BRUCE JESSEPE,
Potawatomi - Kickapoo - Oneida
September 17, 1975
Lawrence, Kansas

This transcript is one of a series of interviews with American Indian people throughout much of the United States by
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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.
Conversations and opinions were encouraged on any subject of interest to interviewees; questions and responses do
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listening to indians

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Sam Myers:

Today we're in Lawrence, Kansas, at Kansas University, talking with Bruce Jessepe. Bruce, you're in the middle of activities on campus for which organization?

Bruce Jessepe:

Native American Alliance.

SM: But first of all, I'd like to get a little biographical sketch of yourself. Were you born here in Lawrence?

BJ: No, I was born in Topeka, Kansas.

SM: That's west of here about 25 miles?

BJ: Yeah, a 20-minute drive.

SM: Did you go to school there?

BJ: Yeah. I went to a couple of grade schools there--Quincy, Grant, and then I went to a Catholic school for a while, first grade--and I had a pretty bad experience there with the nuns, you know. And from there I went back to Grant.

SM: What did you feel was the problem?

BJ: You might call it that's where I got my first shock of recognition of who I really was.

SM: Do you mean that before that you weren't aware that you were anything different from the kid next door or down the street?

BJ: Right.
SM: All of a sudden somebody says you are different somehow?

BJ: Right. I was shocked, you know, at the time, 'cause I didn't know what was going on, or why they even brought it up.

SM: How did it happen?

BJ: Well, one day this Sister started asking us . . . the kids' origins, you know.

SM: Like a German or Swede?

BJ: Right. And she was going row after row, kid after kid, and they were saying, "I'm French, I'm German and I'm Irish, and so on." And then she came to me, and I didn't know what the hell was going on. "What is this," you know. I didn't know what those things were, to tell you the truth. I didn't know anything about it.

SM: How old were you then?

BJ: About . . . seven, seven years old.

SM: So that' understandable.

BJ: So I didn't know what was going on, and she came to me, and I just gave her a look, that's all I could do. She looked down at me and she started this laugh, and I was really gettin' embarrassed 'cause all the kids' eyes were on me, and everybody was quiet. And she looked right down at me and she says, "Well, do you know who you are? Do you know what you are?" And I just looked up and shook my head. "You're a Indian," she said. "Didn't you know that? You're Indian." And, man, that class just about bust out laughing. They were just laughin'. And I just wanted . . . I felt like two inches, you know.
SM: It could have been done in a way that would have been complimentary.

BJ: Well, I didn't know what was goin' on. That was it. I was in the dark.

SM: Kind of broke your heart, for a seven-year old?

BJ: Yeah. And after school I had to wait for my dad, because the Catholic school was on the other side of town, and we had to wait till he got off from work to pick us up. And I was out there in the yard waiting and all these kids were ridiculing me. "Do us a rain dance. How come you don't wear feathers in your hair when you come to school?" Bull like that.

SM: And that came as a shock because you hadn't been aware of it before. Well, there's value in your telling this little incident, for elementary school teachers who hear this tape.

BJ: Well, I hope they're a lot more smarter now than when I was born. And I didn't even tell my folks what happened. I just kept it inside me for quite a while.

SM: And from then on, was it uncomfortable for a while?

BJ: Yeah, it was after that. 'Cause I was different from everybody else now. And I think ever after I've been a loner.

SM: Even yet?

BJ: Even today.

SM: Still you have an outgoing personality, and you are aggressive enough to get yourself involved in these things, so you've overcome it, to
the extent you want to, anyway.

BJ: Yeah, I think any more now it's, I'm gettin' back at what... happened to me, you might say. But still, I want to be constructive in whatever I do, whatever is gonna improve our condition, in the state that we're in.

SM: Bruce, where did you go to school then? I want to bring you up here to KU.

BJ: O.K. After that we moved across the boulevard. We lived on the side of the boulevard where it was pretty rough, and then we moved across it, and I went to a school over there called Grant, and I had a pretty good time there, and then it was back across the highway again and I went to junior high and then I went to high school after junior high. I had a hell of a time in junior high school.

SM: Bad or good?

BJ: It was bad because I had another bad experience in junior high. It was durin' the time when there was a lot of rioting goin' around in Topeka and across the country. The blacks were raisin' hell, you know. Our little junior high got caught into it... the kids were settin' fires in the auditorium.

