Listening to Indians

ERROL LaBELLE,
Assiniboine – Sioux
October 29, 1975
Salt Lake City, Utah

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

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

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

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Sam Myers:
    Today I'm talking to Errol LaBelle, an Assiniboine-Sioux. Did you come from up around the border country of Montana?

Errol LaBelle:
    Yes. I was born on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation in Poplar, Montana.

SM: There's a dam there now, isn't there?

EL: Yes.

SM: And did you go to school there too?

EL: No, I went to school in Pierre Indian School.

SM: Pierre, South Dakota?

EL: South Dakota and Chemawa, Oregon.

SM: Were those boarding schools?

EL: Those were federal boarding schools.

SM: BIA schools?

EL: Yeah, BIA schools.

SM: How did it go?

EL: I didn't like 'em. I didn't like 'em one bit.

SM: You longed for the freedom of back home?
EL: It wasn't that. It was that they were tryin' to take the Indian out of us.

SM: Have they changed a little bit lately?

EL: Yeah. It's more oriented now towards knowing your Indian culture.

SM: So even in your lifetime you've seen quite a change, haven't you?

EL: Definitely.

SM: So you went to these two schools. Did that carry you through high school?

EL: No, I never finished high school. I only went to the eighth grade, then I quit.

SM: But you're in a university now.

EL: Well, that was a long road, that was a very long road.

SM: Have you been working for a while?

EL: Yeah, I was working at anything I could get for the last twenty years, and I finally decided that I didn't like the kind of work I was gettin' so I would get somethin' better.

SM: In other words, then you're not eighteen any more, you've been working for 20 years.

EL: I'm 36 years old.

SM: You started when you were a pretty young man.
EL: Right.

SM: Then you got back in school now. Did you take tests and get a GED?

EL: Yeah, I got my GED first, and then I went to a course that was supposed to prepare me for the courses in college here, and I finally got here. Now I'm here under the GI bill.

SM: Oh, were you in the Service then?

EL: Yeah.

SM: Which part of the Service?

EL: I was in the Navy for three and a half years.

SM: Did you get over in the South Vietnamese area?

EL: No, it was post-Korea.

SM: Oh, that was a little earlier?

EL: After Korea.

SM: Well, you weren't in on that famous landing at Inchon. You got in after that?

EL: No, it was just gettin' down to the last few smokes.

SM: One of those little peace-time breaks we've had this century. You know we've had a lot of wars.

EL: Too many.
SM: Yes. Too many is right. Well, anyway, then you were in the Navy for three and a half years, and you got out and got the GI bill and decided to go back to school, or did that come a little later?

EL: Well, I roamed the country for about 20 years, migrant farm work.

SM: Would you tell us about that, because everybody has all kinds of ideas about it.

EL: Well, when I first started it was pretty bad, but now that they're using Congress-issued standards for migrant workers, or whatever it is, some of them are getting better, but we used to live in, oh, what you might call tarpaper shacks--no indoor plumbing, it was just a little construction so you could get out of the weather. Wherever you were it was extremely hard to get any health assistance if you were sick. Nobody in that nearby city or any general hospital wanted anything to do with migrant workers.

SM: You were just a problem?

EL: Yeah, we were just a problem.

SM: Well then, you can tell us maybe more about that, because most of us never had that chance to learn first-hand like you did.

EL: Well, I started out picking apples in Washington, 'cause I lived there for about five years, and then, after that, California. It was quite a long season there for almost anything, and to Florida for oranges. I stayed there about two years.

SM: All the way to Florida. You really got around.

EL: Sometimes I worked in oil fields, and that was hard work, but the money was good.
SM: A labor job?

EL: Well, I was a floor man, pipe catcher. I was the smallest one, and I had to catch that pipe weighing sometimes over, well, 2,000 pounds, I guess.

SM: What does a pipe catcher do?

EL: Well, it's a hoist thing, and it's got a clamp on it, and they go real fast, and there's a guy way on top. He clamps the clamp on the pipe, and yanks it up, and I gotta make sure that the pipe don't swing around and hit anybody.

SM: So you're way down there at the bottom, and when he gets it off the ground then you grab it?

EL: That thing swings around. It picked me up lotta times and threw me across the floor. For a little guy . . . you have to grab it and put it on the next pipe so they can screw it down.

SM: And then she goes down in the hole they're drilling. Well, that was kind of dangerous, wasn't it?

EL: That was real dangerous.

SM: You got banged up a few times?

EL: Especially when you're only about 100 pounds and that pipe out weighs you.

SM: Quite a bit. How much do you weigh?

EL: Right now I weigh 160. That's just the last couple of years I gained weight.
SM: Before that you were pretty light?

EL: The most I weighed before was about 150, 155.

SM: How tall are you, Errol?

EL: Five foot, six inches.

SM: Well, see, you've had some experiences that are very interesting.

EL: Well, I had to. I never had any family, I didn't know what to do, so I just went and tried to make things happen as they went along. Now, without an education there really wasn't much I could do.

