LESTER JESSEPE, Potawatomie
MRS. LESTER JESSEPE, Oneida
September 18, 1975
Topeka, Kansas

This transcript is one of a series of interviews with American Indian people throughout much of the United States by S. I. Myers of the History Department of St. Louis Community College at Florissant Valley, St. Louis, Missouri, 63135.

The purpose of these interviews is to bring the Indian peoples' own comments to students in classrooms, and to foster greater understanding among the peoples of the United States by providing Indians the opportunity to express their ideas and opinions to a wider audience.

This transcript has been edited for clarity and ease of reading, but every effort has been made to preserve the original feeling. Conversations and opinions were encouraged on any subject of interest to interviewees; questions and responses do not necessarily reflect the viewpoint of the interviewer, the National Endowment for the Humanities, or St. Louis Community College.

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Sam Myers:

Today we're in Topeka, Kansas, talking with an interesting man whom several other people in town said I should see, because he has been through a great deal. His name is Lester Jessepe. Have you always lived here in Topeka, Lester?

Lester Jessepe:

Yes, ever since I got out of Service in '51.

SM: Were you born on a reservation?

LJ: Yeah, I was born up there on Mayetta Reservation, and I went to Haskell.

SM: Mayetta?

LJ: Mayetta, Kansas. Eighteen miles north of Topeka.

SM: Is that the Potawatomi Reservation?

LJ: Right.

SM: Oh, I see. It's called "Potawatomi" on the map. It's right straight north of here. You were born up there?

LJ: Yeah, born and raised.

SM: Did you grow up speaking Potawatomi?

LJ: No, my mother . . . she wanted me to become Catholic. She always sent me off to government schools.

SM: Did you go to a Catholic school too?

SM: So you got around quite a bit too then.

LJ: And bounced around to Indian schools, boarding schools, and after I graduated from Haskell I went to work in the factory.

SM: You came back here to Lawrence to go to Haskell, and then you graduated from there. That's a two-year college there, isn't it?

LJ: No, it was a grade school.

SM: Oh, it was a grade school then, and a high school too?

LJ: Well, really all it was was just a vocational school.

SM: Oh, I see. It's changed now?

LJ: It hasn't changed, it's still the same thing.

SM: But it's a two-year college.

LJ: All that's changed is the name.

SM: They still teach the same things?

LJ: I've always been a strong opponent against BIA education, as administered by the BIA.

SM: Well, you went to Haskell, and then you went to work in a factory?

LJ: In Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
SM: Oh, you got around some more. You've seen a lot of the country. How did you like that?

LJ: Oh, I liked it there real good. But getting back to the BIA schools, well, when I left Haskell that's the last I saw of Indians.

SM: Because when you went back East to Milwaukee, very few Indians?

LJ: Yeah, that's right. You don't compete with Indians. I hope you see what I'm getting at.

SM: I'm not quite sure. There are quite a few Indians in Milwaukee now, but in those days there weren't?

LJ: Well, I'm talking about segregated schools. I don't think this is right.

SM: Explain that all you can, if you will, please.

LJ: I never did go to school with white people.

SM: Because all the schools you went to were for Indians only?

LJ: Right.

SM: And you don't believe in that?

LJ: No, because when I got out, to compete. . . I always competed against the white man.

SM: They were different people who had come up from different schools, different backgrounds?
LJ: Right. They were much more advanced than I was, except in the vocational trade. I was a machinist.

SM: Yes, and did you get proficient in that at Haskell?

LJ: Yes, and I worked in a factory in Milwaukee, I got journeyman's wages. But, like I say, as an individual, very few Indians can do that. They cop out and go back up on the reservation.

SM: And one of the reasons for this is that they have only gone to segregated schools?

LJ: Right.

SM: Now I have found other Indian people who prefer that kind of school because maybe it's more comfortable?

LJ: Well, to me, I think this is wrong. They're more comfortable, but when you start competing, you're not prepared.

SM: Well, that's what this big fuss is all about with the bussing in the cities like Boston.