SM: Did you have quite a few blacks and other Indians in your school?

BJ: Well, there was only about five of us in the whole school.

SM: Five Indians?

BJ: Um hm. And I got with the crowd, and we didn't care who we were... we was a crowd. We had power, you know. We roamed the streets.
SM: You grouped together for self-protection?

BJ: Um hm. But when this damn racial thing came up it split up everybody. Everybody was aware who they were and where they came from. And all of a sudden this "right arm" thing came, you know. "Power to the people." It just split up everybody, and I was again alone.

SM: This was in junior high?

BJ: Um hm. And I was alone again.

SM: I think a lot of people don't realize that those years and the things that were going on affected youngsters that much. They were thinking more of college people, but it was bothering you kids in junior high too?

BJ: It really was.

SM: Well, Bruce, after junior high, you got into high school in Topeka?

BJ: Topeka high. I didn't like it there.

SM: Not good there either?

BJ: It was too big--2,000 students in an inner-city high school.

SM: Do you have much of a racial mixture out here in Kansas in a high school like Topeka, or is it all pretty much one group?

BJ: It's black and white, that's it.

SM: What proportions did you have?
BJ: I think it's about 20% in Topeka.

SM: Twenty per cent black and eighty per cent white?

BJ: Um hm.

SM: Are there very many Indians?

BJ: Not too many. When I was there back in '70 there wasn't hardly anybody there, and I couldn't keep up with my old friends, 'cause they went their way, you know, and I didn't like it there. And all of a sudden I got this idea I wanted to be with my own kind then.

SM: You were kind of isolated, weren't you?

BJ: Yeah. So I dropped out after about three weeks.

SM: Did you have any good white or black friends?

BJ: I didn't have any friends in that school, and I just wanted to get out of there. I wanted to go where my kind were goin', and that was government schools. And I talked to my folks about it, "Well, maybe you'll do better." "Yeah." You know, that sort of thing. So I put in an application and they accepted me in January at Chilocco, Oklahoma. It's a boarding school. It lies on the Kansas-Oklahoma border, three miles south of Arkansas City, Kansas. It's sittin' out there nowhere. It's got a nice campus, I really did like the campus.

SM: You did like it. It was nice?

BJ: It was. They had this about a mile and a half driveway, stuck out in the prairie, and there was these trees lining it, it was really neat out there. That was the first time I was away from home too.
SM: That's kind of a wrench too. Did you get a little homesick?

BJ: Yeah, I did. In fact, I ran away.

SM: Did you go home?

BJ: Yeah, I went home. I went back, my folks made me go back.

SM: But you were home for long enough to kind of get over it, and then go back and start again?

BJ: Yeah, and anyway it wasn't so bad after that.

SM: You know the thing that kind of breaks your heart is when those little kids used to be taken out of their homes and put in a school and wouldn't get home for a year, or sometimes longer.

BJ: When they reach the eighth and ninth grade, they're pretty worldly wise, once they get to junior high level.

SM: The kids in the school there?

BJ: Um hm. The ones that come at an early age. And they're pretty slick too, you know. I was really amazed by that.

SM: Did you graduate from that school at Chilocco?

BJ: No, I didn't like it there either. I was shocked when I saw the education there. It's second-rate, there's no question about it.

SM: Mostly white teachers?

BJ: Yeah. There's some Indians, you know, that the students could relate to, but the education is just bad! It's second rate.
SM: Do you mean you could get by without doing much?

BJ: Right, and the kids took advantage of that. They just goofed around, skipped class a lot, and I'm pretty ashamed of myself, because I fell into that.

SM: You're looking back now with a wiser, older look from here, though?

BJ: Yeah. I don't know, it'd all depend on what you made of it, but it was really easy to fall with everybody else.

SM: Bruce, before we go on with your educational experience--I know there's more because here you are at KU--let's go back to the beginning. You were born in Topeka, and what kind of Indian are you?

BJ: Potawatomi.

SM: Are you a full-blooded Potawatomi?

BJ: No. In fact, I'm only a quarter Potawatomi, a quarter Kickapoo.

SM: That's half.

BJ: Um hm. The rest is Oneida, on my mother's side.

SM: Are you all Indian then?

BJ: Yeah. It's just that with the way our people believe, if you marry into the Potawatomis, everything is on the father's side.

SM: In some cases it goes the other way--on the mother's side.

