably scaffolds were used about 25 years ago.

SM: Then looking at the painting some more, Dennis, there's a horseman. That's a Navajo on a horse?

DJ: It's more of a Plains Indian burial ground.

SM: A burial ground scene. And then there's a poem there by Clyde Threelegs about timeless hours, minutes, seconds. May I take this along and make a slide of it to show my students, Dennis?

DJ: Sure you can.

SM: There I have his permission. Right from the artist himself. I'd
like to see the original of it, I'll bet that's beautiful in color.

DJ: Yeah. It's in the next office over there.

SM: Could we go in there before we leave if we're not interrupting anyone and take a picture of it? Because that will be in color, won't it?

DJ: Yes.

SM: I'll take the picture in color then, and then I can reproduce both in a slide, and with a picture of you, Dennis, our listeners can see you, your work both ways and then hear what you're having to say. Now Dennis, where did you come from?

DJ: I come from Arizona.

SM: What part of the state?

DJ: It's northeastern Arizona, a little town, close to a town called Keems Canyon, about three or four miles from there.

SM: Would that be east of Keems Canyon?

DJ: Yes, it would be east.

SM: Because if you go west of Keems Canyon you get into Hopi land, don't you?

DJ: Yes.

SM: Did they ever get that argument settled between the Navajos and the Hopis about the division of land?

DJ: I think it is still in the courts.
SM: That's been going on for years, hasn't it?

DJ: Yes it has.

SM: So did you go to school out there on the reservation?

DJ: Yes, I went to school in Keems Canyon for nine years.

SM: Is that a BIA school?

DJ: Yes it is.

SM: What kind of an experience would you call it?

DJ: Well, it's . . . kind of bad, in a way, mingled with the good a little. Well, they put you in school when you're about six. You know, you don't know English. I spoke only Navajo when I entered school there. We all had a similar problem, most of us were Navajos. Just a few Hopi kids.

SM: They couldn't understand you and you couldn't understand them either.

DJ: No.

SM: So you had three languages there, but you had to do all your work in English?

DJ: Yes, we had to learn English. Well, I didn't think it was a pain. I found myself speakin' English, I don't know where I really learned it, I can't remember. I found myself speakin' English.

SM: I guess kids are pretty good at picking up languages, aren't they?
DJ: Yes. Like I have a sister that's three years old. She can communicate pretty good in Navajo.

SM: Do you still speak Navajo?

DJ: Yes, I speak fluent Navajo. That's the language I know the best.

SM: English second. Do you know any others?

DJ: No.

SM: Are your mother and father still out there?

DJ: Yes, they are.

SM: Do they speak Navajo all the time?

DJ: They do.

SM: Do they speak English too?

DJ: My father does. My mother doesn't speak English.

SM: Then if you and your folks went to town, you'd sort of be an interpreter for your mother. I'll bet they're proud of you, aren't they?

DJ: Oh, somewhat I guess.

SM: Because here you are, becoming a recognized artist already. Well, you went to school at Keems Canyon first. Where did you go after that?

DJ: I went to an Indian school in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I went to school there for 23 days, and then I transferred back to a Navajo school in Arizona.
SM: I thought you were going to say you ran away.

DJ: No, you get conflicts, you know, with other tribes and people, so I just came back, went to school back in Arizona.

SM: Whereabouts?

DJ: Holbrook. You know where?

SM: Yes, sure. I've been there.

DJ: That's where I went to high school, that's where I graduated.

SM: At Holbrook they have an Indian school, don't they?

DJ: Yes they do.

SM: Is it more comfortable going to an Indian school like that, than it is to go to a public school with a mixture of kids?

DJ: Well, to go to school in a public school, especially down in the Southwest, they seem to have some conflict with the Navajos. Always the Navajos.

SM: 'Course the Navajos are the biggest tribe, is that the reason?

DJ: Yeah. Like I've heard stories about Indian students that go to school way out to Oklahoma, and they say ... the Navajos go a long way, they is such a big tribe, somehow they always get into conflicts with other tribes.