LJ: Yeah. When I graduated down there, they said, "Well, the mere fact that you graduated from Haskell entitles you to go to any college you want." And they waived the entrance exam. Well, I knew right off the bat that no one was capable of passing the college entrance.

SM: Someone else said that when they started at the University of Kansas they had to take a lot of remedial courses to catch up.

LJ: And this is my strong complaint against the BIA, and maybe later on you'll understand my fight in this, because I've always tried to
start some kind of an educational program whereby Indian people could compete more readily.

SM: Some can, of course, some cannot.

LJ: Right. This is why I've sent my children to public schools. My son, Bruce, he tried Indian schools, and I told him what it was like, but he went anyway. After he went he found out, he knew what I was talkin' about. They just don't do what they're supposed to do.

SM: He was speaking of one school that he went to--it wasn't here, I think it was in Oklahoma.

LJ: Chilocco.

SM: He said it was definitely second-rate.

LJ: It is.

SM: And now then when he went to Kansas University he said he had to struggle very hard to catch up.

LJ: Right. Then this set him back.

SM: And he's a bright young man.

LJ: And my other daughter, Leslie, she has always competed like that.

SM: Does she go to non-segregated schools?

LJ: Yes.

SM: Where did she go to school then?
LJ: Here in Topeka, right in the public schools.

SM: Did they run into discrimination in the schools in Topeka?

LJ: Oh, not bad, just the normal, but that's something we live with every day, in every-day life.

SM: Are you speaking now of Indians having to put up with this, or everybody does?

LJ: Everybody does, you know, whether you're German or Irish.

SM: Or if you get old sometime, you get discriminated against too.

LJ: It's nothing, it's normal, 'cause they always have that, black and white. And the Indian, he's right inbetween. He usually just has to sit back.

SM: That's a perceptive observation. Every group, whether you be too young, too old, too dark, too light, or something or Swede or Norwegian or an Irishman or an Indian or black, somebody's going to not like you because of that reason. That's just too bad. That's what we hope we're doing here to help overcome some of that.

LJ: That's one of the reasons why I stayed in this fight, and it's a very ticklish problem. I can't understand why the BIA repeatedly makes the same mistakes.

SM: They don't seem to change much?

LJ: No.

SM: Now are there more Indian people working in the BIA than previously?
LJ: Yes.

SM: Has that helped?

LJ: No. It seems like any Indian that gets an education ends up workin' for the BIA, because that's the only thing he understands.

SM: Lester, before we go on now, let's bring you up to date. You were working in Milwaukee, and then, what happened next?

LJ: I went into the Navy.

SM: In the Navy from Milwaukee?

LJ: Yeah.

SM: How long did you serve in the Navy?

LJ: I served about three years.

SM: During World War II?

LJ: No, I was at Korea.

SM: The Korean War? And then after that you came back here to Topeka?

LJ: Yeah, and I've been here ever since.

SM: What did you do after coming back from the Navy?

LJ: Oh, I tried to work here and there as a machinist, and right here in the Midwest it's not too industrialized, not too many opportunities.
SM: Is that when you went into the post office?

LJ: Right. I went in as janitor, and worked there in maintenance.

SM: And so you've been in the post office how long?

LJ: Twenty years.

SM: Can you retire after 20 years?

LJ: Well, I did, on disability.

SM: Because of your health, emphysema?

LJ: Yeah, because of that.

SM: I do appreciate your seeing me today, because Professor Forer and Bruce both said they'd check and see if you felt well enough to talk to me, and so I'm glad you do, for your sake and for my sake too.

LJ: And for my people's sake too.

SM: Yes. A good thought. Anyway, then, so here we are up to date, and you've been working with the post office. You're retired now, and then you referred to carrying on this fight, and I think you're talking about the Potawatomi Reservation and St. Mary's and this sort of thing. Would you explain that? What is St. Mary's?

LJ: Well, St. Mary's at one time was a seminary for the Jesuits in St. Louis, the provincial office, and we negotiated with them for that property.

SM: They have some property out by St. Mary's, Kansas?
LJ: So we negotiated with them for that. They were going to put it up for sale.

SM: This was quite an extensive piece of property, a lot of acres, and a lot of buildings out there?