BJ: I'm a quarter Potawatomi, but I'm on my father's side.
SM: So you would be considered a Potawatomi, even though you're a part Kickapoo and part . . .

BJ: Part Kickapoo and Oneida.

SM: The Oneidas . . . it always jars me because I think of them in terms of being back in New York State, but here they've been out here for a hundred years or so now.

BJ: They were moved to Wisconsin.

SM: And then on down here?

BJ: While my dad was in the Navy he'd be sometimes in Milwaukee, or Fort Sheridan in Chicago, and he got up there amongst those Indians up there in Oneida, Wisconsin, and he met my mother up there.

SM: So then, back to school. What did you do after the school at Chilocco?

BJ: I came back and decided to tackle Topeka high again, because that's where it was really happening, as far as education was concerned.

SM: You thought it was a better school, even though it was where you were more or less picked on?

BJ: As far as learning anything, it was a good school.

SM: Did you graduate from there?

BJ: Yeah.

SM: And did you come from there to KU?
BJ: Yeah. I graduated in '74, January.

SM: You're in your sophomore year here?

BJ: Yeah.

SM: That's at Kansas University. What's your major, Bruce?

BJ: Right now I'm in liberal arts.

SM: Because you haven't really decided for sure yet?

BJ: Well, I know what I want, and I know where I want to go, it's just that I'm ill-prepared for what I want to get into.

SM: Do you have courses to make up things here? Like if you're weak in something, or need something?

BJ: Yeah. Last year they didn't have these courses up here for real elementary stuff, you know. Like you hit it like a brick wall when you get into it.

SM: Well, if you come poorly prepared to some of the universities, it's rough, I know. We have non-curriculum courses where you can take English and math and various courses that you are deficient in to bring you up to a level you should have reached in high school.

BJ: Yeah. That's what I'm workin' on now. And this semester's workin' O.K. Everything is goin' smooth so far, I can't believe it.

SM: You're so accustomed to things going wrong it surprises you when it goes well? It's like when most of the days are rainy, one sunshiny day must be beautiful. I talked to a young lady who had an experience
something like yours, but a little bit more poignant. She was in a more rural community, and went to one high school where she said the discrimination was pretty bad and she was very miserable. And then they moved to another town not a hundred miles away, but she said it was like the sun came out and it was a bright, sunshiny day, because you got treated like you were a person—no discrimination, they took you for what you were. And she said it was just wonderful—like coming out of a dark room into the sunshine. I hope you're having one of those now.

BJ: Study-wise it's O.K. But as far as the campus scene, I just don't dig it at all.

SM: Well, I think if you looked around, you'd find half or more of the people are just coming to classes and leaving, aren't they?

BJ: Yeah.

SM: In the big universities that's usually the case. A lot of people participate in nothing.

BJ: Yeah. Any chance I get I leave the campus.

SM: And yet you are engaged in your organization here to help other Indian students. Isn't that what you do?

BJ: Yeah, more or less. Right now we're just mostly a social organization, where we can get together and talk to each other, see what's bugging us, are we gettin' a fair deal here, you know, it's mostly like that.

SM: Do most of the kids feel they're getting a fair deal?
BJ: You're always gonna find complaints—all the time, you know.

SM: I'm sure. But looking at the over-all picture, it's changed a lot in the last 20 years, don't you think?

BJ: I think it's got worse. I really do. Especially with the current events that's happening nationally.

SM: Like for example?

BJ: Like the AIM movement. What it is is The Hundred Years all over again.

SM: Do you mean the AIM movement and the activities they're engaged in is like going back a hundred years?

BJ: Um hm. It's startin' all over again. Indians are startin' to be hunted down again, and the lands are slowly deteriorating, you know. Take the Potawatomi Reservation for example. Topeka is creepin' up there. Sometimes . . . at nights I'm sittin' in the middle of a field or standin' in the middle of the field at night, and I can see the city lights, and each year they get brighter and brighter. And every time I go up there for religious doings, there's new ranches goin' on up there. There's a couple of horse ranches now, some cattle people moved in, suburbanites movin' in.

SM: They're just off the reservation?

BJ: No, they're goin' in the reservation.

SM: Can they do that?

BJ: The Indians are doing it to themselves. They don't have no income, these families don't have no income, and they get desperate and they
start to sell them their land, or lease it out.

SM: Can they sell it? Isn't it communally owned?

