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:

I'm in the county jail at Hibbing, Minnesota, talking to a young Chippewa man, and his name is Michael James Leecy. Is that right, Mike?

Michael Leecy:

Yes.

SM: And Mike, would you tell me where you live?

ML: Nett Lake, Minnesota.

SM: That's north of here?

ML: Yep. About 70 miles.

SM: Is that a reservation?

ML: Yes.

SM: Do you live on the reservation?

ML: Yes.

SM: Is there a town up there?

ML: Closest town is Orr, Minnesota.

SM: How is it then you're in this jail and not one up there?

ML: Well, I was charged in a different county—that would be St. Louis County. I wasn't charged on the reservation. If I was charged on the reservation, I would have been in International Falls jail, or
in Red Lake jail.

SM: Because those are Indian reservation jails, and this is not?

ML: No.

SM: So then, since you were charged off the reservation, they could incarcerate you here?

ML: Yes.

SM: How long have you been here now?

ML: Twenty three days.

SM: Do you want to explain what the charge was?

ML: Well, it's a Mickey Mouse charge. Uh--I didn't have nothing to do with it--it was some younger Indian boys who got in a fight with a few other white boys, and I guess they just had someone to blame it on. Well, it's a long story, really.

SM: Was anyone seriously hurt in the fight?

ML: No. I think it's just a racial matter.

SM: Were you arrested then by Indian police or non-Indian?

ML: Non-Indian, and the non-Indian police, they're prejudiced around there.

SM: This was near Nett Lake, though, where you were arrested?

ML: Yes, and the law just works for the white people, not the Indians.
SM: Were you just off the reservation then when you were arrested?

ML: Yes, I was in the town of Orr.

SM: Oh, in the town nearby the reservation, but it isn't on it?

ML: No.

SM: Were you born up there in Nett Lake, and did you grow up there?

ML: Yes.

SM: Did you go to school there too?

ML: In Orr, Minnesota.

SM: That is not an Indian school?

ML: No.

SM: Do they have an Indian school up there?

ML: In Nett Lake it goes up to ... first to the sixth.

SM: And then you have to go off the reservation to some other school?

ML: Yeah, bus to Orr; it's about a 20-mile drive.

SM: There used to be a Civilian Conservation Camp up at Orr a long time ago, but I don't imagine you remember that?

ML: CC Camp? I heard about it.
SM: But you don't remember it because it was gone, I suppose, before you were old enough to remember.

ML: That was back in the '30's, '40's.

SM: By the way, do you mind if I ask you how old you are?

ML: Twenty nine.

SM: When the people see your picture they'll be surprised, because I don't think you look 29.

ML: I look older in a picture.

SM: Do you? Well, we'll find that out because, if you'll agree, we'll take some pictures of you if we can figure out a way. Actually, we might as well describe the situation here. I'm standing on one side of this barred wall, and you're on the other side, and they won't let us sit down in the same room. And we'll have to figure out some way to get your picture, probably through the bars too. So, anyway, you were arrested and put in jail here. Did you go through the six grades then at Nett Lake school?

ML: Yes.

SM: And then you went to Orr. Did you graduate from high school there?

ML: No I didn't. I went to the ninth grade.

SM: Did you drop out then?

ML: Yes. I took one year of college, University of Minnesota.
SM: You went through the ninth grade? Did you get a G.E.D. diploma then?

ML: No. I just entered college at the university. All you had to take was a written test, and they let you go into it for a year.

SM: Where was that?

ML: The University of Minnesota.

SM: In Minneapolis?

ML: Yeah.

SM: So you could take an entrance exam and you made it. You passed that exam after having only gone through the ninth grade?

ML: Yeah.

SM: That's good, isn't it?

ML: Yeah.

SM: Not too many people do that. What did you register for down there?

ML: AA degree.

SM: Associate in Arts?

ML: Yeah.

SM: Were you aiming at anything in particular?

ML: No, not really. I just wanted to study for my G.E.D., but I was
thrown in jail again, so I quit that.

SM: That was down in Minneapolis?

ML: Yes.

SM: Did you have some other problems with the law officials besides that?

ML: Yes. They used to jump us on the street.

SM: Down there?

ML: Yes.

SM: I'm going down there in a couple of weeks. Are there any people down there you'd like to have me talk to?

ML: I can think of lot of them, but I just . . .

SM: Well, before I leave, if you think of one or two, I'll write their names down and look them up. Well then, you went to the university for about a year, and came back to Nett Lake?

ML: Yes.

SM: What then? What activity were you engaged in from then on?

