RICHARD LEES, Chippewa

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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 talking today to Mr. Richard Lees. Dick, did you grow up here in the St. Louis area?

Richard Lees:

No, I have not basically. I am a half-Chippewa and half-Irish party that came over to talk to you today. I was born in the Pipestone, Minnesota, area. That's Pipestone where the sacred pipe grounds are, and of course I lived there until I was about seven years of age, and then my father left the reservation with my mom, and we went to the Lake of the Ozarks area; came to the Missouri area, and lived around the Lake of the Ozarks for a number of years in numerous towns, moving from one town to another because of some problem or another that occurred--my dad could not find a job, or they did not identify with him.

SM: Did your father look more like a Chippewa Indian than you do?

RL: Yes. He was full blooded, and my mother was Irish.

SM: You don't look as Indian as your father must have, then?

RL: That's true.

SM: Did he find that he ran into discrimination as far as getting jobs is concerned?

RL: He certainly did. He ran into all kinds of discrimination, discriminatory things, taking one menial job after another because nobody would hire him because of probably his ancestral trait.

SM: Did you grow up then speaking both English and Chippewa?
RL: Yes.

SM: So you can still speak both languages?

RL: Yes.

SM: Well, how do we say "hello" then in Chippewa?

RL: Well, there are four ways that you can say hello in the Chippewa language. There is one that you can say Ah-lo-ka, which is a derivative of the Sioux, and it actually fell over into the Chippewa people and they use that also as a hello. There was Nu-ee-ge-nah, which was another way of saying hello. It was a greeting, a complimentary greeting. There were two other ones. I find these probably are the most common that you'll find. I think in the factors of languages, the lingual tongue, depending on where you came from around the Minnesota area, like in the Mankato area they speak it one way, and there's a different influx of the language.

SM: What were those other two words?

RL: Well one is a family greeting which was used in our family, and the other language is really a gone language. It's never used anymore. The two most common are the two that I just spoke to you.

SM: Ah-lo-ka and Nu-ee-ge-nah. Sounds like some of the names of lakes and towns up in northern Minnesota.

RL: Actually a lot of your lakes in the area were named from your Indian derivative. Some of the old languages they took words from it and named it because of one thing or another, and I think you'll find that probably more of the language is cast into the ground and into the waters in the Minnesota area than you will in anything.
SM: More about your own personal background before we go on to other things. Did you start school at Pipestone?

RL: No, I did not. I started school at the Lake of the Ozarks area in a small town in Camden County, where I lived for a number of years in the county, moving from one small town to another. And ran into quite a few problems, probably in the background, because some of my brothers and sisters have very definite Indian traits, and of course we do not. The younger brother very definitely has the background of the Indian—the dark hair, the darker face, and the sisters in the family also. But my older brothers are all dark complexioned, and have the black, matted hair.

SM: Then even as a school child you began to notice discrimination?

RL: Well, I would say yes, there was an awful lot of discrimination. There were some very bad things that were cast around, such as "how" and such as "Where did you leave your pony" and "Do you still live in a wickiup or in a tepee," and things of this type, and the ridicule that went along with it was not an easy thing. And this is probably one reason why my father moved so readily and steadily around the state.

SM: Did you speak both English and Chippewa when you began school?

RL: Well, we spoke strictly Chippewa at home. There was never another language that was passed at home. My father spoke it all the time, and my mother actually picked up the language from my dad and spoke it out of pure respect, and carried his traits and lived his life the same as he did, or what he would have expected of a woman of his own tribe.

SM: How do you account then for your having learned English? Was this
from your friends, from contacts outside home?

RL: No. My English was learned through the school systems predominately. They didn't understand the Chippewa, so consequently I got into the English language more and more, and consequently I tried very, very hard over the period of years to retain my own language, which sometimes I speak at home. I married a German girl, and we have a number of children of our own, and my children understand Chippewa, and of course they speak English as well.

SM: But then you had probably some language handicaps as a first grader?

RL: Well, I had some tremendously bad handicaps as far as the language was concerned, because I didn't identify with probably some of the meanings of the words, and they were very, very difficult, because there is a tremendous difference in the lingual sounds and enunciations in the Indian language and in the American language.

SM: Do you mean difficulty in pronouncing some of the sounds?

RL: Yes. Very much so.

SM: Like the difficulty a non-Indian would have to pronounce all the sounds in the Chippewa language?

RL: That's true.