BJ: Not any more. Not since 1934 when the Indian Reorganization Act came in.

SM: I thought that act reversed that trend.

BJ: It was designed to help Indians to be up to date as far as governing themselves. Some tribes it did work, but our tribe, we didn't want that because we had our own committee. We had five councilmen and they was appointed for life, and these five councilmen had to own land, which they did. And back in '34, they didn't denounce that act because they did not understand it. And so what the elders at that time told them, "Wait a minute. You want our younger generation to grow up and be educated to understand this act." So they made a resolution to call it, you know, good in that time. And that generation is my dad now, and he's fightin' like hell to fight that damn thing off, and they're still tryin' to put it on us, and they keep saying that we did accept it. And we took 'em to court on it, and the judge asked 'em. . . .

SM: Indians Claims Court?

BJ: No. This is a federal court in Kansas City. The judge asked the superintendent at the time, Jack Carson, "Do you have any proof?"

SM: This is the reservation superintendent?

BJ: Yes. "Do you have any proof that these Potawatomis accepted that act? Do you have any ballots to prove it? And he shook his head, "no." He didn't have any record whatsoever that the Potawatomi
accepted it, but they still insist that we do. And because my dad questioned them, they cancelled his tribal chairmanship. They cut off his tribal funds altogether.

SM: He was the tribal chairman at the time?

BJ: At the time. This was 1971, I believe. And right now the case is waiting to be heard in Supreme Court.

SM: The supreme court of the state?

BJ: No. The nation!

SM: The United States Supreme Court.

BJ: In the nation. Did they have the right to cancel our government, because we are not under that act. Because if we were, the BIA could tell us anything. They could do anything they wanted to.

SM: Now this isn't the termination act you're speaking of that hit the Menominees and the Klamath Indians?

BJ: You might say it was disguised as that termination act.

SM: There was this termination act that came out in the '50's to--like the newspaper articles said then--"Let's get out of the Indian business and let the Indians do their own thing the way they want to." But, of course, it also meant, "Let's pull away all the support, the financing and so on."

BJ: What it did--when the Indians accepted that--they forfeited their rights as being Indians altogether, and they became U.S. citizens.
SM: But I don't think that did happen to the Potawatomis, did it?

BJ: No.

SM: But what did happen was that this 1934 so-called "Indian New Deal," the Indian Reorganization Act, was in most cases intended to break up the old Dawes Act that did take the property and allot it separately, to bring it back together. But in the Potawatomi case it didn't work that way.

BJ: Collier is the one that drafted this thing. He was really sympathetic to the Indians. He really thought, he really believed that this act would help the Indian out. But what he forgot was that each tribe is a different personality.

SM: Yes, there've been several cases of good intentions going awry and doing more harm than good. And one of the problems is to recognize that at least they meant well but went wrong, so let's correct it now. That's where you are right now--trying to correct those misunderstandings that went wrong. Your dad's been in the midst of this all along, hasn't he?

BJ: Yeah, since '70.

SM: I'm looking forward to seeing him. Well, Bruce, here you are, anyway, in your second year at Kansas University. How's everything else going here at school?

BJ: Oh, school's O.K.

SM: There are plenty of courses here that are helpful?

BJ: Yeah, I'm takin' some history courses, you know, tryin' to get behind just what happened to us.
SM: Do you have a native American studies program here?

BJ: Not a program, just classes that give a run-down about history.

SM: Have you taken some?

BJ: Yes, I have. Last year I had Professor Napier—she is really good, and that was History of the American Indian. That was last semester. This semester I've got her in Trans-Mississippi West.

SM: Is that what you're using this textbook for?

BJ: Yeah. And that's about the same thing, only she's more talkin' about the actual white movement on to the West.

SM: That book by Hine there. We're going to use that in January, and I still think it's not the perfect textbook.

BJ: The only textbook that's gonna be perfect in my eye is if an Indian writes it.

SM: There are some excellent books written by Indians now. Have you read D'Arcy McNickle and Vine Deloria and some of the others?

BJ: I've read three of his books. I read his new one, **Behind the Trail of Broken Treaties**.

SM: He's an interesting writer. Sometimes he doesn't seem consistent.

BJ: He has some pretty interesting arguments that I think the real rallying call for us.

SM: He's a lawyer, a clergyman and an historian.
BJ: He's done everything in the book.

SM: Do you like his work?

BJ: Oh yeah.