ML: Well, I come back to Nett Lake and worked for a while.

SM: Where did you work?

ML: Uh . . . construction--Indian housing.
SM: Are they building a housing project up there?

ML: Yes.

SM: Is it a nice one?

ML: Oh yeah, they're all right. Kind of flimsy, but I guess that's all the government's gonna give.

SM: And you worked on those projects?

ML: Yes. Worked on them for about half a year.

SM: That only brings you up to around the age of 20, doesn't it?

ML: Oh, I've been all over--in the Service.

SM: What part?

ML: Army. I was in there through '67, '69. I spent my tour in Germany for a year and a half.

SM: You didn't go to Viet Nam then?

ML: No. I was honorably discharged, then when I got out I was thrown in prison at St. Cloud.

SM: When you got out of the Army?

ML: Yeah.

SM: What was that for?
ML: Aggravated assault. And that was another trumped-up charge. Anyway, the Governor of Minnesota let us out on a pardon.

SM: Let us out?

ML: Yeah, my brother and I. I have a twin brother, his name is Merle Leecy.

SM: Oh, I see. The other Leecy boy that was in here is a twin of yours.

ML: Yes.

SM: He isn't here now, but he was here the other day, I heard.

ML: Yeah, Friday he was here.

SM: How is it that he isn't here now?

ML: He bailed out, and I'm waitin' for him to bail me out.

SM: If he raises the bail, then he can get you out?

ML: Yes. I already have the money, but it's tied up somewhere.

SM: Then if you get bailed out you will be free on bail until the trial comes up, is that the idea?

ML: Yeah. That's on the 25th of this month, of August.

SM: Well, it isn't going to be too terribly long anyway. It isn't like several months, just a few days, since today's the 18th already.

ML: That's an assault charge.
SM: This last one, the one that you were explaining where the boys, young men, or both got in this fight up there in Orr?

ML: Yeah, 16, 17. It was a bunch of old guys that jumped 'em, non-Indian. Not old . . . about 25.

SM: You mean older non-Indian men jumped some teen-age Indian boys? Is that what you said?

ML: Yes.

SM: And you are in here as being blamed for it?

ML: Yes. All the Indian boys, the young Indian boys, came down here and tried to sign complaints, but the prosecuting attorneys, or whoever you go to, just gave 'em the runaround. This always happens north here.

SM: You mean that when they tried to make a complaint . . . ?

ML: They wouldn't accept 'em.

SM: But then you ended up in jail?

ML: Yeah. But then these people that assaulted these young Indian boys, they came down and got all kinds of complaints signed against these Indian boys.

SM: Both factions came down to make out complaints against the other group, and one of the complaints, apparently, was against you then?

ML: Yes.
SM: So then, here you are today.

ML: Well, I think why I am here is because I belong to the American Indian Movement, my brother and I.

SM: You do belong to AIM, both you and your brother?

ML: Um hm.

SM: Have you been active in the movement?

ML: Not too much, but we've been listening to it, and keeping track of it the last three years.

SM: Were you in the BIA take-over in Washington?

ML: No.

SM: Or at Wounded Knee in '73?

ML: No.

SM: But you have been keeping up with the activities and reading about it?

ML: Yes.

SM: Do you know any of the people, like Dennis Banks or Russell Means?

ML: Yes, I do.

SM: Do you know where they are now? I'd like to talk to them too.

ML: No, I wouldn't know. They're all over, and you never know where they're at.
SM: Have you been in any of the protest movements--is that what you'd call them... of the AIM group?

ML: I guess so, but I haven't been in any of 'em.

SM: Your activities, if any, in AIM would be interesting to our listeners, I am sure. I have had other people who have mentioned that they believe in some of the things that AIM stands for; don't like the violence; some just say they are members, and active, sympathetic, different shades of opinion about the whole thing, because it has been very much in the news, you know.

ML: Yes. Yeah, I know the newspaper and news media, T.V., they call AIM criminals and hoodlums, but that's not true.

SM: Do you want to make an explanation of any of their activities or purposes so people can understand it better?

ML: I wouldn't know how to say it then, I'm not a very good talker.

SM: You don't feel like you're an orator? Well, most of us aren't, I guess. If you'll permit me to mention it, I notice you're wearing a Navajo ring. Did you get that in the Southwest?

ML: No, my girl friend got it, I don't know where it was.

SM: It is Navajo, isn't it?

ML: I don't know.