SM: Then after getting started in school, you apparently succeeded pretty well, because here you are doing fine right now, but what was the background of your life after that?

RL: Well, at an early age my mother passed away, and my father, at that point, was taking care of 14 children—there's 12 boys and 2 girls in
the family. And an aunt of mine, on my mother's side, wrote a letter to the good members of the church around the Lake of the Ozarks area, saying that Father was an unfit individual to raise the children, and that we should be taken from him. And under some adverse circumstances the children were taken away. All of us were brought here to the St. Louis area and put in the Missouri Baptist Children's Home on Fee Fee Road at St. Charles Rock Road, where I was for nine years. After I left the home—I was adopted into another family—we all got together again in later years. I lived four houses away from my younger brother and younger sister, and never knew that I was related to them at that time. So it was kind of a funny situation. We felt as though some of the family had gone back home, and some had stayed here, and some had been adopted in other families. Over the years we finally did get back together again, and my dad had subsequently moved back to the Lake of the Ozarks and had lived there and worked in a sawmill or lumber mill for probably 55, 57 years at that point.

SM: Well, what happened next in your young life as a child? Can you remember that pretty well?

RL: Well, yes I can. Of course, being adopted into another family, the present family at that time by the name of Lees.

SM: Before that you were in the Missouri Baptist Home for nine years?

RL: Yes, but a portion of that I spent at Missouri Baptist Hospital, the old Missouri Baptist Hospital here in town. When I came here I was quite ill—had ricketts, was having inner ear problems, had double mastoid on both ears at the time, and spent the biggest part of my time at Missouri Baptist Hospital here in St. Louis.

SM: And then the Baptist home finally found a foster home for you?
RL: Yes, they did. An application had been made for adoption by a party who had never had any children, residents of the University City area, and I was adopted into this family. While living there with them, and living three or four doors away from a younger brother and younger sister who were adopted into another family, although not knowing that they were relatives, we grew up together, became very fast friends. I think probably it was from the family heritage background more than anything else that we became so close, and consequently at that point I went through some of the University City schools.

SM: You actually grew up then with friends down the street who were your brothers and sisters and you didn't know it?

RL: That is correct. The parents that adopted me at that time were trying to make a life for me, I assume. I've finally begun to realize this over a number of years, and trying to erase all of the other things that preceded their adoption of me. And of course they never did tell me, or they never did tell the boy and girl down the street that were adopted into another family, that we were related to one another. So it became a very serious situation once we found out. As a matter of fact, the day that I got married I found out that the fellow I had grown up with three doors down the street was a brother, because he appeared at my wedding.

SM: It must have been a shock.

RL: Well, I don't know which was the bigger shock—getting married or finding a brother at that point, all on the same day.

SM: Is this where you got your name Lees?

RL: Yes, that's where I got my name Lees.
SM: Is this a case of good intentions but not quite understanding what you would have preferred on their part?

RL: I believe in my own mind that they were doing what they thought was best, what they thought was right. In the earlier stages of my lifetime I probably would have said no. I resented it more and more, and probably the older I got, and then finally I realized that maybe I was not resenting what they were doing, but was resenting what I thought they should have been doing. And they gave me a very good lifetime, as far as raising me, and they gave me everything that an individual could want, and subsequently adopted another younger girl at a later date.

SM: Indian also?

RL: No, she is not. She came from another children's home; had no background of Indian. She's Scotch and Irish, and my fosterparents are Scotch and German, and so the intention, I think, was good. All the intents that there were, I think, were very, very good, although in my own mind I didn't truly believe that they should have said, "Well, your family is dead. There are no living relatives." Never told me where I lived; never told me where I came from, or anything. So it was to my own benefit that I find some of these items out.

SM: Their name was Lees. Do you have a name in Chippewa?

RL: Yes. My Christian name in the Indian is Clovis, first name, middle name, James, last name Wood. Now, I am a Gezek, that's last name, first name is Na-gana, last name Gezek.

SM: Na-gana Gezek--that would be the Chippewa, and your Christian name is Clovis James Wood. And now Richard Lees.
RL: That's right.

SM: You have more names than most people.

RL: Well, I guess maybe I've been fortunate.

SM: Na-gana. That's a nice sound.