SM: I suppose maybe just the mere fact that your tribe is the biggest and, like somebody else said, the richest, with those mineral resources, oil and uranium, and timber on the land up there, and also, the most
progressive, that there would be a certain amount of resentment among the other tribes, because they figure, well, "They've got it better than we have."

DJ: Well, I don't really look at it that way. It's just that, like a foreign person. . . . To me the Navajos are probably the richest in the sense that they're the biggest tribe, and in the sense they are more progressive, by their population, and to see a different tribe, you know, their customs, and this lack of understanding that lead into conflicts.

SM: Like any group but ours is sort of against us?

DJ: Yes, kind of like that.

SM: I guess that happens no matter where we are, no matter who we are, we all have a little tendency in that direction.

DJ: Like the Navajos, I think, are more traditional than any other tribe. I believe so.

SM: Even more than some of the pueblos?

DJ: Maybe . . . but I think, well, to my knowledge they're more away from civilization than any other tribe.

SM: Yes. Now that's some of the Navajos, of course, because here you are in the middle of a large city, going to a big university, but back home you're kind of out there away from . . . urban centers.

DJ: Just take the average Navajo. I believe he is more away from civilization than any other tribe in the United States.
SM: I can see the vast distances out there as you drive across it, and there are miles and miles of land, and there'll be a Navajo home. And some of those people, then, don't leave there much either, I guess.

DJ: Yeah. Well, like some of the students go back probably are encompassing the situation as they go back. Out on the reservation, there's hardly any people.

SM: Did you go to any other schools after you went back to Holbrook?

DJ: No, I came here.

SM: You came to BYU from Holbrook?

DJ: Um hm.

SM: When did you first start becoming interested in art?

DJ: My dad does a little art work. Most of the Indians do a lot of art work, jewelry or whatever, rugs, sand paintings, different things that they do. I kind of like drawing. I just picked it up, I don't know where.

SM: Did you ever take classes in drawing?

DJ: I never took a class, but now I'm taking classes.

SM: Now when did you do this drawing here, this painting.

DJ: I done that last year.

SM: That would be 1974. I didn't ask you how old you are. Do you mind if I do?
DJ: I'm 21.

SM: So when you were 20 you did this. Well, the composition of this is dramatic, it's got impact. Either you have a real natural talent, or you have learned very well how to put things together for the purpose of making an impact. No one can look at that without taking another look.

DJ: I try to put down what I feel, you know, about Indians, in my picture, my paintings.

SM: Do you prefer oil paints?

DJ: Yeah, I like oils.

SM: What else do you do?

DJ: Water colors, sketching, mostly pencils or ink sketches.

SM: Black and white?

DJ: Um hm.

SM: Do you work at anything else, like silver or pottery or anything like that?

DJ: I do a little silver, not too much. I don't do pottery.

SM: What you really like is drawing, painting?

DJ: Yeah.

SM: And if you stick to one, then you're going to probably develop more proficiency.
DJ: That's true. That's why I like painting.

SM: Do you plan to make a career of art?

DJ: I like art, it's what I plan to go into.

SM: Are you going to try to make it to sell, or to teach it, or do you have any thoughts on that yet?

DJ: I would like to do a history of my people mostly, because I don't think there has been an artist that's really done Navajos the way it really was, back 100 or 150 years ago.

SM: How can you find out what it was like?

DJ: Well, you get information from the old people, or you get old photos from the Smithsonian institution, those places.

SM: Photos go back to 1850 probably. That's about 125 years ago.

DJ: Um hm.

SM: Well, that would take you back quite a ways, because they hadn't changed too much from the old ways then yet, had they?

DJ: No.

SM: Like you were saying, the Navajo people have been, some of them at least, in less contact with the rest of the world than any of the Indian peoples.

DJ: Yes, that's true.
SM: Now that's a paradox in a way, because at the same time that that's probably true, they have also been one of the most progressive tribes, haven't they?

DJ: Yeah. You see, in a sense, it's like population. I believe they judge it by population. Like say more Navajos you see on the reservation would go to school than any other tribe. Let's say, for instance, like the Blood probably have 5,000, the biggest tribe in Canada. The Blood has about 5,000 Indians, and the Navajos, how much do they have? About 150,000, and that's just a drop in the bucket against the Navajos. And take 5,000 Navajos that would go to school, that would finish, and you'd say, "Hey, that's the biggest tribe of graduates we have here." I believe they judge it by population, and they judge the wealth of the Navajo Nation by the population.