SM: It looks characteristically Navajo, with the heavy sterling silver and a large piece of turquoise--it's a handsome ring. In the Southwest, it's very, very popular--in fact, over the whole United States
now it's becoming popular—which is a sort of development of the last few years. Maybe you've noticed that too. What other jobs or activities have you been involved in besides the construction work up there. We have a few years that we haven't accounted for yet. Any other jobs up there?

ML: Before I went into the Service, I was clerk-typist for the Community Action Program up at Nett Lake. I was there for a couple of years.

SM: Community Action Program? Is that government-sponsored?

ML: Yeah.

SM: You were a clerk-typist for that?

ML: Yeah, through '65, '66, '67, and after that I went in the Service.

SM: Well, that accounts for about six years altogether.

ML: Yeah. Then off and on I was just workin' and livin' I guess.

SM: Mostly up at Nett Lake?

ML: Yeah.

SM: You haven't been roaming around the country too much?

ML: No.

SM: I suppose your experience with the Army in Germany satisfied your urge to travel for a while?

ML: Well, I'd like to travel, but . . . I'm on pardon right now, and I
can't leave the state.

SM: Oh I see, from one of those previous charges?

ML: Yes.

SM: Well, does that aggravate the present condition then--having this other...?

ML: No, it doesn't.

SM: It doesn't have anything to do with this?

ML: No.

SM: Now the man I talked to, who gave me permission to come down and talk to you, you know him, Mr. Bill Tibbetts. He's the probation officer, I believe?

ML: Yes.

SM: He's from Nett Lake too, isn't he?

ML: Yes, he lives in Keewatin.

SM: But he's originally from Nett Lake?

ML: He just got out of the Service about a year or a couple of years ago.

SM: I believe he's a retired Air Force man, isn't he?

ML: Yeah, Air Force, Master Sergeant.
SM: He doesn't look old enough to have been retired from the Air Force either. Maybe there's something about the air up here that keeps people looking younger. Both of you look younger than your years. Do you know Bill very well?

ML: No, I don't. He seems to be a pretty nice guy. I've known him... since he's gotten out--I've known him for maybe two months.

SM: Well, does it help any to have a man like him who is also a Chippewa Indian as your probation officer?

ML: Yes, I guess so.

SM: It makes you feel a little better anyway?

ML: Yeah. He's just... he's workin' with juveniles.

SM: Mostly juveniles?

ML: Yeah.

SM: Now you're not classified as a juvenile anymore?

ML: No. Well, he comes in and tries to help and bring up our spirits a little bit.

SM: Just build your morale up—which is not part of his job necessarily, but because he's a friendly guy.

ML: Yeah.

SM: Well, that's a little bit of improvement over some conditions we've all heard about, wouldn't you say?
ML: Yeah.

SM: Did you ever go to school here in this part of the country, in Hibbing, where they have a junior college?

ML: No.

SM: Just that experience you had down at the University of Minnesota?

ML: Yeah.

SM: Is there anything else about the AIM movement you can tell us, Mike, that we should know?

ML: No, I couldn't. I'd hate to say anything, I might say something wrong.

SM: Of course it's only your opinion, and we're all entitled to our own opinion, and some people think AIM is pretty bad, and some think it's very good, and everyone has his opinion.

ML: Well it has been good to me.

SM: You think it's good because it hasn't hurt you?

ML: It's just these other people that are lost; that cut 'em down. People that don't like 'em, that tell other people, and they just make bad things about 'em, make up bad things.

SM: Do you suppose that some of that reaction is due to some of the activities they have been engaged in, like that Wounded Knee thing, back there in '73, you know, when they took it over?

ML: Yes.
SM: The publicity was very great, you know. That's about all there was in the papers for a while.

ML: Yeah, they really had the government backed into a corner.

SM: And so you can understand why some people were getting very concerned and worried about that.

ML: Yes.

SM: But you still don't think that that's justified—that attitude? Well, let's leave AIM then, and just concern ourselves with you, Mike. You mentioned, I think, that you had been in jail once or twice before. Have you had any other experiences with the law like that?

ML: Many.

SM: Many?

ML: Yes. All Mickey Mouse charges. Well, my brother and I, we sort of play lawmen out there, you know. . . .

SM: On the reservation?

ML: In town. In Orr and all these small towns around the reservation.

SM: Could you explain that?

ML: Well, when Indian people go into town, they get picked on, you know, or jumped by non-Indians. . . .

SM: Do you mean on the street, or in the bars?
ML: Anywhere. And we jump in to stop it. The law won't do anything, all they do is sign complaints against the Indians when they try to fight back, or try to help themselves--and once in a while my brother and I, we come along, and I guess that's why they always have us in jail.

SM: Because you come along to take the part of the Indians then?