SM: How did you like McNickle?

BJ: McNickle? I thought he was pretty . . . interesting.

SM: A little less critical, I guess.

BJ: Yeah.

SM: Any others you've encountered? Because the books that I find that you and others like, I keep writing them down and then I use the ones that kind of come to the top all the time. For instance, Black Elk Speaks. Have you heard of that one?

BJ: I read that one. It was given to me by a friend. To me that's the Indian Bible.

SM: There's an interesting record I think you'd like, old John Neihardt . . . have you ever heard of him? He's a non-Indian instructor; he's the poet of the prairie. He was an old pioneer and he spent one or two summers with Black Elk before he died, with an interpreter, getting the story for Black Elk Speaks. Anyway, any other things that have piqued your interest in this field lately that I might be able to use for my students? You said you knew what you wanted to do, but you didn't explain. Are you going to work with Indians?

BJ: I want to go on to medical school.
SM: Oh, are you going to be a medical doctor?

BJ: Either that or something in research.

SM: What would you do with it? Would you go and work in a clinic somewhere, a hospital, or out on the reservation?

BJ: The reservation is kind of like a big dream for me.

SM: Quite a few young people are doing this. Of course, a lot of young Indians who do get a good education are suddenly tempted away by the bigger money somewhere.

BJ: Yeah, they turn white, my people say.

SM: Now to continue with your experiences. You had some bad experiences here--you dropped out for one semester?

BJ: Yes.

SM: And your folks, your dad and others, and your own thinking helped bring you back?

BJ: Yeah, I had to come back. I had to find myself spiritually, you know, so I went back to our medicine man.

SM: Up on the Potawatomi Reservation?

BJ: Yeah. Anymore now I go to the Kickapoo Reservation because the Jessepe family is up there, and that's where it's really happening for me, because when we have our doings, it's a family affair, you know. When you go up there, there's Jessepe's just crawling all over the place. It really makes me feel good!
SM: That's fascinating too. Is this the old religion, or is the Native American Church, or can you put in words what it is?

BJ: This is the Native American Church - peyote cult, the whites would call it.

SM: Well, that's part of it, isn't it?

BJ: Well, I don't think it's a cult at all.

SM: I mean peyote is a part of it?

BJ: It's part of it.

SM: That cult thing is a bit of an exotic term, perhaps.

BJ: Yeah, and I went through a couple ceremonies and ... strength came back.

SM: Would it be in bad taste for me to ask you to describe it?

BJ: Oh, I could tell you, describe what it's like for me to be in there. I just see things in there, to where I wouldn't see ... if I was going on dope to try to reach, I would never reach it. And when I go in there ....

SM: What do you mean by, "in there?" You go up to Kickapoo Reservation?

BJ: It's either a tepee meeting or in a basement.

SM: Most visually it would seem like a tepee meeting.

BJ: I like those better. I just love them.
SM: Are they special tepees?

BJ: This is regular canvas tepees.

SM: Bigger?

BJ: They're bigger, yeah, and the poles are painted different colors. They've got this little feather tied way on the top, and it's blowing in the wind, you know. And sometimes I'd walk out at night--the tepee is . . . it's just alive, you know.

SM: Your experiences are fascinating, Bruce. So just tell me, if you would, please.

BJ: O.K. I'll try. I'm gettin' high just talkin' about it. Like I said, I went back and I had to get strength, and I wanted to do it. One thing I haven't done, and that was sing in there before. Usually I take the medicine--the peyote--to help me out. I ask the Spirit to help me out, but one thing I never did, and that was to sing in there. And I said to myself, "I want to see somethin' in here, I want somethin' to happen to me in here--I want . . . I want it to wake me up! And I wanted it so bad, and I said, "By dammit, I'm gonna sing in there tonight." And I kept sayin' it to myself, and sayin' it to myself, and finally one of our medicine men had a tape from the Sioux--he goes all over the country to peyote meetings--and he had this tape of these kids singing--Sioux boys. And man, I heard 'em sing, and it was just like riding on a cloud. I mean, they literally took me for a ride when I heard them on that tape. And I said, "If them nine, ten year-olds can do it, I can do it." And sure enough, when that gourd and drum came around to me I just stopped it right there. Nelson, another medicine man, looked at me and he smiled, you know, because in three years I've been goin' to him and I haven't singed, you know, and he was really glad. And I said, "Nelson, do you wanta drum for me?" And he gets up from the center, and he sits by me and he starts drummin' away, and I just opened up, and it felt
like ... it felt like I had all these chains just come off of me, all these lockets and ropes and everything just came off from me, and I was just glad. I wanted to cry too, at the same time. That's another thing that I'm gonna have to do, to experience, and that is to literally break down and cry in front of everybody in there.