LJ: There were 12 buildings and 1,383 acres.

SM: That had been a Catholic seminary, and they weren't using it any more?

LJ: No, it was abandoned.

SM: And you were negotiating to acquire it?

LJ: There is an old statute in the U.S. Annotated Code, Title 25, Indians, it's in Section 280.

SM: Title 25, Section 280, of the U.S. Annotated Code.

LJ: This was brought out to me by some of our elders, who came to me and told me to go up there and look at that, and after I seen it, well, to me there was no question about it that that property belonged to us.

SM: It is not on the reservation, though, is it?

LJ: No. It was originally.

SM: At one time, yes, before the reservation was shrunk down. So previously it was on the reservation.

LJ: Yeah, and in that Section 280 it states that whenever a religious group or organization acquires any Indian land through title fee simple, by which this was acquired, well then, all land, when it's
abandoned, no longer serves the Indian, or the Indian no longer receives any benefit from it, then it should revert back to the original Indian owners.

SM: And that's the basis on which you thought it should become the property of the tribe?

LJ: And this is what we went on, this is what my people told me about.

SM: And you based a claim for the property on this?

LJ: Yes.

SM: Now the church was thinking of selling it, weren't they?

LJ: Yes. 'Course I can't speak for the Jesuits, but we worked up a plan for it.

SM: Do you know Father Murray?

LJ: Yes, I developed a real friendship with him, Father Murray.

SM: Now he's representing the Jesuit Order, you represent the Potawatomi people, and you've become good friends in trying to work this out?

LJ: And he's very understanding about the way the Bureau of Indian Affairs operates. I don't think he believed us.

SM: At first?

LJ: But after he seen what they do and everything, why he sort of changed his opinion on a lot of things.
SM: Has he been out here?

LJ: Yes. He's been here several times. He always calls me from town, and we've had a lot of discussions.

SM: Well then, you were negotiating to take it over. What happened? You haven't got it yet, so it didn't work out too well?

LJ: It's the Bureau of Indian Affairs. They took over our tribal government, they're dealin' directly with the Jesuits.

SM: Oh, the BIA is dealing with them on your behalf, supposedly?

LJ: Right. So they just completely ignore us. And all our funding, too, you know, has to come from government grants, and so we just never seem to get anywhere, but it's quite understandable. They always revert back to this, and they know, they check with the BIA, and the BIA . . . I don't know if they do this or not, but it seems to be that way.

SM: It seems to kind of bog down then?

LJ: Yeah. Then they don't wanta do it, you know.

SM: You mean the BIA doesn't?

LJ: The people that we go to for funding, to try and get something developed.

SM: Now the church is willing, they've given up their idea to sell the land and property, and they're willing to give it to the people, the Potawatomi people?

LJ: Right.
SM: But why can't they then just sign it over to the tribal leadership or the tribe?

LJ: There is no tribal leadership now.

SM: Oh, there's the problem?

LJ: There's the problem. The Bureau lifted our constitution and by-laws governing the tribe.

SM: So you don't have a constitution and by-laws any more?

LJ: No, that's what we're fightin' for now.

SM: You don't have a tribal chairman then, or a chief, or anybody in charge?

LJ: No. Just people living there, and the BIA is the sole administrator of everything. They assumed that.

SM: Well, how many people are there up on the reservation now?

LJ: Oh, I'd say about between 200 and 300.

SM: Between 200 and 300 Potawatomi people up there?

LJ: They're scattered for economic reasons.

SM: What is the economy up there anyway, farming, cattle raising?

LJ: Nothing. They just live there.

SM: They have to depend on the BIA?
LJ: And welfare.

SM: Welfare, and that doesn't make people too...

LJ: It doesn't develop any kind of initiative.

SM: And there isn't any recognized leadership up there now?

LJ: No. They have one man up there. They have the United Tribes, and the people that are the head of these things aren't Potawatomi. They're Iowas, Sac and Fox, and they don't even come around the reservation. They're afraid to, but they make all the decisions for us. They do what the BIA tells them, and I don't know why the BIA condones this.

SM: Would it be possible to develop a leadership that the BIA would recognize that these other people would... Father Murray would be glad to recognize a leader, wouldn't he?