RL: It is. My father's name was Nash-ka Gesek, and, of course, if you are born into a family of Indian people, everybody in our family is a Gezek, but you must carry a first, given name, so they took the first Christian name, which was Clovis, and threw it away, because it didn't have a very good connotation for the family, and so they called me James. So I was Jimmy Gezek, and that's what I was known as when I got back with the family again. And my younger brother, whose name was Roy, is named Roy Gezek.

SM: Did you get to know your father again?

RL: Oh yes.

SM: Did he call you Na-gana when he was feeling severe towards you?

RL: Well, it's a rather funny thing. I can't remember any time after getting back with my dad that he ever raised his voice in severity. Very placid people.

SM: Isn't this the characteristic of Indian people toward their children, a sort of indulgence, a gentleness that we're not familiar with in white society?

RL: I think it is. I really don't like to use the term "white society." I think we can say non-Indian people at this point. I think when you
begin to think about the Indian punishment factors, there was no physical punishment as far as father to son in our Indian culture. The way a child was punished is he was restricted from doing something; he was restricted from having something. Dad said at one time, "I want you to go down to the creek, and I want you to remove all the large boulders out of the creek so that the water flows bigger." And at that point I said, "Well, if I do that, you know, can we go to town?" He said, "Yes," so I went down and we moved a couple of the big rocks, and I went back up to the house and I said, "O.K., it's time to go to town." He said, "Not until we go back and look at the spring bridge." So we went down to the bottom, and the rocks weren't moved, and he turned on his heel and went back to the house, and we didn't go to town. But I think that physical punishment as far as whipping or spanking or whatever, as you know it in the non-Indian culture, was not an accepted thing in the Indian people. They indulged their children; they restricted them and took things away from them that they really wanted, and kept them from doing things that they really wanted. I can relate a story which is very, very close to me and Oliver Red Cloud's family of the Sioux Nation, whose son at 12 years of age asked his father for a spotted pony. And his father said, "If by the time you are 17 you have gone through your manhood rights, you have accepted the responsibilities and undertaken the things that you should by that time, you will have a spotted pony." And, of course, unfortunately, it got to the point where he became a militant individual—I'm searching for a word which I can't find at this point—became very, very outspoken; would not do anything that anybody asked him to do, and by the time he reached the age where all the other boys were receiving ponies, he asked his father for a spotted pony, and his father turned and went back in the house and that was it, and he never has owned a pony. So these things, I think, you have to accept as punishment factors. I never heard my father raise his voice. Whenever he and my mother would have a dispute, they would leave the house, go back down to a spring that we
had about a mile behind the house, be it summer, winter, whatever, and when they came back they would be hand in hand, coming up the path together. Now when they would get to the small chicken house that we had in the back, of course then he would assume his role as the head of the family, and she, in turn, would be directly behind him coming up the path. But if you looked out the back door, you could see them coming hand in hand. It was not an uncommon thing.

SM: So then you went through the University City schools, and then did you live the rest of your life here in the St. Louis area?

RL: No, I haven't. I've moved from here back to Minnesota, and I stayed in Minnesota, and my father had remarried by that time and had seven children by his second wife. She was a full-blooded Choctaw Indian girl.

SM: Living in Minnesota?

RL: They didn't meet there, but he took her back there at this point, and so, very shortly after that, they probably moved to Anadarko. I don't know where they went from there, because they disappeared for about two years; went from Minnesota to the Anadarko area, I believe, and then back to the Lake of the Ozarks, and over the number of years their children grew up. I have brothers and sisters that were 16 and 17 and 18 and 19 years old at that time, and the youngest one is now 28. And the woman that my father married passed away, and he became quite despondent. We had moved to the Lake of the Ozarks, so I moved him into our house, and he was with us for a number of years. When my mother died, he walked out of the house, and put a postal padlock on the door and never did go back. Left all the Irish linen and all the Irish things, which had no consequences to him by any means. But he wore his hair long; tied a scarf around his head all of the time; buckskin shirt, black and white blanketrobe coat, and
that's all he ever wore all his lifetime that I can remember.

SM: He looked like an Indian?

RL: Exactly. And I think probably if he had got his hair cut, taken off his buckskin shirt, put on a normal, non-Indian type wear shirt, and worn some other type of a coat or jacket, I think he would have done very well.

SM: Had less resistance?

RL: I think he would have obtained less resistance, yes, all the way through. Of course I ran into a tremendous amount of resistance when I first pursued into the background of the family, because nobody wishes to tell me anything.

SM: Did they consider you sort of an outcast?