SM: In the meeting?

BJ: 'Cause everybody else . . . goes through that, and when you do that, you mean business when you're in there.

SM: Had you eaten some of the peyote by this time? That helps to free your feelings, doesn't it?

BJ:Yeah, that's part of it. It gets you ready for that drum to come around.

SM: The combination of peyote and the association of your friends and the surroundings, the whole thing adds up to this lifting, kind of freeing feeling that you experienced?

BJ: It just surges you all night, and then toward the middle of the night--that's when we start seein' things in there, and I saw things in there . . . to where I just wanted . . . (whispers) GOSH . . . it was . . . I . . . I'd just say God!. It's another world!

SM: Did you have some colorful visions?

BJ: I'll tell you, I saw somethin' in there, I just have to tell you, you know, 'cause . . . I really wanted to see, and I really did, and it just made me feel . . . that I'm special, that He does care--the Great Spirit. And I saw in there that ground--just breathing--it was fluctuating, and then those flames in that fire, they just turned into people--like they was all dancing. And then other times
I see that whole tepee just—you know—it's alive, everything's alive in there, and I really understand that concept, what they're tryin' to say—everything is alive. And it's true, everything's alive. One thing I really saw was that whole floor in there just turn into an open prairie. And I saw these hills in there . . . and it's like a dream, you know, and there's this buffalo running . . . just millions of 'em, just running, you know. And I was in there . . . my whole family was in there, and we was about free as they were. And I just looked . . . and shook my head, you know . . . we're on the right road, we're on the right road.

SM: That's the way you felt then?

BJ: Um hm.

SM: Do you feel that now too?

BJ: When I can think about it. It's just a personal experience . . . it's really somethin' else. And after that I said, "I'm goin' back to that damn anthill." So here I am.

SM: You can always go out there again, can't you?

BJ: Yeah. In fact, I'm overdue. I'm overdue to be up there again.

SM: Do you have any schedule, or do you go and come when you please?

BJ: They tell us, they preach to us, that you'll come when you're ready. Don't go up there 'cause you think you have to, but when you think you're ready, and right now I'm at the point where I'm about ready.

SM: It isn't far. Physically I mean.
BJ: It's pretty far, it's about 60 miles north.

SM: When does it usually start? Saturday night ... through Sunday noon?

BJ: Saturday night at sundown it starts. Everybody's just waitin' around. Pretty soon the men go down--either they go inside the tepee or they go down the stairs, and you know that they're tyin' the drum, gettin' it ready. Pretty soon, you know, it's time to go, and everybody gets up and goes. Then we each have our smoke, then we pray.

SM: Do you start out smoking cigarettes or something else?

BJ: They're regular corn shucks.

SM: But you don't get into the chewing of the peyote until later in the night?

BJ: Yeah.

SM: How many peyote buttons do people usually chew?

BJ: They all come in sizes, different sizes. It depends on the individual.

SM: I've heard four up to forty.

BJ: Well, they tell us, they told me, that the medicine will go around four times, and you are to eat, take some of it each of those times. They said the first one you take is for your spirit, the second one is for your soul, the third time it comes around it's for your clan, and the fourth and the last is for yourself.

SM: May I ask you what it tastes like?

BJ: It's very ... indescribably ... vulgar.
SM: It doesn't taste good?

BJ: It doesn't taste good at all.

SM: Well, they are little buttons of cactus plant, aren't they?

BJ: Yeah, but the women clean it up first. They get all the thorns out of it, and what not, and I'll tell you, that first time, it's really an effort.

SM: But you don't swallow it, do you?

BJ: Yeah you do, you swallow it.

SM: You don't swallow the button itself, do you? Don't you spit out the pulpy part?

BJ: You eat the whole thing. They clean it, you know. They take all the thorns out, and they just clean it up real good. They fix it in four ways. One is buttons that are cleaned. The other way is they chop it up and dry it out, crush it to a fine powder. And then there's where they just chop it up altogether, and eat it like that. Another way is they capture all the juices, you drink the juices, and they make tea out of it. But after the night is goin' on, that stuff tastes like candy, after while. They tell you that too. "Do you want some candy?"