LJ: Oh yeah. But the BIA wouldn't, because they know what I stand for.

SM: And how would you describe what you stand for?

LJ: Well, I stand for...well, Indian self-determination.

SM: Well, that's supposed to be the current point of view of the whole government.

LJ: Yeah, and we took the initiative to do all these things ourselves, and we was goin' along good.

SM: Yes.

LJ: Till the BIA stepped in. They were a hindrance to us. Every time
we set out to do somethin' they say we can't do that. "No, you can't do that."

SM: And you don't have a constitution or a tribal headquarters up there?

LJ: No, this was when we had it, too.

SM: Oh, even when you did have it!

LJ: Yeah. "You can't do that." "Well, why not?" "You just can't do it." We said, "Why can't we do it?" They said, "Well, we'll have to get a solicitor's opinion out of Anadarko, the area office."

SM: But down at Anadarko there aren't any Potawatomies, are there?

LJ: No, there isn't.

SM: That's just the BIA office, and they're looking at your territory and problems from down there?

LJ: Yeah, and it has to be approved. Anything we do on a local level has to be approved by the area office, and in turn it has to get the approval in Washington.

SM: Do you have any representatives here in the neighborhood locally, besides Anadarko, anybody closer?

LJ: No.

SM: That's quite a ways away, way down south of Oklahoma City.

LJ: Right. That's the whole trouble with this thing. When we want something it takes too much time. The need is now, you know, not next
week or six months from now, and by the time we get any action on it people forgot about it, and any monies that comes down, it has to all funnel down through.

SM: I suppose young people like your son, Bruce, are very much interested in this too, aren't they?

LJ: No, it's pretty hard to get young people interested in this, because they've gone on and seen this for so long that they just say, "Ah, the hell with it." They've been doin' that ever since I can remember, you know. But as of lately I think I give a great amount of credit to AIM.

SM: Are they helping?

LJ: Yes.

SM: Are they in this area now?

LJ: They're all over, because this is what's appealing to the younger people, and I've always been an ardent supporter of AIM, because they deal direct with the problem.

SM: How would they help you now out there?

LJ: Well, by self-determination. Get somebody there that knows something, you know, that's been in this business.

SM: Well, they would have to find some leadership among the Potawatomi people, though, wouldn't they?

LJ: Yeah. I know all the AIM leaders, you know, but we try to settle our own problems our own way. See, all an Indian has to do is just proclaim himself as bein' AIM. This is what the people don't understand,
and it isn't like havin' a card and paying dues and anything like this way.

SM: Anyone who wants to can say, "I am a member of AIM," and he is then?

LJ: And he just self-proclamation, and any time when you need help, they'll come at your request.

SM: They'll come to help you, but they don't come to stay. After they leave, then what would be the case?

LJ: Well, then, hopefully when they leave then the problem is corrected.

SM: But you still have to have some tribal leadership that would take over and run that property and use it. What would you use the property for if you did acquire it?

LJ: Well, like I said, educational purposes.

SM: Have a school there?

LJ: Yeah. See, with Indian people, when you start lookin' for priorities, I don't care what you think of, could name, it's a priority among Indian people. That's how poor and pitiful Indian people are.

SM: Anything you name, they need it?

LJ: They need it. Anything. Health, education, jobs, anything. It's priority, it can be made the number one priority.

SM: This property out there then, St. Mary's, is something you set up, and you hope to organize it as a school of some kind?

LJ: Yeah, for the betterment of the Indian education.
SM: You don't like segregated education, so I suppose you'd have it open for anyone?

LJ: Right. For all Indian people, you know. Of course, when you get government funds, you know, well, you have to open the doors for other races.

SM: Well, you'd prefer that anyway, wouldn't you?

LJ: Right. And through this way we could get other help. The state of Kansas has offered their assistance in the event we did get something going out there. In fact, they're waiting now, you know, but all this tribal business, the Bureau takin' over our government. . . .

SM: How long ago did that happen?


SM: It's been three years or better since you've had a working tribal government?