RL: Well, yes they did, but I didn't really mean it from that respect. The records burned at the Missouri Baptist Children's Home. Versailles, which is the county seat of the small community we lived in around the Lake of the Ozarks, had a massive fire, burned all the records. Subsequently the record books were very, very difficult to find, going into the background. And so I think that when I finally did reach the point where I was beginning to pursue into the background and really got back to the original Indian culture as I always wanted to do, I think that I came upon a closed door immediately from the Chippewa people; from the Ojibways, the Ottawas in the area in which we had originally lived. And a number of years passed—like three years—before probably I was accepted as an individual who really had lived there at that time. Probably had one of my brothers, who was dark of skin and hair, gone they would have accepted him overnight, but, under the circumstances, my complexion
and features were very, very difficult for them to cope with.

SM: I could say, for the benefit of our audience, that you could pass for just about any racial background. Of course, as soon as we know that you are a Chippewa Indian, then we keep trying to see it in your features and so on. This background of your growing up is a great story in itself, actually, like many that have been turned into novels of children's lives. And you have dug into the family background until you know who the people were, where they are, and so on?

RL: Yes. On my father's side of the family I can go back 15 generations, all through a four-square mile area right outside the Pipestone grounds. All of the grandparents on his side of the family were there. My father was a shaman, gave his medicines, cultures totally up when he left the Minnesota area. Why he left I don't know; where he came by with my mother I don't know. It was never spoken of, never talked about. One small fragment of it I finally got in the later years when my dad was about 89 years old--that she was traveling north with a fur trapper at that point--and this is all I could get out of it. But, consequently, in getting back with the people, I know where all of my relatives are buried at this point, which is very uncommon, because they bury them just wherever it happens to be--they don't have regular burial grounds in some of the areas. Some places do, some places don't. But in our area, there is a family plot where all of the Gezeks are buried.

SM: Up at Pipestone?

RL: Yes, up by Pipestone. And of course our family spans from the Pipestone, Minnesota, area, the Wisconsin Dells, and into the Dakotas, and you'll find Gezeks almost throughout those areas.

SM: How is it that your family, a Chippewa family, lived in the Pipestone area and in Wisconsin and out in the Dakotas. Is there an explanation?
RL: Well, I think there is. Originally the Gezeks, some of the old, old, old-culture people, began intermarrying into the Ottawas, the Ojibways. Of course they were very, very close in our own area, and some of our people, some of the family, were with lumber companies, and so, consequently, they moved with the mill, as the lumber mills moved. They were very extremely good, top-men; as a matter of fact, did an awful lot of the topping of the big trees, so they would go with the mill, and wherever the mill went, the family went, of course. So I think this is why we're spread out, and not in the traditional areas.

SM: And of course this has happened much more as time has gone by, hasn't it?

RL: Yes, it has.

SM: After becoming an adult then, and finding out what the family was, where it was, and who you really were, you then became more interested in your Indian background?

RL: That's correct.

SM: And you have pursued this quite thoroughly since?

RL: Yes, I have. In the last 15 to 18 years, I have lectured school assemblies, civic organizations, trying to get the non-Indian people to accept the assimilated Indian who has been sent from the reservation to live in a non-Indian community. And consequently, over the period of years, I have touched a lot of people who are also of Indian descent, of Indian blood. We have established a rather home base here in St. Louis, which is called the Association of the American Indian, and we're located at 603 Rue St. Dennis, in the Florissant area. We have an association there that is represented by 12 tribes,
many of the people are 1/8, 1/4, 1/2, and some of them are full bloods. Consequently we cover a very, very wide span across the country, from the Seneca and Iroquois to the Cherokee in the South, from the Apache to the Cherokee in the Carolinas. We have Chippewa and Ottawa people. All of us are trying to acquaint people with Indian customs, and we have really gotten into it very wholeheartedly. We want everybody to understand that we are people trying to do what we should be doing for our families, as well as what they do, in holding a job and getting a job. And I think it's a very bad context whenever you say, "I'm of Indian descent," immediately—and you can put this as a parenthesis—they immediately say, "alcohol." It's a common thing, and of the 300 or more Indians who came to the St. Louis area within the last 15 months, there probably are three or four left in the St. Louis area, because when they come here they can't afford to live in a good community; they live in the ghettos; they live in the housing projects; they live in the lower eastern section of the St. Louis area, metropolitan area; predominately a place that they don't identify with. So, in turn, invariably what they do is they will turn immediately and go back to the reservation, which is the Indian's blanket, per se. This is the place that he's not hassled. Nobody bugs him at all—he does what he wants, he comes when he wants, he leaves when he wants. Nobody has anything to say about him at all in this area. So this is his security blanket. We don't want to remove the security blanket, but we want to build a steeper hill between our civilization as we know it now, and their civilization as they know it now, because we want to make it harder for them to go back, and assimilate them into our society, and help them in some way in acquiring jobs, finding a place to live. When they come in off the reservation, we'll afford them a place to stay, and we'll pursue in the leads to try to get them located in a job, transportation, and also into the association.