SM: Most of the people will partake like you have all these times, and then finally when you get all the way in to it, you sing as well as the next one to you, right?

BJ: It makes you sing. It makes you want to sing.

SM: And then one person drums for the other one's singing?
BJ: Yeah.

SM: Do you have a leader, too?

BJ: Yeah, we have what we call the roadman.

SM: Do women ever partake in these ceremonies?

BJ: Yeah, they go in there and they help the men sing. I think they're really beautiful when they sing in there.

SM: They do sing too. Do they chew the peyote?

BJ: Yeah, some of them have special duties--like they bring in the midnight water. They sit in the circle. Whoever is sponsoring the meeting will bring in the midnight water, and then she prays, and then she tells why she puts on the meeting, and that she wants everybody to help her out 'cause she needs help, or her family needs help. And we all pray with her, and we all drink the water.

SM: The water has a sacred symbolism too, doesn't it?

BJ: It's re-life, rebirth. It's life itself.

SM: Then after the evening has worn on, you reach a climax in the middle of the night, starting at sundown on Saturday? Does it have to be a Saturday?

BJ: Yeah, it's always on Saturday, but they do have special ones where they have them on weekdays. That's when somebody is really sick, or someone is dying.

SM: Or some special problem or other?
BJ: Or something that's happening to the tribe, they'll get together and have a special meeting.

SM: Back to the weekend one, Saturday and Sunday. You begin at sundown, it reaches a climax during the small hours of the night, and then Sunday morning you have a simple breakfast?

BJ: Yeah.

SM: And then you carry on until noon and have that dinner?

BJ: Yeah, and then you're through.

SM: And that's the end of it?

BJ: And then you go your way. I usually like to stick around 'cause I like to listen to the old men talk. They can tell some really wild stories.

SM: I really hope, Bruce, I really do hope that your expression, your feeling comes through on this tape, because it's been a beautiful experience, just watching you describe it. It has!

BJ: Yeah, wait 'til you get to hear my dad! He can make it spooky, though.

SM: I guess there have been some visions that have been pretty scary, as well as beautiful. I read one about a Kickapoo who was being chased by some kind of a weird animal that was orange, and so on, and, like in LSD, his trip was a bad one.

BJ: Well, it's not tripping, you know. I'm really offended when professors or ignorant people call it "tripping on mescale," you know. And
that burns me up, because we're not tripping. It's medicine to us, it's a medicine to us, a medicine to us. But they'll never understand, I don't think they ever will.

SM: Well, I think it's coming across a little better. I think the students in my classes understand it now. I have read all I can find about it, but no one has ever conveyed the feelings like you did.

BJ: I wish I could tell you some more things, but I'm not allowed to tell. I just wish I could.

SM: There is more?

BJ: There's a lot more to it than what I said.

SM: The very next question, especially among young students in college classrooms, would be, "Well, can I do it? Can I participate?" And then, what's your answer to that? Can they participate?

BJ: No.

SM: They have to be Indians, or they have to be accepted as Indians?

BJ: There are some rare occasions where a white man has been in there, but only when he has come down to our level; only when he has come and lived with us and shared some of the happiness and some of the misery. And if the Indians really see that he is sincere, they'll take him in there. And the medicine men tell us there was some white men that went up there. "I heard you guys, you have some special thing going on up here." And those white people up there, around that reservation, they know that we know somethin' that they don't, because I heard them tell that, "You know, when I go drive on those roads, and I see that tepee up"--and these are white farmers
now--"There's something going on up there, and you Indians know somethin' that I don't, because it only lightnings and thunders around where that place is at."

SM: Really?

BJ: Really. And I tell you, I went to a meeting one time where it lightnings and thundered, and those spirits were there that night. This was an electrifying thing for me, and I just sit back and... it's really fascinating. They know something, they know something.

SM: Well, you feel something, I can see it in your face.

BJ: Yeah, I just feel something.

SM: You went to a Catholic school. Can you be a Catholic or a Protestant or a Christian, and still participate in this--be both at the same time?

BJ: Well, since the peyote cult came to Kansas, most of the Indians were Christians, Catholics. When that came up there, they incorporated some of the Christian thought in there, and they have implements that are like what the white man uses, like our staff--they have a staff that's about three feet long, and toward the bottom it changes into a lightning bolt, then at the top is a crucifix. Little things like that.