LJ: Right. So this is where it's all standin'. This is why nobody's doin' anything out at St. Mary's.

SM: Everything's just hanging in limbo, sort of?

LJ: Yeah. And of course they allus tell me, you know, let's wait about St. Mary's, let's take care of this Horton business first. Whoever controls that then will control St. Mary's.

SM: What is the Horton business?

LJ: The Horton Indian Agency.
SM: Where is that now?

LJ: At Horton, Kansas.

SM: Is that near the Potawatomi Reservation?

LJ: No, it's 60 miles away. We can't even get up there. I mean, it's way off our reservation. Everything's off our reservation.

SM: Just the travel inconvenience is a problem, isn't it?

LJ: Yeah. We want our own office where our people don't have to travel; the price of gas, we can't afford to be runnin' up there every day, but that's what they want us to do. They won't come to us, so how do they know what's goin' on around here? That clinic, it's at Holton, Kansas. Indian clinic.

SM: That's not on the reservation either then. How far is that away?

LJ: That must be about 10, 12 miles off the reservation.

SM: It's a clinic, not a hospital?

LJ: Yeah. And we have to go up there, and all these things used to be on our reservation.

SM: Before the reservation was reduced, or they have been moved off?

LJ: They moved it off.

SM: They moved it off, and the people have been moving away too?

LJ: Getting back to this clinic. At one time the tribe, through the
general council, had authorized me to spend tribal funds to build this clinic on the reservation, and we had the money whereby we would build it, put it up according to GSA specifications.

SM: Were you the chairman of the tribal council then?

LJ: Yes. And then in turn we'd lease it to the GSA, as is the general practice, and they said, "Well, yeah, this is fine." So the tribe told me to go ahead and do this, and we done it, but when we went to the Indian Health Clinic in Oklahoma City, they told us there they'd look it over. Well, when we got back from a meeting down there, they come back and told us that the Indian Enterprises out of Kansas City, Missouri, was gonna build a clinic, and they felt that if it was built at Holton it would serve Indian people, it would be geographically situated, but we didn't go along with that, because we're the biggest tribe, and our people are in the most direst of need. Therefore, we figured we should have it on our reservation; we had the money to do it, and the tribe gave the business committee authorization to do this, so this is how they took that away from us. They don't want us to be self-determined; they do everything to discourage, you know.

SM: It looks like it, doesn't it?

LJ: It does. So this Indian Enterprises out of Kansas City got the contract. They just completely ignored us, and we had no say so about it, and they had a government there called United Tribes of Northeast Kansas and Nebraska. There was four tribes there, and each had one vote, and they ganged up on us, and it didn't matter whether we were there or not, because they could outvote us.

SM: They'd vote three to one against you?

LJ: They knew this. They need us a lot worse than we need them, but the
BIA fixes it this way, for their convenience, and this is how the fight begin, and it's the basis of controversy today. We don't want in that.

SM: You were the tribal chairman when this was abandoned, disintegrated, or terminated?

LJ: Yeah, when Louis R. Bruce lifted the constitution and by-laws.

SM: That ended your term and ended the tribal chairman, the council and everything?

LJ: Yeah. The Indian agent then took complete. . . .

SM: And now the whole thing's operated by an Indian agent. And is he an Indian?

LJ: Well, I don't know. They all say they are, you know, but it would be very questionable.

SM: He's not one of your group at least?

LJ: No. We felt that we got people capable of bein', havin' our own agent, you know, and they always send us someone that they approve of, but they never come and ask us about it. They just tell us who's gonna run our business.

SM: So ever since that time when they lifted your constitution and so on, it's been stalemated; nothing has happened?

LJ: Nothing has happened. HUD is tryin' to push a housin' project up there now. They want to build 200 homes.
SM: That's unusual. You have 200 or 300 people?

LJ: Yeah, but they don't all want these homes, because they ain't got no way to pay for 'em. Now some Indians can't see that, you know.

SM: Do they have to pay for them?

LJ: Yes, certainly they have to pay for them, so much a month. But they seem to think they're gettin' these houses for nothin'. They tell 'em it's only $15.00 a month. Well, sure, you know, "I want a house." But they don't tell 'em how the utilities and everything are tied in, in addition.