SM: Not only do you want to make it harder for them to go back to the reservation—I think the connotation is, "give up,"—but also to make
it easier for them to succeed.

RL: That's right. The reason for me saying that I want to make a bigger hill for them to go up, is that when we get them here, we have an association of people that they can identify with, and who will understand their feelings. Then, consequently, it will make it easier for them to assimilate into a society as you know it. Again, as I said, when an Indian boy comes here from the reservation, he loses his proud heritage, because he's a stranger, in a totally foreign civilization, where he doesn't identify with the people, he doesn't identify with jobs, he doesn't identify with the densely populated areas, he doesn't identify with the fast traffic, he doesn't identify with the high prices of food—although if you want the highest prices of things in the world, go to the reservations some time, because that's really where it is high. But I think that these things make it so difficult for the Indian boy or the Indian man who comes here. He possibly does not have enough money to live in a proper manner, and consequently when he gets here, all of these obstacles that he has to overcome—you'll have to excuse the expression—he says, "To hell with it," and he goes back home. So I think these are the problems that we've incurred with a lot of the people that have come to the St. Louis area, men and women alike.

SM: Then you and your organization are trying to help, not only in theory, but in specific concrete details with individual people?

RL: That's right.

SM: Maybe we can all contribute a little through understanding if nothing else, to overcoming this kind of handicap which people are burdened with.

RL: Well, I think there's a thought for everybody at this point. I think
I should not disdain you, or ridicule you of your religion, of your race, of your color, or of your beliefs, nor do I think that anybody else should. I feel as though—and we'll use a Christian factor—that the good Lord put us all here for the same purpose. I think that the Great Spirit put us where we were in the same purpose. But I think that basically what you're talking about is if we can make it easier for an Indian family to come to the St. Louis area, and where he will be accepted with an open hand, an open heart, in preference to being shut out because he is a drunkard, he is an alcoholic, he is unstable on the job. The majority of the Indian people have never had jobs, so how can they be stable on the job? They've never even had the background of being able to do this. I know of two lumber mills in the North Country that were run by Indians for a number of years, and then all of a sudden they brought in a white, non-Indian—here I am saying "white" again—a non-Indian efficiency expert, which caused the mill to go down hill. They're only doing about 50% of the production now that they were doing when the Indian ran it. That was in the Wisconsin area. And, speaking of the Wisconsin area, if you'd been around the Wisconsin Dells area at all, the Indian was taken from an area called, I believe it was Lac ver de Sioux, which was the Lake of the Sioux, and he was put into an area which was very barren, desolate, sandy, withered trees, pines area. And at that time, Lac ver de Sioux area was a plush virgin wilderness, and at that time one of their great orators arose and made a tremendous plea; a marvelous speech, and said that "Within 50 years the Great Spirit will again smile upon my children, and replenish our earth again," and within 42 years the river changed its course naturally, by itself; it made the Lac ver de Sioux area they had originally come from by the lake, a barren, desolate area, returning it to sand and the withered trees, and created an area called the Wisconsin Dells area which is now, of course, a marvelous, beautiful forest area, Wisconsin Dells.
SM: Thousands of people go there every year because it's such a beautiful spot.

RL: Well, the government is now beginning to reclaim a portion of it, a little at a time, but Wisconsin Dells was originally an area where the Indian lived, and, of course, the Indian predominantly owned it. They used to rent all the buildings out in the area, and now, of course, the non-Indian people have moved in and bought the buildings, and they turned it into a tremendously big tourist attraction. But that is probably one of the oldest stories that you'll hear from the area.

SM: Are there Indians still involved in the area around Wisconsin Dells?

RL: Oh yeah.

SM: Do they own the land yet?

