WALTER JENSEN, Navajo

October 20, 1975

Tsaile, Arizona

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

WALTER JENSEN, Navajo
October 20, 1975
Tsaile, Arizona

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Sam Myers:
I'm at the Navajo Community College today in Tsaile, Arizona, on this beautiful campus, in the office of the student senate president, Walter Jensen. Is that your office, Walter?

Walter Jensen:
It's originally known as the college student body.

SM: The college student body president, and, in spite of his Danish name, Jensen, he's a full-blood Navajo. I think your position, Walter, is unique in that you're also on the board of regents, aren't you?

WJ: Correct.

SM: That's kind of a heavy job, isn't it?

WJ: It's a very challenging job. It's one of the newer concepts of probably higher education; we're one of the probably very few that are trying this system.

SM: So you're head of the student body, president of it, and also, in that capacity then, serve as one of the regents of the college?

WJ: Right. It's mainly ... I guess it's more or less ex-officio.

SM: But you have a vote, don't you?

WJ: Correct. Full vote.

SM: One out of ten?

WJ: Right.

SM: If you keep this up you're probably going to revolutionize all the
campuses in the United States. Anyway, let's find out a little bit more about you. Did you grow up in this part of the country?

WJ: I grew up about 140 miles south of here, the southwestern portion of the reservation, a little country area named Indian Wells.

SM: Indian Wells. Yes, I've heard of that. In fact, it's a kind of a tourist spot now, isn't it?

WJ: No, our area's not for tourists that much. You're probably thinking of the western areas towards Grand Canyon.

SM: Oh, there's another one over there?

WJ: Correct. We're probably east of Grand Canyon by another 140 miles.

SM: Did you go to school down there?

WJ: No, I went to school off the reservation, in a place called Holbrook, Arizona.

SM: Oh yes, Holbrook is a well-known town. How was that? A good experience?

WJ: It was very good.

SM: A lot of Navajo kids in school there?

WJ: They were all Navajos.

SM: A BIA school?

WJ: No, this is a private school.
SM: Who ran it?

WJ: A church organization. That was very small at the time. I guess one of the reasons why my grandparents didn't send me to public school, BIA school, is they didn't really enjoy the reports about BIA and the public school, the way they are operated.

SM: I've heard it both ways. The mission schools are sort of decreasing, aren't they?

WJ: They certainly are.

SM: The biggest growth is in the public schools now in Arizona and on the reservations too, isn't it?

WJ: During that time we didn't have public schools on the reservation. To go to school you had to leave your home for nine months out of a year, and you had to stay. . . .

SM: How young were you when you went to the Holbrook school?

WJ: Probably about seven years old.

SM: That's kind of a twist for a kid of seven, isn't it?

WJ: It is, but you get used to it.

SM: Then you went there through elementary school and high school?

WJ: Just elementary. Then I went from there to another school in Scottsdale, Arizona, which is near Phoenix. Graduated from there at a place called Thunderbird Academy. It's a college preparatory school too. It's also private and very expensive, and the reason why I went there is I was interested in their flight training program.
SM: Are you still interested in flying?

WJ: Oh certainly.

SM: Are you active in it now?

WJ: No. I've been away from it because of, I guess, financial situations. Rather expensive.

SM: Flying now. Did you get into the Service, flying there?

WJ: No I didn't. I went to the Service, but I didn't fly at all.

SM: That would have been a good chance. What branch of the Service were you in?

WJ: I was in the U.S. Army.

SM: One of the infantrymen?

WJ: No, I was in many areas. I started out in administration, Army basic administration. Then, due to the shortage of men, I was put into other areas like crew chief.

SM: You were in flying there then?

WJ: Yes I was. Well, more servicing helicopters, keeping their maintenance.

SM: Then did you get a chance to go to school any more before you came here?

WJ: Not in a college.
SM: After you got out of the Service then, did you have any other experiences before you came here?

WJ: What do you mean? In the way of education?

SM: Work or did you come right here then?

WJ: Right after Service I came here.

SM: Well, that brings us up to date, and here you are now. Is this your first semester?

WJ: This is my second semester.

SM: And you've already been elected president of the student body. Do you have to campaign for that job?

WJ: Well certainly. You have to be elected from the student body.

SM: Does most everyone vote?

WJ: Oh certainly. We got a good turnout. We're a small college, so we get, not total participation, but probably the core that's very interested in the college. I would say roughly 70% voted.

SM: That's unique, comparing your college with ours. Ours is a commuter college--nobody lives on campus--yours is a resident campus, most of the people live here, don't they?

WJ: Right.