SM: And they have no way of earning the money to pay it?

LJ: Right. And by the time they get through payin' it, they're payin' about $150.00 a month. And from the last report I got on the Kickapoo Reservation, north of us, out of 64 homes they had there, 30 of 'em was on the verge of bein' foreclosed, because of non-payment.

SM: Do they ever actually foreclose?

LJ: No . . . I don't know. But they keep gettin' deeper and deeper. They keep goin' in the hole, and I talked to the gas company that got the contract to furnish propane, and they said they just had to cut 'em off, they couldn't carry 'em no more. Then what they do is go to another gas company, and the high cost of fuel now is a big factor in these things, and they were quoting 1971 prices of propane. Since then it had quadrupled in price, and this is what they're tryin' to push on us, and, as you can see, it's designed to get the land, Indian land. In other words, it's the old blockbusting thing, that's just what they're doin'.
SM: If people get discouraged and leave, then the land will be there?

LJ: Then the houses there open for anybody. This is one of the things about spending government money. Once government funds are allocated, then you can't discriminate as to who gets this.

SM: Anybody could come in, not your own people?

LJ: Right. And then, there we'd be again. We'd be blockbusted off our reservation, to completely assimilate us.

SM: The problem seems to be trying to get that tribal council reestablished somehow, doesn't it?

LJ: They're doing that now. They got a constitution committee, but they're havin' problems now. I don't know what they are, and this committee was set up by the BIA, and the way they done that, I could talk to you all day on that, but it was set up by the BIA and it isn't working now. But there again, see, it's stalemated again. The BIA cares less about it; as long as it is, they're gonna have a job while Indian people suffer. See, HUD comes out and says that all decisions gotta be made by the tribal council.

SM: But you don't have a tribal council?

LJ: No, but they're goin' ahead and building the homes anyway, without the tribal council. They developed a housing authority, so they're lettin' this housing authority make all the decisions, and that's just a handful of people.

SM: Do they claim that this agent they appointed is acting in the place of the tribal council?

LJ: Well, they just pass the buck.
SM: You can't get any answers?

LJ: No. They say it's the housing authority; you go to the housing authority, it's the tribal council, the housing authority, tribal, or the agency. 'Cause we had trouble once where some women complained about their rent collector, and he was givin' 'em a hard time, and I guess he molested one of these women, so these women went to the housing authority and complained against this man, and they turned around and told 'em, "We don't have nothin' to do with that, you go and see your tribal council." And then the tribal council, the Kickapoo tribal council, they're in the same status as we are, they're not recognized.

SM: The Kickapoos are in the same boat now?

LJ: Right, because they sided in with us, so you can see the workings of the BIA. If you go up and see this health clinic, the guy that's the head of the Inter-tribal Council, as they call it, he's an Iowa Indian, and those people are assimilated. In fact, their membership consists of people, you know, that are 1/32, 1/64 Indian blood, and if you saw 'em it would be questionable whether they are Indian or not. And this has been the doctor's complaint, the one that we had here previously--I won't mention his name--but he said he was gettin' tired of treatin' blond-headed and blue-eyed Indians, you know, because he said he treats all these people, and I guess they have a right by their own constitution and by-laws to get these services. But, whenever my people go up there, full-blood Indians, they used up all the money, so there's no money there for medicine.

SM: They don't get treatment?

LJ: No, or medicine. They say, "Well, we ran out of money, we can't help you," and this is what our people can't understand.
SM: This is the clinic that was set up supposedly for your people, but others are using up the funds, so when your people go there, there aren't any?

LJ: Right.

Mrs. Lester Jessepe:
There's a clinic in Haskell too.

SM: A clinic over at Haskell College?

MJ: Yeah. And the Indians that's in that area, if he need medical help, he's to go there, and they're supposed to help him. I got two children at KU, they go there, and they ask them, "Are you students at Haskell" and they tell them "no," and they say, "We can't help you." And that's wrong there, 'cause any Indian is entitled to get help there, and I don't know if you saw Bruce's skin, but he's got eczema from his head down, and sometimes he gets worse, he gets really bad, and he has to come home to here to get a shot, because he can't go down there, and they won't listen to him--somebody that really needs help.