RL: Some of them still own the ground there, still operate stores there. One of them has a very small store there, I understand, and it is a craft store. Up until about four years ago the great, great grandson of Sitting Bull lived at Wisconsin Dells, and was a member of the tourist attraction factors of Wisconsin Dells.

SM: What tribe of Indians was this in that area of Wisconsin?

RL: Well, that was Sioux in that area right there, and, of course, they were the derivative, I think, of the Assiniboin. That was not the Teton Sioux or the Hunkpapa or the Oglala or any of that, but there was a boundary line area there that was Sioux. Now if we say the family that lived there a number of years ago was the great, great grandson of Sitting Bull, then that would have been Hunkpapa Sioux, because he was Hunkpapa Sioux.
SM: Well, back here in the St. Louis area, Dick, where you have been quite a while. You're in the real estate business?

RL: Yes, I'm in the real estate business.

SM: But you mentioned the site of your headquarters for the Association of the American Indians over in Florissant. Now if some of our students wanted to look into this further, if they wanted to come over there, would that be possible for them?

RL: Well, we are in a state of renovation of the building. We now occupy a building called the Archambault House, which dates back to 1858, and we are now in the process of plastering, and we have put in a furnace and new water pipes and lavatories and things of this type in the building. But the building dating 1858 was not as a matter of record in 1857, but Archambault had a trading post on the Wind River in Sioux country, and the great, great granddaughter of this gentleman is still living--lives in the Florissant area, and, through the auspices of the Historical Society of Florissant, and through numerous other agencies too many to mention at this point, I would like to say we would totally be in debt for the rest of our lifetime to Mrs. Rosemary Davidson of the Florissant Historical Society who, I think, deserves a tremendous place in heaven for what she does. We're in a state of renovating the building, and we plan to have a shop also classed as a beadwork, featherwork, customs, library, everything is a proposed plan for the building. But, of course, we're probably talking three to five years from now by the time we do this, because we are a non-profit organization, as well as is the Florissant Historical Society. Everything that we do, money is allocated out of each individual member's pocket to do. So what we do need is we need as much help as we possibly can get from that standpoint.

SM: Financial help? Do you need hands to help too?
RL: Yes, I think that would be a tremendous thing. They've done this with the Meyer house.

SM: Do you use non-Indian hands?

RL: Oh, absolutely.

SM: In other words, our students, of whatever background, are welcome.

RL: Very welcome. Our association is not restricted to people of Indian descent. We have, over the number of years seen the other Indian associations around the country, in Kansas City and Chicago and places of this type, where the Indian runs the organization, the Indian is the only one who has a vote, the Indian is the only one that can make the by-laws. We felt as though this was wrong, and I may be wrong in this, and I may be inferring something in a non-Indian thought, but I think we have a group of people that are all going in the same direction--our association. Some of the other associations across the country are continually fighting with one another. There is no common ground for them to stand on. We have a common ground in understanding that we are all interested in identically the same thing--preservation of the culture, preservation of the language, preservation of the religion, preservation of the music. All these items we are interested in preserving. We have an open membership, whether it's an Indian or Indian descent, a non-Indian husband or non-Indian people, or whatever it may be, it's strictly an open membership. Anybody who joins the membership factors in the association, and, by the way, the money that is brought in for that is actually taken and used for transportation money, for the dancers' costumes, which is an expensive factor when you start looking at featherwork today, and beadwork and things of this type. So all that is expended for that point, but we are a straight open membership. Now on numerous occasions people have come over and tried to help us some way or another. We are
rather restricted to doing things according to what the historical society has set aside. In the process of painting recently, we came across some beautifully painted scrollwork under two layers of paint. We immediately screeched to a halt, because we wanted to make sure we could preserve that. Now the kitchen in the building is being renovated in its original state. We have a nice piece of ground there where the summer house will be turned into a selling area, where we can sell some of the wares that are made by the association people.

SM: Is the house open at any kind of scheduled hours?

RL: Well, the first Sunday of every month we are open for a meeting at 2:00 o'clock in the afternoon until 4:00 on Sundays, and that would be for our regular association meeting. Every Monday night, 7:00 o'clock until 9:00 o'clock, we have a dancing class. It's a rather unusual thing. We have taught our Indian boys to do Indian dances because--it's a rather funny thing, I found it a very bad feeling all the way across the country--the older Indian people are not passing as much on to the younger generation. The reason they're not is--maybe it's wrong, maybe it's right in some respects--because here is a boy that's going to be assimilated into a society that doesn't understand him at all, knows nothing of his background, knows nothing of his heritage, knows nothing of his beliefs, so why should his parents teach him some of the old customs and old ways when they know that he's gonna leave at some time or another?