SM: How long did you spend in the oil fields then?

EL: All total I figure about four years, at least.

SM: Did you have any chance during these years to learn about your background, your Indian culture, and so on?

EL: Not really.

SM: You were kind of separated from all those old ties. How about as a child? Did you have anyone, grandmother or father?

EL: Yeah, I was primarily raised by my grandmother.

SM: Did she tell you stories about the old ways?

EL: Oh yeah, she was pretty good storyteller.

SM: Was she Assiniboine or Sioux?
EL: She was Assiniboine.

WM: The Assiniboine people, they traditionally lived in southern Canada, didn't they?

EL: Right along the border of Canada, Montana and North Dakota, all in that area up there.

SM: Beyond the northern plain.

EL: They were nomadic, and so they just moved wherever the buffalo went.

SM: And that was great buffalo country in the old days. In fact, after the buffalo were nearly exterminated in the United States, there were still a few thousand up there in Canada, the bigger woods buffalo type. Is that right?

EL: Right.

SM: It was back before your time, but you may have heard of it.

EL: Yeah. I was tryin' to think. In that area, just about that time, when I was a child, some person wrote a book about the last buffalo that was killed up there.

SM: Did you ever hear about people harvesting buffalo bones after the old killing off of the herds?

EL: Yeah, I heard about it. It seems like some million years ago, though.

SM: Yes, it's not as long ago as we think. It's probably about a hundred years ago, or even less.

EL: Yeah, I remember when I was back on the reservation as a child there
were some white people there. They had stacks and stacks of bones, but I didn't know what it was all about.

SM: But you remember seeing them, big stacks piled up like a hay stack?

EL: Big stacks. I heard they made buttons and fertilizer out of them. I was just a child, it didn't mean that much to me.

SM: Did you ever see a buffalo in the wild up there when you were a kid?

EL: No, only on preserves. In the zoo and in preserves, that's all.

SM: Yes, that's about the only place they are now. There are some wild herds, I guess, in Wyoming, parts of Montana, the Black Hills? Of course they're not really running wild, they're carefully watched and protected, and so on.

EL: That's the only place I've ever seen 'em.

SM: Your grandmother, though, used to tell you stories about the old ways?

EL: Yeah, some of them I remember.

SM: Did you kind of like to listen to her when you were a child?

EL: Yeah, it was interesting, because at that time they were still being ruled by the federal government, and anything that was done for 'em was forced on 'em, whether they liked it or not.

SM: You're speaking of Montana?

EL: Yeah. I remember my grandmother used to tell me that they used to come out in pick-ups, with ropes and horses, and if they tried to run
they'd lasso them, tie 'em up and put 'em on a pick-up and send 'em to school.

SM: That's the way you went to school sometimes if you rebelled. But you did go to two boarding schools too?

EL: Yeah, I went to two of them.

SM: Did they have to lasso you?

EL: Well, I was too scared to run. I didn't know why, all I know is I had to go to school.

SM: Was it a pretty good learning experience in those schools?

EL: I didn't think so. There wasn't anything about it that I liked. The only thing I remember is we were under their strict thumb, and whenever we done anything wrong we were punished for it.

SM: For example?

EL: Well, you couldn't speak Indian. If they caught you, you had to do extra work, like scrub floors or walls, somethin' like that.

SM: You had to speak English?

EL: Right.

SM: Has this changed now?

EL: As far as I know it is changed. I went back to Pierre one time, and now it's predominantly run by the Indians. Most of the teachers and all the staff are Indians.
SM: Well, that would help, wouldn't it?

EL: Right.

SM: At least they'd have understanding and more sympathy for you.

EL: I believe it's even governed by one of the local tribes or two tribes at this school, but it's still under the jurisdiction of the BIA.

SM: What towns in Montana do you remember as a child?

EL: Just Wolf Point and some parts of Canada. We used to go up to Canada to the powwows.

SM: You could just drift back and forth across the border pretty much at will? Did you go through check points?

EL: Well, we went through check points, but they just looked at us and told us to keep movin'. They never paid no attention to us. They just looked us over and that was all.

SM: They kind of figured that you sort of belonged both places?

EL: I guess so.

SM: Well, you know, if you had been suspected of being some kind of problem, they would have quickly paid attention to you, so that's kind of a compliment, in a way. They figured you were dependable people that they didn't have to worry about.

EL: I never thought of it that way.

SM: Well, what are you thinking mostly about these days now? Here you are, you've been through all these experiences from migrant working
and the Navy, these schools, and you're an adult man now. Have you got a family now?

EL: No, I'm gettin' married tomorrow.

SM: Tomorrow? You've got things on your mind, haven't you?

EL: Right. My primary interest right now is to get a better education so I don't have to scrub toilets and floors and walls the rest of my life.

SM: Or pick peas and beans out of the fields?

EL: Right.

SM: It's going to work, too, isn't it? How far are you along in school?

EL: Well, counting the last one this will be my second quarter, but that first quarter was under a different department, but I still get college credits for it.