SM: And then sometimes they refer to the "Jesus road?"

BJ: They always point to the east, and that's just enough in itself for us. My sister, she had a baby, and we had a special meeting for that baby, and in that ceremony he got his Indian name. And everybody that night prayed for that baby to be healthy, to be strong, and to
go on that road, that same road, and that road would lead you to a
good life--it's goin' into the sun. And when that meeting's over,
everybody gets up and walks out toward the east, and it's really
beautiful when the morning comes.

SM: Is the opening of the tepee to the east also?

BJ: Everything is done in circles, you know. I'm kinda proud of that
little guy, too.

SM: Your little nephew?

BJ: Yeah.

SM: Do you have an Indian name?

BJ: Yeah. Mine is Mat-way-oshe. I'd have trouble spelling it, but I
can tell you the meaning of it, if you want to know that.

SM: Yes.

BJ: It's very descriptive. It means that sound that's blowin' through
the trees. It's more of a thought, really, than a description. There's
no real way to spell it, your guess is as good as mine. Even they spell
our tribe's name wrong, and they don't even know if it's the correct
way.

SM: The sound that's blowing through the trees. That's a beautiful thought,
kind of like poetry.

BJ: The name we gave my little nephew...we gave him the family name.
The family name is an Indian word altogether. Jessepe. It's really
spelled M-j-is-s-e-p-e, and that means "bad water." Named after the
Mississippi River. That's where half the tribe got killed when they moved them from Michigan.

SM: Across the river?

BJ: Yeah, they made them wade, swim across, and half of them went down with the river.

SM: This is your nephew's name, the family name?

BJ: Jeseppe is his name. I was pretty proud of that name after I found out what it meant in history.

SM: Well, a lot of these things may seem different when you get into them. You might have even been skeptical of the Native American Church and some of its teachings, but you've got into it now, the peyote and the ceremony, and it appears to be a great thing for you.

BJ: There are some things I don't understand yet about it, and I'm not supposed to understand, just accept them, and not question everything. But there will be a time in my life when I will get the knowledge of it.

SM: Might you become one of the leaders sometime?

BJ: I'll probably be endin' up like my dad.

SM: Is he one of them?

BJ: He's a tribal leader. You see a long time ago our family was a pretty powerful bunch in the tribe. But since the white man has been tryin' to change our tribal structure, and his values, it just
screwed everything up, you know, to where it's like ... I don't know, they just screwed everything up. There's no more to it, it's not the same, and I don't think it'll ever be the same again like it was with a council.

SM: We're kind of all stuck with each other now though, aren't we?

BJ: Yeah.

SM: Do you see any hope?

BJ: All I see is a long, continual fight, that's all I see.

SM: Do you mean a long, continued fight for the native Americans against the rest of the world?

BJ: I'm lookin' at my tribe and its future, and I just don't see us waitin' for a decision by the Supreme Court twenty years from now. I just cannot see that. My people—the Potawatomi—are just gettin' frustrated by every day.

SM: What about that St. Mary's thing out there? Are they going to take that over and utilize that, that church property which was offered to the tribe by the church?

BJ: That was a big dream, and it never got off the ground, and I'm just ashamed of my people, because what happened is that different families got a hold of different things into it, you know, and pretty soon, family was against family about what should be done out there, and it just put everything at a standstill.

SM: The church will give it to the tribe?
BJ: Right now my dad can tell you more about it, but they want to take it back, and I told Dad, way back when they was negotiating to do it, that those Indians out there wanta raise hell.

SM: How old is your dad? He's not well right now, is he?

BJ: No, he has emphysema, he's got one lung that's totally damaged.

SM: They need a leader who can come out there and help them reorganize so they can take this over and start doing something with it.

BJ: After that, it just drained him out completely—that whole project. Pretty soon he was fightin' with his own councilmen, and they was doin' back-handed things, you know. They wasn't tellin' him what was really goin' on, just penny-ante bickering between families, and they just drained him out completely, but what he's hopin' for is that case to be heard. That will determine everything, and put him right back on the top again.

SM: I'm very grateful for your experience that you've shared with me, because that was, well, the closest thing to being there. I'm sincerely grateful for that, and I hope it comes through here as effectively as you've expressed it. Bruce, thank you very much.