SM: What does it cost to join the organization?

RL: Family membership is $10.00 per year. That's for husband and wife. And there's an individual membership if they're over 18 years of age--for students. Under 18 they have to have consent of the parental guidance, or whoever the guardian factor is at that point. $5.00 per year, and it's a calendar fiscal year, and this will entitle everybody
eighteen and older into a vote, into having just as much to say as a full-blooded Indian who happens to be sitting next to you.

SM: Obviously you're not afraid of an influx of non-Indian people taking it over.

RL: No, I am not. And the reason I'm not afraid of that is because there are not enough of us per se, so we really need all of the other people who have the same feelings that we do, that have set their goals that they are interested in the Indian people. Then at that point what we can say is that we now have an association. This is why we didn't say, "The American Indian Society," because the context is wrong. I think we need not only our Indian people, but we need everybody, anybody who has a desire.

SM: Now if I joined, I don't have to participate in the dances if I don't want to?

RL: Absolutely not.

SM: I don't have to wear an Indian costume, but I can if I want to?

RL: If you wish to.

SM: Now I don't imagine that you would let me or let anyone wear some of those precious things that we have seen--the prayer harness, for example, but if I acquired things of my own to wear I could and you wouldn't mind?

RL: No. We don't want to stereotype the Indian as you see it on television or whatever it may be. I think we have had to do this to a certain extent, because when you go to preschool communities, or you go to a kindergarten class or first or third grade where they're now beginning
to teach some true American, early American history, this is what the children will identify with. I just had a recent occasion to speak to a woman at St. Ferdinand's Church, who asked us to do a program on Sunday morning, and she said, "Mr. Lees, you're certainly not going to come with war paint and feathers and beads and all this type of thing?" "Mrs. Ankenbrand," I said, "Number one, I want you to understand that we are an association of the American Indian people, and I want you to understand that there are certain things that we do, maybe not because we want to, but because people will identify with what we are doing." So I said, "I would like you to make a little trip with me," and maybe some of your people who will listen to this tape at some stage would like to make that same little trip. I asked her to close her eyes, and I said, "Mrs. Ankenbrand, I wish you to close your eyes and travel with me back in time. You are sitting astride a lovely pony, sitting on the bluff overlooking a lovely valley. And as you're sitting there thinking about all the beauty that's around you, you look down in the valley and you see a troop of Cavalry soldiers." I said, "What do you see?" Mrs. Ankenbrand hesitated a moment; she said, "Well, I see blue uniforms, I see sabers, I see the Old McClellan saddles and pack horses." I said, "Fine." I said, "Now I'd like you to close your eyes again, and I want you to take a little trip further down the valley; you look up on the bluff across from you, you see a large cloud of smoke, and you look into another area and you see another cloud of smoke. And while this troop of soldiers is riding down through the valley you hear a piercing war cry, and all of a sudden, out from behind the aspens you see a group of Indians riding." I said, "Now, what do you see?" Well, she hesitated again, and she said, "Well, I really don't think I want to tell you." And I said, "Why?" She said, "Well, I see feathers, I see war clubs, I see spotted ponies, I see more feathers, I see warriors, completely painted." And I said, "That's exactly the way we appear to do a program. No paint." But we do this, and I have a group of boys who are tremendous with children,
and I mean they do a tremendous job. We go to an elementary school, and there is never a fear of a child, because they are so warm that they go to the youngster that kinda recoils from them, and then they take him in his arm and they'll walk with him somewhere, and it's a tremendous thing for me to see a group of people get together to do a program in a school. We have Indian dances such as the hoop dancers; we do gourd dances, we do friendship dances. Friendship dances are very, very important when you're doing a program with people, because you get the other people involved. And we have had as many as 420 students in two separate rounds doing round dances, or friendship dances, going on and going in opposite directions and breaking the circles and doing serpentine and changing from one side of the room to the other side of the room, and we've danced from probably 12:00 noon until maybe 12:00 o'clock at night. So I think it's very important that, no matter who you are, or what race, color, denomination or creed, that if you understand that there is an association here that you can belong to if you have a sincere interest in the Indian people. What we want to do is we want to later on in time be able to acquire clothing and things for the reservations, and we want to take them ourselves, not ship them by somebody else. We want to take them ourselves to know that they're gonna get to the right reservation, to the right people that can disburse it, and cut out the middle man who makes all the money when they go.