SM: And so you have more student participation in these things. Sometimes we're lucky to have 10% voter participation in these events.
WJ: We have also a large number of commuters here too, probably almost half, I would say. Yes.

SM: They must drive a ways. Are there any towns close by? Twenty-five miles is the closest one, isn't it?

WJ: Yes it is. Well, we have a little community, just mostly residential areas, about 10 miles north of here. Probably the longest ones that drive, about 85 miles from here. Every day.

SM: Eighty-five miles! The roads are pretty good up here, aren't they? At least the one I came across today was beautiful.

WJ: Which way did you come?

SM: I came from Chinle. Twenty-five miles, just a beautiful road, over those hills. Coming down the last mile or two here where you overlook the valley, that's a spectacular sight. How are things going with the student body?

WJ: Oh, very fine.

SM: Any problems?

WJ: We got a good group of students this year, more concerned with studies, and you can notice that. The feeling's much better this year.

SM: They're seriously interested in their work?

WJ: Right. Academic side of it.

SM: And they're also interested in the school activities when they come out and vote. And you got elected, so that's a little more satisfying than a win out of a 5% or 8% or 10% of the vote. How is your
student body organized? You have a president—yourself.

WJ: Right. We have a vice-president, a secretary-treasurer, below that we have a group of 15 students that are known as student advisors, and then from there they have other representatives, like the student disciplinary board, a delegation of five that oversee disciplinary matters on the college level that arise from the students.

SM: You mean the students themselves exercise disciplinary pressure?

WJ: Right.

SM: Or judiciary performance?

WJ: Right. I guess you would say sort of like a jury.

SM: What kind of cases do you have?

WJ: Well, it's mainly probably cases like for . . . violation of quiet hours, liquor violations.

SM: So, what then? Do you have campus security arrest them?

WJ: Usually try to handle it through the residence area. The concept and the living conditions here is based on the hogan as a home.

SM: Oh I see. The building is built that way, and the idea is carried out.

WJ: There's a dorm parent in each residence that tries to maintain order in each dorm. Well, not necessarily order, it's just a house, and if anything goes wrong the first person that is called in contact is the resident.
SM: Now is the dorm parent an older, married couple?

WJ: Right.

SM: It's not another student?

WJ: No. They're older Navajos, and they understand and talk to them in their native tongue. I guess they try to practice a lot of philosophies that they are attuned to.

SM: Does it work out well in the dormitories?

WJ: Oh, certainly. But probably the only ones that don't understand that part, not quite, is the non-Indians.

SM: You have some non-Navajos, some Anglos and other people here too, don't you?

WJ: Right. But even so, the population of Navajos is higher.

SM: Most of the dorm parents are Navajos?

WJ: Right.

SM: So then you have the campus organization, you have this kind of judiciary thing. Somebody comes back on the campus drunk, and gets in trouble, then the dorm parents try to take it to the . . .

WJ: Those outside matters like that are handled by the tribal police, the Navajo Nation police. That's in the hands of security. If they're not students, they refer those to outside.

SM: But if they are students, then they go to the student body. What did
you call it?

WJ: The student disciplinary panel or board.

SM: Now let's say some student before the board feels that he doesn't get a fair shake; that somebody on the board doesn't like him, and they're going to lower the boom on him. Does he have an appeal?

WJ: We have an appeals committee, yes, that he could turn to if he does not like the actions of the board.

SM: Also made up of students?

WJ: No, they're a mixture of faculty and staff and students.

SM: Can a student appeal anything else, like grades or that sort of thing?

WJ: Certainly. For things like that then, we get down into separate organizations. We have committees such as these here, the President's Advisory Council, Academics. These are the people that you'd want to go to for like academic standards commission, or curriculum committee, or disciplinary appeals or financial aid, learning resources, personnel selection, the college disciplinary panel.

SM: You have eight bodies right there, haven't you? Are they all a part of the student body then?

WJ: Let's see. It's probably half and half. Half staff and half faculty.

SM: What's the biggest campaign project for the student body right now? Anything that you're pushing?

WJ: Right now we're working on the Folk Festival we have every year. We
had our first annual last year.

SM: Native American Folk Festival.

WJ: We're working on that right now for November.

SM: That's going to be right here on campus?

WJ: Right. We've had singers back from the East like Floyd Westerman. These are not all native musicians, and they're well-known singers within the area.

SM: Could you describe that festival a little bit?

WJ: It's a fund-raising, a benefit-raising concert for our music scholarship.

SM: It goes into a scholarship fund?

WJ: Right. For those students who are interested in music, that leave here, that want to have a music scholarship. That's the reason why we started this out. It goes on for three days, and it attracted hundreds last year. We had a full house.