SM: Dennis, here at the university, is this your first year?

DJ: This is my second year here.

SM: How do you like it?

DJ: I like it.

SM: A big place, isn't it?

DJ: Yeah.

SM: This university is bigger than lots of cities.

DJ: Yeah, it's a big place.

SM: Do you live on campus?

DJ: No, I live off campus.
SM: You're taking drawing classes now.

DJ: Yes I am.

SM: Have they changed your work any?

DJ: No. Well, kind of, a little bit changed it. But my subject is the same.

SM: Since you were a child you've been painting, drawing. And you probably developed certain attitudes, and techniques and so on also from listening and watching your father. Then you go to a drawing class, and you get an instructor who says, "Now here is the way a drawing is supposed to be approached or done." Is that confusing?

DJ: Well, there are techniques of doing, applying different mediums, but as far as my subject is concerned, I don't think it's gonna change because I'm an Indian, it's part of me, it's always there. Can't walk away from it.

SM: You don't want to either, do you?

DJ: No.

SM: So, anyway, you're just learning new techniques to do what you were doing anyway, and you may pick up some ideas that will help. Once in a while an idea may conflict with another, but then you'll try them both, I suppose.

DJ: Well, for instance, I'm tryin' to do water colors now. I never done water colors before.

SM: Do you like that as well as oil?
DJ: No. Well, I don't have much experience with water colors as far as judging right now, but it's pretty good.

SM: You can do more in oils, can't you?

DJ: Yes. It's different anyway. I'm kinda beginnin' to like it. First it was confusing, just like everything else. When I started oils it was confusing a little bit to me.

SM: Did you ever try any sculpture?

DJ: Yeah. Eventually. I'm thinking of it now.

SM: But more or less by way of experimentation, because you still like the painting?

DJ: Yeah.

SM: That's going to be your first love in art?

DJ: Yeah. Painting. . . .

SM: Have you ever sold anything yet?

DJ: I sold all my work.

SM: Have you sold this one?

DJ: Yeah, kind of, I sold that.

SM: This one is hanging in the building here, isn't it?

DJ: It's in the office here. They're gonna hang it.
SM: Did they buy it from you?

DJ: They didn't buy it. I entered it in a contest a year ago, and it came in second, and the department had some type of reward that they gave me as they took the painting.

SM: So they got the painting and you got the award.

DJ: Um hm.

SM: Well, sometimes that's even nicer than just an outright sale, because you are recognized by the people who are supposed to be experts.

DJ: Um hm.

SM: Do you have any plans to go to any other schools?

DJ: Well, I plan to go to a good art school. I haven't yet made up my mind.

SM: Are you going to stay here another two years though?

DJ: No, I don't think so.

SM: In other words, you're finishing up your second year now. So then you're going to concentrate on art alone in an art school?

DJ: That's just what I plan to do.

SM: But you don't have one in mind yet?

DJ: Do you have any suggestions?

SM: No I don't, but I know some people who would, who are involved in it.
There is a man over at Haskell, for example, Dr. Richard West, who some people think is the greatest living Indian artist, and he certainly would have some ideas. He's a southern Cheyenne. Then there was a young man, we saw his work over in Muskogee, Oklahoma. His name was Jerome Tiger. Have you ever heard of him?

DJ: I've heard of him.

SM: Unfortunately he died at the age of 26. He was very good. His work is subtle and delicate. It's got a kind of drama in it, but yours is more forceful. Most of his was less forceful than this. Now I don't know where he went to school, but the people at Bacone College in Muskogee would be able to give you some ideas.

DJ: Yeah, I've heard about Bacone College.

SM: And then there are schools back east. Does your school right here have more art courses that you haven't taken?

DJ: Yeah. But they're not particularly in the professional field of art.

SM: They're more like art education?

DJ: Yes.

SM: And then you have to take other courses too that you aren't especially interested in. Well, after we're through here I can give you a couple of other names that might help. And then there's the Institute of American Indian Arts at Santa Fe.