ML: Yeah, we take the part of the law, 'cause they don't do anything.

SM: Well now, taking the part of the law, of course, is unofficial. Like I suppose your accusers would say you're taking the law into your own hands?

ML: Um hm. We have to. I don't like to see people getting picked on. Most of these non-Indians are all trouble-makers. You go into a bar or restaurant, and they say derogatory things to Indians.

SM: Have you any specific cases in mind that you'd like to describe? I think if we describe these, maybe it will help. Or don't you have much hope for that?

ML: No, it's gonna keep on going on.

SM: Do you think so?

ML: Yes, until we get our own power of the law.

SM: On the reservation?

ML: Well, we have it now, but still we don't have no power. Like, for instance, when we had that trouble down at the dock. Well, the non-Indian deputy, he signed complaints against the Indians, but the
Indian deputy, he didn't do a thing—he didn't even...

SM: You do have Indian law officers then?

ML: Yes, but they only have so much power. They can pick up their own kind, their own people, but they seem not to be able to pick up non-Indians.

SM: Even on the reservation?

ML: Oh, never known of a case of them pickin' up a non-Indian on the reservation.

SM: Or off, as far as that goes?

ML: Yes.

SM: And so you get discouraged about the equality in the enforcement of the law. Is that it?

ML: Yes, it's real bad.

SM: So then you and your brother have gotten into several of these scrapes because you were trying to defend Indian groups in the town near the reservation there?

ML: Yes, and I always see that the non-Indians are in the wrong.

SM: You always see that? Well, would you admit that that's prejudice?

ML: Yes, it's a real... it's a racial problem.

SM: From both sides?
ML: No. Non-Indians. They always cause the trouble?

SM: If they were fair, then there wouldn't be any trouble?

ML: I think there's always gonna be trouble.

SM: Do you?

ML: Yes.

SM: I was hoping maybe we could get over it somehow.

ML: Yes. Well, if they give the power to the Indian law enforcement officers that're pickin' up white people, he'd be gone. He'd probably be shot or...

SM: Oh, I see what you mean. If the Indian law enforcement officer arrested some non-Indian, then he wouldn't keep his job.

ML: Yes. If he got the reputation for doing that, he'd be shot some way or fired. People are just lost up on reservations. About 90% of the Indians up there don't really know what's goin' on.

SM: One Indian woman said that in this particular town where she went to high school, she ran into a lot of discrimination, but then her brother went to the same school ten years later, and he said he didn't notice any discrimination. There would not be a possibility of a change like that in a small town near a reservation?

ML: Well, probably they didn't do it in front of him. Maybe he was dressed in a different way, or ran around with non-Indians.

SM: Well, he wasn't conspicuously an Indian, if that's what you mean.
ML: Well, in a way. Maybe he didn't act like an Indian, maybe he was an Indian.

SM: Maybe because he didn't look so much like an Indian? Is that what you're saying?

ML: Yeah, that's what I think. Could be many other things, but.

SM: Well, you seem to be quite discouraged about the possibility for any improvement in relations then, don't you Mike?

ML: Yes, I do. It's always gonna be this way.

SM: Don't you think we almost have to have some hope for making it better, though?

ML: Yes, we're gonna have to, but.

SM: You don't have too much now, I guess.

ML: No.

SM: You think AIM is going to help, though?

ML: We've done a lot right now.

SM: Already?

ML: Sure. Like the programs on the reservation. I don't think they would've gotten these programs if it wasn't for AIM.

SM: You see now, most of us don't know about that. Are there any programs in particular?
ML: Like Indians are gettin' sawmills now, gettin' more programs, you know.

SM: And those things help with employment?

ML: Yes.

SM: How many times would you say you've been involved with the law then altogether, Mike?

ML: Twenty times, thirty times.

SM: Twenty to thirty! I guess you can't help but gain experience if it's 20 or 30 times. But I suppose then each time makes it a little bit more difficult because of the record. Is that true?

ML: Yes. But I'll keep on doing it if I see wrong.

SM: If you see things that are unfair that you think are wrong, then you will keep on doing what you have been doing?

ML: Yes. I know it's wrong what they do, non-Indians.

SM: Can't you think of any way that we can make constructive progress so we could sort of bring an end to some of this unfairness then--law officers with more power on the reservation, is that what you had in mind?

ML: And off the reservation.

SM: And off too?

ML: Yes, and to improve these court systems. All they do is lie, every
one of 'em. There's always a Gestapo—we have one right up from Nett Lake to Hibbing right here, a Gestapo.

SM: How far is Nett Lake from here?