SM: And you charge $2.50 for adults and $1.50 for students with an I.D., so you raise some money in admissions alone.

WJ: Right.

SM: Do you have other activities that raise money too?

WJ: Certainly. We have like dances here, other, like sales.
SM: Sales of things like foods and crafts and so on. And then how does it unfold during those three days?

WJ: Well, we start out during the day in the morning with classroom daytime presentations, and these musicians will be scheduled through various classes.

SM: Oh, they come around and visit the classes?

WJ: Yeah, they go around. Sort of have a seminar or sessions, and explain their history of themselves, and explain the composition, texture of their music, this sort of thing. It's very educational. We have a lot of schools throughout the reservation that are participating in this. And then in the evening we have regular concert-style music, continuous music from 7:00 all the way to midnight. Oh, this is a combination of musicians all working at once.

SM: And the second day you do the same thing?

WJ: Right. The second day we have more school. See, you have to have this for three days 'cause so many are interested.

SM: You bring in people from other schools?

WJ: Right. It attracts a lot.

SM: Other colleges, high schools?

WJ: Right. Mainly high schools.

SM: I can see why that would be very interesting. This is the second one, the second annual. And it was a success?
WJ: It was very good.

SM: Does it take a lot of your time?

WJ: I was not in the student government at the time, but I helped out just setting up a lot of things for the lighting, decoration, and what not.

SM: Are you kind of laying awake nights planning all the details?

WJ: Oh yeah, it takes a lot of work.

SM: Do you have a good staff organized to help you?

WJ: Right. Sure.

SM: Do you have your vice president and some of your student advisors who help also?

WJ: Right. We're always open for help, and they really contribute a lot of time.

SM: I imagine that would be a unique experience for some of our students who drive to school and leave again, to be involved in one of these on-campus activities, situations, like you have here. Somebody said once that everybody should have the experience of living in a dormitory at a residence school. Any other projects you're working on?

WJ: Let's see. We have what they call a powwow here every year, and this next one will be the fifth annual, and this draws Indians from the national level.

SM: Do you also have a lot of visitors who come to be spectators?
WJ: True. We had last year, I would say, a good 10,000 here. We had that for two days, and each day we've had an average of 6,000 to 7,000.

SM: That is tremendous.

WJ: So I would say within two days we had over 10,000 people on campus.

SM: The powwows now, some of the people back East would think a powwow is a kind of show. But it really isn't, is it?

WJ: It's really just a get together, competition on the side.

SM: A social affair for the people participating, and competition like you said, and then the spectacular thing for the spectators who want to just come see it and not participate. This is coming back, isn't it? It's growing in importance and popularity through the country.

WJ: Sure is.

SM: Do other schools do this too?

WJ: We're probably the only one in the Southwest right now that puts on the largest money for this, and our reputation's growing every year.

SM: It's five years now and growing. Is this one of your responsibilities too?

WJ: I will oversee a lot of things like this.

SM: Now there's two projects right there that are major in size. Have you got more?

WJ: Well, we also have American Indian music seminars. It's really more or less a total workshop by Indian musicians.
SM: Is that once a year also?

WJ: We want to encourage that. We did it last year, and we'd like to continue it if possible. We haven't really decided. And another event that we have here is a rodeo every year.

SM: Is that another student body project?

WJ: Right. That attracts a lot of people.

SM: When do you get time to do your school work?

WJ: Well, you have to fit it in. You let that come first, and then worry about these other activities.

SM: The public is invited to all these things?

WJ: Certainly.

SM: Now where would they stay if they wanted to come here? Are there any facilities, the nearest towns, motels, that sort of thing, to get down to practical necessities.

WJ: Well, it depends how large a group. Say two or three, they have guest rooms down here they could request, and they're usually open for guests most of the time. But on those large activities we have a lot of special guests that we invite. We are crowded, but we open campsites here nearby.

SM: Well, there's an answer. So if somebody wanted to come they could bring their camping gear and camp out under the starry Arizona skies.

WJ: We also have camper areas right down here by the lake, about a mile
from here, right by the lake here.

SM: That would be neat.

WJ: And also if they want to be a little more comfortable, there are motels 25 miles from here, west.

SM: Over at Chinle. That's the nearest motel? So they could camp out. They might get space in one of the dorms, or go to the motels. They sound interesting, the Native American Folk Festival, your American Indian music workshops, the powwow, the rodeo. That's quite a lot of activity, four major events in each year. Any others?

WJ: Any others we have is mostly dances that occur occasionally, twice a month or so.

SM: These are for the students?