DJ: Yeah, I heard about it.

SM: Well not to go there necessarily, but to talk to some of the people there, and see what they have to suggest.
DJ: Yeah, different types of artists came out of there, out of Santa Fe.

SM: Their's is a two-year school, and you've already got two years in, but the people there might know some place that would be best for you. I'm glad to see that you're definitely planning to go on. You don't have any doubts about it either, do you?

DJ: Yeah, I'll just roll on.

SM: I think you're fortunate, because a lot of people are so unsure.

DJ: Yeah, some people are.

SM: And you have sold so far everything you've done?

DJ: Except the one in my bag.

SM: You have one in your knapsack there?

DJ: Yeah, I've got a water color there.

SM: How do you manage to sell them?

DJ: Well, there's a guy over here in this building. He teaches current Indian affairs. I just bring my work to him, and he sells some of mine, and I got different people in Arizona that I send it to. They sell it, like McGees.

SM: Oh, McGees Indian Shop?

DJ: Yeah, the one in Keems Canyon.

SM: That's a nice shop there. A lot of beautiful things.
DJ: Yeah, I sold some there, plus one of the McGees that lives in Holbrook also.

SM: McGees are in several places. They're in Keems Canyon, Holbrook, Scottsdale. Are they all the same family?

DJ: Yeah, they're all the same.

SM: McGees are in jewelry, but they also handle paintings, rugs, pottery, everything.

DJ: Yeah. Some of the McGees are really good friends of mine. I know them really well.

SM: The one in Keems Canyon, is his name Bruce?

DJ: Yeah, his name's Bruce. I know him.

SM: He's one of the younger members of the family. Is he one that's a friend of yours?

DJ: Well, I don't really know him that well. I speak to him, talk to him, but I know his sister. She got married, her last name is Kaye now. There's a guy named Johnny Kaye there. Beverly Kaye.

SM: Does she live up there in Keems Canyon?

DJ: Yeah, she lives there. She works at the trading post there.

SM: I was really surprised and very much impressed with that store there, the shop, because I wondered how they get enough traffic through there to support that great collection of valuable things--art, jewelry, rugs, kachinas.
DJ: Yeah, they put on displays all over.

SM: Move their stuff around to other stores too?

DJ: They put on displays in California, Arizona, Phoenix, Scottsdale. 'Course they have stores down in Scottsdale and Phoenix now.

SM: That's the same family that runs that large store in Scottsdale, McGee's Indian Den?

DJ: That's the same store, run by the same person. His name is Cliff McGee.

SM: Is that the kind of place where people can go and buy things with confidence? Did you want to give them a plug?

DJ: If it was my personal view, I won't say go to the trading post.

SM: Where would you go?

DJ: Go directly to the person that makes it.

SM: The person that makes the jewelry or the rug or the painting?

DJ: Yes.

SM: But some people can't do that, Dennis. If people can't get out there, what are they going to do?

DJ: The next thing is the trading post, I guess.

SM: So here you are now, a young Navajo student with a real talent in art,
and your advice to the general public out there in St. Louis, for example, or Chicago, if you can't get to the reservation to watch somebody make something, or paint something, then to find someone you have faith in, trust in?

DJ: Yes, true.

SM: Because there are imitations on the market, aren't there?

DJ: Yeah, there're a lot of it. There's a lot of just junk, jewelry that's junk.

SM: Southwestern Indian people have really come into their own, don't you feel, lately in this art field?

DJ: Um hm. Yes.

SM: It's been almost a boom, hasn't it?

DJ: Indian seems to be the "in" part.

SM: You're "in" right now.

DJ: Yeah.

SM: I'm looking forward to seeing your painting in color. Any experiences back on the reservation that you can tell us about, so students can know you, Dennis Jeffery?

DJ: To all of you there in St. Louis, don't go to the Navajo Reservation. (laughter)

SM: Don't go there?
DJ: I'm just kidding. It's a nice place, you know.

SM: Are there many people going out there?

DJ: Oh, there're some that go out there, take pictures.

SM: Are tourists welcome out there on the Navajo Reservation?

DJ: Sure, they're welcome.