SM: So there's a problem there, too, with the clinic. There was another point you were mentioning a while ago.

LJ: Another thing about this clinic, it's off the reservation now, and it's right in the city of Holton, and it's on the tax roles, and we have to pay taxes now on it.

SM: Your people have to pay taxes on it, even though it isn't on your reservation?

LJ: Right. This is one of the reasons why...
SM: And the services aren't there when you go?

LJ: You just have to go up there. See, this is another thing, Indian health. While the Vietnam thing was goin' on, we had plenty doctors, because lot of them didn't believe in goin' to Vietnam, so they went into Indian service to get out of goin' to Vietnam. Well, the thing's over now, and all the young doctors have left; they've gone back to private practice now, where there's more money, because there ain't no money in treatin' Indians, you know, and this is another reason why our health conditions are real bad, and I think they got a psychiatrist up there now.

MJ: He was a psychiatrist. Whether he went to medical school to be a medicine doctor, I don't know.

LJ: But he's the head doctor there. Whatever's wrong with you, why he has to run to a book.

SM: The people aren't very happy about that either?

LJ: No, and there again, it's tribal politics again. The BIA plays this up.

MJ: They've got an X-ray machine there that really cost a lot of money, but it's not even up. You gotta go somewhere else to get an X-ray.

SM: The problems seem almost insurmountable, don't they?

LJ: It does. The deeper you go into it. It's fantastic.

SM: You feel discouraged?

MJ: Look how long Indians been this way.
SM: You've been facing this for a long time?

LJ: We've been facin' this ever since I can remember.

SM: Can you see any kind of answer, any kind of solution?

LJ: I think the Bureau of Indian Affairs has to be did away with completely, or I say restructured in a manner in which the Indian will receive more direct help in place of going through the Bureau and the bureaucratic jungle that it does. The bureaucracy. And this is what is very costly and time-consuming for Indians.

SM: Well, it's costly, of course, for everyone, but then the trouble is that it doesn't seem to be doing what it was intended to do.

LJ: I think in the '75 fiscal budget there was something like two and a half billion dollars allocated for Indian people, and if you dole this out individually, every Indian would receive about $10,000 a year.

SM: In other words, the money is being spent anyway, but it isn't getting to where it needs to do the good?

LJ: By the time it gets to Indian people, it's in the millions then, over a vast area, you know, and we don't get nothing out of it.

SM: Now there are things like this that might be possibilities--you mentioned AIM coming in to help. But then, of course, they would leave again and you'd have to develop some kind of local leadership that would carry on, wouldn't you?

LJ: Right. And this is what's going on right at the present time, and I'm just out of the hospital, and they all know I've retired now. Now they're countin' on me to take this on full time.
SM: Given your health now, can you?

LJ: Well, I don't know. I'll have to take it a little easy. 'Course they know this. See, I've been in this thing so long that they just naturally recognize me as a leader.

SM: Well, that's what I gathered from several people that sent me here.

MJ: I'll tell you something else about this clinic. An old Indian law states an Indian woman marries a white man or colored or a Mexican or another race, she automatically forfeits all her rights as an Indian, and she is to go live like her husband, but she can still receive the benefits herself, you know, but that's all she can receive. None of her children are supposed to be, but then, you see all of them there. They go up there anyway, and they get help, but here now there's this white man sittin' there, when he can afford to take his family to a real doctor in town.

SM: Have you heard of the Menominee situation in Wisconsin? They were terminated in the '50's and finally effective in 1961, I believe, and they have managed now to accomplish restoration of their tribal status. Their rolls were even closed and everything.

LJ: See our rolls and everything's closed.

SM: Well, here's maybe one avenue of hope. There were several people involved up there; one of the outstanding ones was a woman named Ada Deer. Have you heard of her?

LJ: Yes, I've heard of her. They send me the tribal newsletter.