SM: I suppose sooner or later you will get to the point as you grow that you will have the building open more.

RL: There was a question you asked that I really failed to answer. You asked, "Do I have to participate in the dances?" Well, I said, "No." You said, "Do I have to wear tribal costumes if I don't wish to?" And I said, "No." Now this happens to be your own field. You have to take this under your own field. If you're going to pursue the Cherokee, let's say, and that's the nation that you want to pursue,
and if you wish to wear Cherokee clothing at that point, as a member of the association, you may. I have a four-year-old son who is probably one of the youngest gourd dancers in the country. He is four years of age, he wears a feather bustle, leggings, breech cloth, headband, roach, black shirt, a very, very common color because mine is all black. Where I come from that color is very black with the velveteen and the flowers, but I wear the isometric patterns. But he is probably one of the youngest, and his hair is flaxen blond, and he looks rather peculiar dancing with some of our Sioux boys, but he's 100% Indian.

SM: It's Indian how you think, is that it?

RL: That's right. Very much so. I would certainly like to take the opportunity to thank Mr. Myers for the time spent here today. I'm going to have to leave very shortly, and we plan to get back and talk some more on this. I think the only thing that I can tell all of you, in our custom, is that you have to learn to accept one another as you are; you have to love one another, regardless of who you are, and make sure that you don't step on somebody else's beliefs as you go, because I think it's very important for the boy who's Scotch and Irish to stand up and throw his chest out and say, "I'm Scotch and Irish," or the Germans to say, "I'm German." Or whatever ethnic group you belong to at this point, I think it's very important. We have, on numerous occasions, gone into all-black schools, and we've had a tremendous reception from the people, because of the fact that they probably identify with some of the problems that some of the Indian people had identified with in the early stages. And I think it's a marvelous thing when a group of people can get together, such as the college, or such as the other schools, and pursue into the true native American history that you've got, which we have a tremendous amount. Everything that you use in medicinal drugs today, the derivative is of the Indian.
So, basically what you have to understand is that at one time we were as many as leaves or buffaloes on the plains. Today we're very few, but today we need the people who have a sincere interest in the native American culture, so that maybe a hundred years from now, when my great, great grandchildren are here, and your great great grandchildren are here, that they look back and they say, "You know, I remember my great, great grandmother talking about an Indian association that started in Florissant, and I think it's very important to preserve that for tomorrow from today.

SM: Do you think we're making any progress at all?

RL: Well, I certainly think so. I think people are accepting us more and more, because of us getting out and getting in front of the people, and trying to make them understand that what we're trying to do is to go in the right direction. We have not asked for federal grants, we have not asked for help from the government, nor will we ever ask for help from the government. Once you do this, you're immediately under the thumb of the governmental people, and they can take it away any time they wish, or they can give it to you any time they wish. So we feel as though we're gonna make it on our own, and I believe that wholeheartedly, and every member of my association believes it wholeheartedly. And we have got, again, a very tremendous group of people. We're not as sociable as some people when you come into the association, because people are a little more reserved in our association, they have a tendency to kind of hold back. They don't want to talk to people, but I think that you'll find that in time, once you get into the association, and once you have become a working member, per se, you will find that you have now been assimilated into a tremendous family of people, because we, on numerous occasions, have helped one another. We had an individual this winter who was laid off from his job and was seeking other employment, and in the meantime he was having difficulty—they have
nine children—the association bore the bills for the repair on the
furnace, and oil, and groceries and so forth until they got a job,
which he is permitted to pay back at any per rate that he wants,
whenever he can. So we wish to help the members of the association,
that's what we banded for, and we actually have made a tremendous
amount of headway in the right direction, instead of all standing and
fighting all the time. We've all gotten on the same trail, and
we're walking the same trail.

SM: Well, it sounds like real progress. You've got a good thing going,
and it's going well, and all it has to do is keep on in the same
direction, getting bigger and better for the good causes you're
working for. I do appreciate your coming over. We will look forward
to seeing not only more of you on tape and in person, but also some
of those marvelous things you have that LeMoyne took pictures of
today, and we'll look forward to the opportunity to show these
things and to have you talk to some of our classes. So thank you
very much, Dick, we appreciate it.