LEO LaCLAIR, Muckleshoot
November 22, 1975
Sumner, Washington

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

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

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

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LISTENING TO INDIANS

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Sam Myers:
I'm at the STOWW headquarters, and I'm talking with Leo LaClair.
That's a French name?

Leo LaClair:
A French trapper got over here in this Indian country.

SM: Which tribe are you from, Leo?

LL: My mother's enrolled in the Yakima Tribe, and I'm enrolled in the Muckleshoot Tribe, and according to the Bureau of Indian Affairs records I'm also of Lower Cowlitz blood, Puyallup blood, the Yakima blood, of course from my mother. My mother and father are both Indian, and they had various degrees of blood in them from other tribes, a mixture, so I also have Snoqualmie.

SM: That's an interesting blend.

LL: Like my father's mother was part Metlakatla, and that's up off Alaska.

SM: There are 23 tribes in the association?

LL: Right.

SM: And some of the names I can't pronounce. Is it Shehalis or Chehalis?

LL: Well, I pronounce it Ché-hā-līs. We have the Cowlitz, Chinook, Jamestown, Clallam, the Clallam Tribe, the Lower Elwha of the Clallam Tribe, then Marietta Nooksack, and of course Muckleshoot.

SM: That's one of yours. Is that your main tribal background?

LL: Yes, that's the tribe that I have the most Indian blood of. And
Nisqually, Nooksack, Port Gamble Clallam, another band of the Clallam Tribe, Squaxin Island Tribe.

SM: That was one I didn't know. Squaxin.

LL: It's an island right here. You can't really tell, but it is an island. It's the only tribe that we have in this western Washington that's located on an island.

SM: There are lots of tribes in Washington. South Dakota is mainly one tribe, the Sioux, but here you have two dozen or more?

LL: Right. Then we have the Stillaguamish Tribe, the Suquamish, the Skokomish, Sauk-Suiattle.

SM: Does Seattle come from that?

LL: Not to my knowledge.

SM: But this is different. Sauk-Suiattle.

LL: Then we have the Snohomish, Samish, Skagit, Steilacoom, Shoalwater, Duwamish, and then the Siletz is a confederated band of tribes. The Siletz Tribe is in Oregon, but in this vicinity, and as a matter of fact it's pushing for what they call the Siletz Indian restoration.

SM: They're working for that like the Menominees?

LL: Right. They're in that process at this moment. That's a confederating group of tribes. Then we have the Snoqualmie, the latest tribe that joined STOWW.

SM: Now there are other tribes in the area too, but this association is
made up of the smaller tribes of western Washington—STOWW.

LL: Right. Let's cover ten years in one sentence. Say that these tribes were what they thought were the "have-nots," whereas the larger tribes—we call them larger, but in terms of number they're not—like the Makahs are not a member of STOWW, 600 living on the reservation. You got the Lummi Tribe that doesn't belong to STOWW, you got the Swinomish Tribe that doesn't belong to STOWW, you have the Tulalip Tribe doesn't belong to STOWW. As a matter of fact there's a tribe that is a small tribe that has decided it would be best not for it to join this non-profit corporation called STOWW. They're just working on their own as the Puyallup Tribe, and they're located in the vicinity of the urban center of Tacoma, and the particular chairman of that tribe now is spearheading an effort to set up an urban Indian center, and they do have a facility, and they are moving on, doing good work.

SM: How many tribes are there altogether in Washington?

LL: I guess I would just say there's over 32 tribes in Washington State.

SM: And 23 of them now are in your association?

LL: Well, we have one tribe that is outside of the state of Washington.

SM: That is the Siletz?

LL: We're working with the Oregon tribes. We got Coos Bay, for example. Coos Bay—Umpqua that are downstairs now at our board of directors' meeting, and we're assisting them, and we're hoping that we can help them develop and have an entity like STOWW, a small tribes organization in western Oregon, and they can do the similar projects that we're on, projects that were developed that we're working on now in various areas—the issues that are affecting our tribes. For example,
of those tribes that we talked about, there's half of them that are federally recognized, that have federal recognition, and, take for example, the Snoqualmie Tribe. They are not federally recognized at this time.

SM: The BIA does not recognize them as a tribal entity?