ML: Sixty-five, seventy miles.

SM: Straight north, almost?

ML: Yes.

SM: What do you mean by Gestapo?

ML: Well, they're all in a . . . there's a clique, you know, operating on the reservation.

SM: Oh, do you mean Indian people?

ML: Yes. Well, our RBC has somethin' to do with it. They're really lost.

SM: What is RBC?

ML: That's the Reservation Business Committee. They're like the governing body, they are the governing body, and they're all lost. They don't know what's goin' on.

SM: They're supposed to be the governing body, but they don't seem to know what's going on, you say?

ML: Yah. They think that the law is fair, you know. I wouldn't know how to explain it, but when an Indian gets in trouble outside . . . like off the reservation, they say, "Well, why don't you behave, you know, and stay home," and if something happens to them, if
they're discriminated against, one of the older people, they don't know . . . what to say, or they'll just keep it quiet.

SM: Do you mean they sort of accept it?

ML: Yah.

SM: But you don't like to accept it?

ML: No, because it's wrong, and it's always . . . they don't stand up, and it's always gonna be happening.

SM: Well, looking back over your own experience now, have there been any of these instances where you might have been wrong yourself?

ML: No.

SM: You don't think so?

ML: No.

SM: It was always one of those other situations that you've been describing that's been the real cause of the problem?

ML: Yes. And then they say my brother and I go around causing trouble. But that's not true. They think we're the type that are aggressive, you know, and just go up and start hitting on someone. No, we don't do that. Once in a while I do when I get real mad.

SM: Well, you seem to be a very pleasant young man standing here talking to me. It surprises me that, with the pleasant manner that you have, you've been in all these situations. But then you lose your temper, like you said, a few times when you see things that you think are wrong?
ML: Yeah.

SM: We're coming down towards the end of this tape. How would you like to wrap it up? Do you have some comment you'd like to make, or message that you'd like to deliver to people, to Indians, non-Indians, whatever? You feel strongly about the injustices you've seen, the unfairness that you've noticed, and you don't hesitate to take action to correct it, even at the expense of being arrested 20 or 30 times, as you said. Right?

ML: Yes.

SM: Well then, do you have any advice for us that we could follow that would make things better?

ML: I wouldn't know how to put it. Maybe you can ask me some more.

SM: Well, one thing you already have said would be to have the Indian law enforcement officers have more authority, more power, right?

ML: Yeah, they could give them more power, but I doubt if it would work.

SM: But if they did, and if they exercised that power to arrest Indians and non-Indians alike when they are wrong, that would help a little?

ML: Yes.

SM: Because you have a feeling that the Indian officers would be more fair than the non-Indian ones?

ML: Yes, I think so.

SM: Like, for example, Mr. Tibbetts, your probation officer, has been
helpful and thoughtful to you, as you said at the beginning, even comes down to help.

ML: Well, this law and order—he goes just so far too, you know. I think he knows he doesn't have any power. Well, I think he knows that Indian law enforcers don't have any power—just to their own people.

SM: And then, the business committee . . . how did you say that?

ML: The Reservation Business Committee?

SM: You don't have too much hope for their success, either?

ML: No.

SM: Because they don't seem to run the reservation the way you'd like?

ML: That's true. They call 'em "government puppets."

SM: So then you feel that they don't perform in your interests like they should?

ML: No.

SM: I suppose in some cases they would be people like that, and then in other cases people that would agree with you, don't you imagine?

ML: Yeah. We need young people on the RBC.

SM: Most of them are not young?

ML: They're all old.
SM: Now over on this other reservation I was at the day before yesterday, some of them were your age, at least two were.

ML: Um hm. How are they doin'?

SM: Well, they seem to be doing a little better, although, what should I say, they have opinions somewhat sympathetic toward yours. They haven't carried it that far, I guess. But there was some criticism of their committee too, I could detect, and yet, generally speaking, they were more hopeful, I think, than you are. I suppose your experience has helped to crystallize your opinion.

ML: Yes, you never know who's a racist.

SM: Well, Mike, we're just about of tape, so I want to say thanks very much, and the best of luck to you in any event.

Note: The following is an excerpt from the October 5, 1976, issue of the Hibbing Daily Tribune, Hibbing, Minnesota.

"Killed was Michael Leecey, 30, Nett Lake. His twin brother, Merle, is in stable condition in Virginia Municipal Hospital with a bullet wound in the abdomen.

The brothers reportedly got into a fight with Orr constable, Philip Christensen, outside the municipal liquor store, between 9:00 and 10:00 p.m., Saturday."