WJ: Right. A social get-together.

SM: It's not a thing that you promote outside attendance for?

WJ: Right. The public is welcome to that too.

SM: They're welcome to come, but you don't go out and work at it?

WJ: Well, they come because of the popular musicians that we invite.

SM: Mostly students coming from other schools again?

WJ: Oh certainly. We like to invite them. Another event that we will probably be getting into—we're trying to emphasize more music here, educationally, and we invite schools, high schools that have music departments.
SM: Are you interested in music, Walter?

WJ: Yes I am. I'm a member of the Navajo Nation band.

SM: Oh, I saw that in a movie. Were you in that?

WJ: From Pasadena?

SM: No, the movie about the school here.

WJ: Yes.

SM: The Navajo Nation band is in that. Is that the one you're a member of?

WJ: Right.

SM: It's a spectacular band.

WJ: There's a picture of it.

SM: Oh yes, there's a picture right there on the wall. They were wearing concho belts, and some of them were wearing squash blossoms, and you know, they had a lot of valuable things they were wearing.

WJ: January 1st of this year we were in the Tournament of Roses parade in Pasadena. We were right behind the Marine Band. We were the third band. We had a very enjoyable time.

SM: When you go to the Rose Bowl like that, you have to pay your own expenses, don't you?

WJ: The tribe was the one that paid our expenses. More or less we serve as public relations for the whole tribe.
SM: Next year what would you rather do, be in the Rose Bowl parade or watch it?

WJ: We had a good time playing in it. I would say we'd like to do both.

SM: Well, I suppose you could be in it and watch a film of the T.V. presentation of it later, because it is beautiful on T.V. in color. Can you tell me of any of your other plans and your own career? Now you're interested in music. You're a member of a band already. That's a pretty serious band too, that's not just another group of school kids?

WJ: Right. They're getting professionalized in their field.

SM: Are you going to major in music?

WJ: At one time back when I was smaller I had a good music background, good music teachers. I wanted to go into music, but I don't know why I didn't continue it.

SM: Now what do you play?

WJ: I play French horn.

SM: That's difficult to play, I've heard.

WJ: It's challenging.

SM: Any other kind of music, like vocal?

WJ: No, I don't sing at all.

SM: What is your major?
WJ: I'm mainly interested in business.

SM: Business administration? And you're getting a lot of experience right here with that, aren't you? Organization, politics, the whole thing with your work as president. Now you have two more semesters here?

WJ: This is my last semester.

SM: So then you're going to graduate in the spring?

WJ: December.

SM: Are you going on to school?

WJ: I'll be going to Arizona State University.

SM: Somebody told me that in the last decade the Indian student population down there has grown from 1% of the population to a number proportional to the Indian population of the state. A great growth, and the school down there is quite proud of that, so they probably will have the welcome mat out for you, won't they?

WJ: Sure.

SM: Have you sensed that? You've been down there?

WJ: Yeah, I've been there. I like it. It's very compact.

SM: They have a good law school down there too.

WJ: I believe it's one of the best in the nation.

SM: And you're going into business administration down there?
WJ: I'll probably end up with education on the side.

SM: A minor or another degree in education?

WJ: Right.

SM: From being here and being in your student activities, do you think you might like to teach in a college like this?

WJ: I probably won't until many years. Probably start off somewhere else, get a little more outside experience.

SM: In some business situation somewhere. Are you going to let your music go a little?

WJ: I'll probably keep that on my hat somewhere. Let me ask you a few questions.

SM: O.K.

WJ: About your college. Do you have any Indians at the college there?

SM: Very few, and that's one of the things I'd like to promote. 'Course there are lots of people who have a little Indian blood that come to school, but for full-blood Indians, there are not very many, and I wish there were more, and I think it would be a nice place for them to go, and I think they'd like it.

WJ: Now with this information that I'm making here, how do you plan to use it?

SM: In our classes and in our listening services, tape bank in the library, so that our student body president, for example, can listen
to your problems, what you're doing; our students can hear what you're thinking of and doing, and they will discover that Indians are like everybody else; they do all kinds of things that everybody else does, and they are good, bad, tall, short and everything else, which is something that some people have to learn yet. I think most of my students know that.

WJ: This is your first time here, and I guess you're witnessing one of the few colleges that will try to make a significant native Indian studies here.

SM: It's unique.

WJ: Yeah. This is very challenging, and the first of its kind.

SM: The first of its kind, and I hope successful. Well, it's certainly a beautiful campus, I've never seen anything like it, and with the start you've got it should work out very effectively. I want to thank you, Walter, for your time, and I hope you have a good trip and get back safely.