LL: Right. And we have a staff of attorneys in a building adjacent to this main office. We have four attorneys now, one attorney working full time on the Judge Boldt case, implementing that decision, that's his full-time job. We have another attorney working just with the federally recognized tribes, that's her full-time job. That attorney that represents the federally recognized tribes is a Winnebago Indian gal, has her law degree from the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque. Then we have a Colville Indian attorney who works with our non-federally recognized tribes.

SM: Colville. That's over in eastern Oregon?

LL: Eastern Washington. And then we have another attorney that's working with the attorney who is implementing the Judge Boldt Decision, also we have three biologists that provide technical assistance to the tribes on their fisheries programs and projects.

SM: If anyone wonders how you know all these things, it's because you're the executive director of this association, right?

LL: That's my job, yes.

SM: So that's whom we're talking to today. We failed to identify you well enough, and some people would wonder how you had all this information so ready at your fingertips here.

LL: In the programs that we handle, probably by the end of this month, I
would suspect we'll be administering $4,000,000 worth of projects for the tribes that we represent. STOWW represents 23 tribes, and administers these funds for them, which are funded by various federal agencies. For example, out of HEW we are funded by Offices of Native American Programs, ONAP, and we receive our basic funding there. For example, under one project--we call it Tribal Development Grants--last year we provided the tribes with $15,000 so that they could use those funds to set up an administrative structure on the reservation. This year we have more people, more tribes and have had to divide the money more ways, and this year it's $9,250 per tribe.

SM: But the organization has been highly successful so far by bringing together all these people who couldn't do very much individually.

LL: Right. That's correct. For example, my tribe, in program monies, we're handling $450,701.

SM: For the Muckleshoots?

LL: Right. And then project monies--we call it project monies--like we're building a group home. We were funded for $180,000. We received a technical assistance grant from the Farmer's House Administration for housing for $100,000. Then we received some funds from King County community development. Now that's the county that our reservation is located in, King County, supplementing our housing program, for $48,000. Then we were funded out of Economic Development Administration, Department of Commerce, through the Office of Native American Programs, for our recreational job program, where 75% of the money will be spent for labor and 25% for construction costs. That comes to $150,000. Then we have a self-help housing program which is a small grant of $10,000, so this comes up to over $2,500,000. So it's not to say that STOWW is doing everything for the tribes. It's that one of our goals in grouping together as tribes is to help the tribes get on their own feet, develop their own administrative structure, have their own
accounting department, have their own administrators to run their programs themselves, and I find on my reservation the majority of our employees are of the tribe. Like we hired our own biologist, a non-Indian, but the tribe tends to try to hire their own people, and if they don't have the background, then they look for training-type programs for them.

SM: So there's a lot of progress being made then?

LL: Since I'm also the vice-chairman of the tribe, I have this understanding of what we're trying to do there, which I bring with myself to STOWW. I work for 23 tribes, but, at the same time, I'm also working for Muckleshoot too.

SM: And you're vice-chairman of that tribe and executive director of the association?

LL: Right.

SM: And you have a board meeting going on here this morning, don't you?

LL: That's correct.

SM: So they'll be needing your presence soon. Is this report part of the program for the meeting today?

LL: Yes. Every year we have what we call an audit report. An audit was made of our various programs, and this afternoon at 1:30 the auditors will come in and give their report of the audit that they conducted of all of our various programs.

SM: It's all very business-like, isn't it?

LL: It sure is. If you had the opportunity to sit in and observe the
board meeting this morning just for a few minutes, I think you'd notice that we have 23. I'm not sure that there's exactly 23 down there.

SM: At this point one of the other people in the meeting came to get Leo to come down to attend it, so he had to leave, and then I was able to attend the board meeting with him. There were 17 members sitting around the board table discussing the agenda, and then there were 16 other people as visitors and observers, including myself. It was a very business-like meeting, with some people checking on every detail, other people simply being quiet and then voting. STOWW has an extensive plant in Sumner. From the front the building looks like a comparatively small, one-story structure, but at the back, being built on a hill, it is a two-level building with a complete suite of offices of several kinds on the ground floor, and another series of offices on the second floor, and out back, a couple of warehouses, including two mobile health units, and so forth. So they are a very active organization in the thick of trying to promote the welfare of all these small so-called "have-not" tribes of western Washington.