SM: You've got the GI bill to help with expenses?

EL: Right.

SM: And if you run out of that, you can apply for a BIA scholarship, can't you?

EL: Well, Manpower and Development said they'd help me for two years.

SM: So you've got a couple of aces in the hole there. Now then, what are you going to major in?
EL: Well, I was leaning towards sociology or community health. I really haven't decided on either one of them.

SM: Do you have any plans of working with Indian people as a health officer?

EL: Well, that's really too far away to say. I have thought of it, but, the best-laid plans of mice and men are soon, you know, kaput, so I just plan only as far as I think I can get, and when I get there, plan different, or plan the next step.

SM: But you are convinced that it's going to be a better opportunity to get a job by getting some educational background?

EL: Yeah, I definitely believe that I'll be able to get a better job.

SM: You have a little different experience than some of the younger students who are just starting out at 18 maybe. You have all these other experiences that you've gone through, which leaves you with a very practical approach to the thing, and sort of pragmatic--you're going to see how it works today, and decide tomorrow what to do next.

EL: Well, the only thing I can say about it, it has given me an education that I could never get out of textbooks.

SM: Errol, what classes are you taking now?

EL: Right now it's just math, English composition, and political science. That was just mainly so I can see if I could ... stay in, if I can keep up with college work.

SM: Well chances are you'll find you can, because you survived this far, and if you've managed that you probably can survive through college
experience and get yourself a really good education and a good job somewhere.

EL: Well, I'm trying hard, and I'll find out if I'll make it.

SM: That's going to be a great improvement and a great credit to you for having taken yourself in hand to do it.

EL: Well, I'd say so, yeah, because from what I've been for the last 20 years to what I am now is quite different.

SM: Errol, is your wife from Montana too?

EL: No, she's an Indian from the East coast.

SM: What kind?

EL: She's Mattaponi, a very small, almost extinct tribe from Pennsylvania, and I believe there's some in Virginia too, West Virginia.

SM: Are they connected with any other groups, or related to any?

EL: I don't know. I really don't know much about that tribe.

SM: Did you meet her here at the university?

EL: No, I met her when she was just travelling through.

SM: So, tomorrow's the day. Are you excited?

EL: I'm scared.

SM: You're looking pretty calm, though, for all you're apprehensive.
EL: Outside, not inside.

SM: Can you think of anything else that you want to add now? Did you have a comment to make about one of your experiences as a migrant farm worker?

EL: Yeah. I was in Tampa, Florida. Some college kids started a test case on vagrancy. Just about that time policemen were picking up all transits, and if they couldn't charge them with public intoxication then they were chargin' them with vagrancy. So if you looked a little bit dirty or didn't have the right kind of clothes, it seemed like they would pick you up and charge you with vagrancy, and really there was no way you could defend yourself against that.

SM: Because if you weren't working you might be technically a vagrant?

EL: You were technically a vagrant.

SM: Did you get picked up?

EL: Oh lot of times. Plenty of times. Too many a times.

SM: How did it go then?

EL: Well, it was just a kangaroo court. They said you're charged with vagrancy. Guilty or not guilty? You had to plead guilty because it was the definition then, and you got anywhere from a week to 30 days.

SM: In the workhouse or jail?

EL: In the workhouse.

SM: What did you have to do, work there?
EL: Yeah. They give you two days for every one day that you work, so you could cut your time down.

SM: So if they gave you ten days and you worked five, that was it?

EL: Right. You washed the police cars, mowed lawn, picked up garbage, and they'd give you two days.

SM: Now did you notice any difference in treatment between yourself as an Indian or Chicanos or blacks or whatever?

EL: Down in the South they separated us. The minorities and the whites were separated. But in the North they just threw all races together, including whites.

SM: Did they separate different minority groups in the South?

EL: No, it was minorities all together separated from the whites.

SM: How were you treated?

EL: Let's say indifferently, like we didn't count.

SM: Which is kind of a hard thing to take too, isn't it?

EL: Well, I grew up in that atmosphere, so I just accepted it as normal.

SM: You never expected much of anything different?

EL: I would have been very surprised if I was treated differently.

SM: Now here at the university you're being treated as a respected individual, aren't you?
EL: I'm being treated as a student, not as an Indian student.

SM: They don't give you any special good or bad treatment because you happen to be an Indian?

EL: No, I'm not on anybody's band wagon. I'm on my own band wagon.

SM: Have you had any opinion developed on some of the Indian movements lately? Have you heard of the American Indian Movement?

EL: Well, I'm not a radical or a militant, and I believe that if anything is to be settled it's gonna be settled through courts.

SM: You still have some faith in the system?

EL: Yeah, the system works. It'll work for you if you use it in the correct manner.

SM: If you learn how to. That's one of the things you're doing here is you're taking advantage of the whole thing, and you're going to get some good out of it . . . but, it's time for your class now?

EL: Right. I gotta scram.

SM: All right. I was glad to see you today, and I appreciate your talking to me. Good luck to you, and good luck tomorrow.