SM: Well, through her efforts and the efforts of many others--she's quick to point out that she didn't do it alone--and their organization they call Drums, they managed to accomplish a reversal of this whole
thing, and now she hopes to get, and they do expect to get, all the rights and benefits restored without the domination by the BIA. She said she had devoted over five years of her life to this struggle, is not going to become tribal chairman, but would like time to go to law school, and to write, and maybe travel through the other areas where other Indian people need help, and where she could help them with her experience. Now there's somebody who might be able to give some advice about how to make improvement in your situation.

LJ: Well, this is the same thing that even my wife here has talked to me about. We sit down a lot of times and talk, and this is what I'da hoped to have done.

SM: You've got to take care of your health.

LJ: I wanta go back into Indian religion, and study that, and practice it.

MJ: The main purpose of all this trouble is the Indians have forgot about their Creator. They're not gonna get any help, and they're not gonna get any place until they get back together and start askin' their Creator to help them.

LJ: We've got to get back spiritually.

MJ: It's gonna be pretty hard because all the other religions got a good start on Indian people, joining different churches.

SM: It splits people up?

LJ: Yeah, splits people up.

SM: If you do get back to the old ways and feel that you're doing better that way, and if you could get some practical day-to-day, how-to-cope-with-bureaucracy kind of advice from people like Ada Deer . . .
maybe you could make it work. They made it work, it can be done.

LJ: Yes, it can be done.

MJ: People got to stick together too. That's the trouble up here. They've inter-married, and it's mostly the full-blood or the real Indians against the ones that have married out of their race.

SM: Maybe that's a place to start, to try to build some solidarity there, among all the people, whether they're full, half or quarter or whatever.

LJ: I went up to Canada last summer, and the Canadian government recognizes heirship through the father's side, and they don't seem to have no problem up there. This is why different ones up there was tellin' me that whenever a white man marries into Indian, you know, he never goes through a right kind of ceremony, he just lives with her, because if he married her, then this cuts her off of her rights. And this has stopped a lot of that, whereas round here, it more or less assimilates us, more and more by inter-marriage. And this is where the whole thing is, it's the full blood against the half breed.

SM: They just don't go down the road together? Maybe that's one of the biggest problems, because if you could get together with a united front, even if there are only 200 of you or 300.

LJ: And this is why lot of them are against me. They say my grandchildren are half white. Well, I can't help that, I didn't tell them.

SM: You're a full blood? All Potawatomi?

LJ: Yes. "You should have talked to them, teach 'em." I said, "I didn't tell them."
SM: There shouldn't be anything necessarily wrong with that either.

LJ: But this is the thing the BIA plays up. See, there's a split faction comes in on this, and the Bureau plays this up, and this is why they stay in business, and that's what the whole thing is about.

SM: Have you got any of your local legislators--senators, representatives who are understanding of the situation?

LJ: Oh gollys, they are very understanding. You tell 'em about it, write to 'em, and they refer all our letters to the Bureau. It doesn't do any good. They're useless, because we don't have no money, we don't control no kind of voting block, and we're just nothing to 'em, except when they're gettin' ready to be elected they come around.

SM: And like your vote.

MJ: And when a war comes, then you gotta go fight, and still you don't have no rights.

LJ: Another thing. In the federal courts, we've even went to court--this is where our decision is laying right now. We have no rights in the federal courts. We Indian people are not protected under the First, Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments.

MJ: Even the judge said that the BIA are dictators over Indian people.

LJ: I've gone to court on this, and I've always tried to pursue the peaceful way.

SM: I wish I had some kind of answer, but I don't have any either, because I know less about it than you do.
MJ: I know the answer. It's for all the Indian people to get together and declare war on them.

SM: Would that be a good answer?

MJ: There would be a lot of us gittin' killed, but it would be better dead than to have to live the rest of our lives like this.

SM: If you could talk to Ada Deer, I think she could make you feel a little encouraged that there would be some hope, because they did do it. There were more of them, and that helps, but they had more dissension too, I suppose, so they had more problems as well as more people.

LJ: They had more resources. They got lumber up there, whereas we're a small tribe.

SM: That's a handicap, I'll agree with you, but, still, maybe that would be a good place to start. It seems we're at the end of our tape, so, thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Jessepe.