MELVIN MCKENZIE, Navajo

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Tsaille, Arizona

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, 63136.

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 in a new and novel situation at the brand new Navajo Community College at Tsaile, Arizona, and I'm talking to one of the people in public relations here, and I want to get a little biographical sketch of him. First of all, Melvin McKenzie, were you ever a student at Navajo Community College?

Melvin McKenzie:

No, I wasn't.

SM: Are you a native of this area?

MM: Yes I am. I worked down at Window Rock about 50 miles south of here.

SM: That's the Navajo capital, isn't it? It's quite a bustling place.

MM: The council is not in session right now, so I think they have some of their committees meeting, so it is like a regular council meeting. There are 74 members on the council.

SM: Then did you go to school down there at Window Rock?

MM: No, I didn't. I went up to school in Kirtland, New Mexico, that's south of Farmington.

SM: That's over near Shiprock, isn't it?

MM: Yes it is.

SM: The famous erosional landmark over there?

MM: Yes it is. And from Kirtland, after I left high school, I went up to Fort Louis College in Durango, Colorado. And from there I went to
Albuquerque. The president, who is Thomas Atcity, was over one day and he asked me to go to work for him, so I did. I've been out here for about two years now since the fall of '73, and he got me out here on a grant which is called the National Program Educational Leadership, where a person is taken out of one area and put into education, and I tried it for a year, and I decided to stay and I've been here close to two years now.

SM: Do you like it?

MM: Yes, I do.

SM: Well, then, I should mention first of all, that you just gave me an opportunity to see that film about the college. It's very interesting, and it's quite well done too.

MM: It is.

SM: It's a film describing how the college came to be, and some comment on Navajo education problems, and other problems, too, for that matter. Would it be possible to get that film to show to our classes?

MM: Yes. I don't know all the details on it, but I can get it for you.

SM: Let's talk about the college itself first. It's the first and only one of its kind, isn't it?

MM: Yes it is. We are in a consortium where we have, I believe, six or seven other colleges, but there's none like NCC.

SM: And it was started by the Navajo people themselves?

MM: Yes it was. This was going back, way back to the early '50's, when
they first talked of a Navajo community college. It was in the talking stage, and then gradually the people were hitting the council, members of the council, and it finally became a reality in 1968. The school was chartered in 1968, and in 1969 the doors opened in Many Farms in borrowed facilities in Many Farms.

SM: Many Farms is west of here isn't it?

MM: Yes. Directly west.

SM: You borrowed some space in a high school building over there?

MM: Yes.

SM: You know, that's where our school started too, in a high school building, from borrowed space like that. And all the time they were planning this campus here, weren't they?

MM: Yes.

SM: And then when did you move over here?

MM: We made our move in the fall of '73. In fact, they did not have summer school that summer, and all the moving was done in the fall, and classes were opened in October, I believe it was.

SM: Melvin, for anyone listening who may not be familiar with the geography of the area, where are in relation to other towns or the corner of the state we're in?

MM: We are right in the heart of the Navajo Reservation. The Navajo Reservation takes up parts of Arizona, Utah and New Mexico, and it's about the size of the state of West Virginia, and Navajo Community College is right in the center of the Navajo Reservation.
SM: And then, let's see now, we're north of Window Rock.

MM: We're north of Window Rock, approximately 50 miles.

SM: Flagstaff is off to the west of us?

MM: Southwest.

SM: And the Grand Canyon is over there west of us.

MM: Right, directly west.

SM: You know, coming from the west toward the school, you come down that long slope over those hills, and there you see the mountains in the background and the valley and then the campus laid out, it's a dramatic setting.

MM: Well, that was one of the reasons this site was chosen, because the area is just beautiful, also the availability of water. We have a long range of water that's available to us.

SM: Water is a very important factor out here, isn't it?

MM: Yes it is.

SM: Do you get your water from wells, a stream, or what?

MM: From wells.

SM: Is the water table far down?

MM: Don't quote me, I think it's about 1,000 feet.

SM: That's pretty far. In some parts of the country it's no more than a
few feet. Now the college is uniquely designed, can you kind of describe that, because there's nothing like it any place in the country, or in the world, I guess.

MM: Well, the college is uniquely designed in that all of the buildings resemble a hogan, except for the student union--it's built a conventional type building, and also our classrooms and our specialized classrooms, they're conventionally built. But the dorms are built in a hogan shape, an eight-sided figure, and the library in that figure likewise, also our cafeteria.

SM: And then you have the main building of the campus which is not yet finished.

MM: And that is the culture center, and that's also an eight-sided figure, and hopefully that will be completed this coming Christmas.

SM: It is up above all the other surrounding buildings.

MM: Yes.

SM: How many stories has it?

MM: It has seven stories.

SM: Again in the hogan, eight-sided shape. Is it glass on the outside?

MM: Yes, I call it one-way glass. You can see out, but you can't see in.

SM: So that's different from all the others in that respect, because the others are made of a very attractive, reddish-colored, lightweight aggregate block, I believe. Really striking buildings.

MM: We also have our housing area, which is situated in the western
portion of the circle. We have 50 units, they're also in the hogan shape style. They run from one bedroom through four bedrooms, using the same type of block that's used on the campus.

SM: Is the whole design of the campus a circle?

MM: Yes. Now this goes back to culture.

SM: There's a lot of symbolism in the whole layout and the buildings, isn't there?

MM: Right. The circle itself is the foundation of a hogan, and in the traditional way of living you usually have your sleeping area on the west side of the hogan.

SM: Which you do here too.

MM: And likewise with your recreational areas usually on the north side of the hogan. Your central eating place is in the center of the hogan, which represents the cafeteria. Then your work area is usually in the south side of the hogan, that represents your classrooms and your specialized classrooms.

SM: And you carry this out.

MM: Yes.

SM: In the film they mention the Rough Rock School as being the first school built and run by the Navajos for themselves. Now that's an elementary school though, isn't it? Or is it high school?

MM: It runs from elementary through high school.

SM: I imagine some of the experience with that helped in the creative or
formative stages of this college here?

MM: The first president of the college was out at Rough Rock at one time, and started the whole system out there.

SM: I noticed too that you already have a branch. You're still building this one, and you've already got a branch going.

MM: Yes, that's up at Shiprock, it's about 100 miles north of here, and that's been in existence, I think, since '71, and we're getting calls every day for more branches, in Kayenta, Tuba City.

SM: Something that people may not understand is the distances involved in all this, because, like you said, the Navajo Reservation is as big as the state of West Virginia, and so one school, even though it is in the center, would pose some transportation problems.

MM: Yes, that's very correct, yes.

SM: So a branch is a reasonable solution.

MM: And your highways aren't that great out here. To communicate, like for instance to Shiprock, you'd have to go back towards Window Rock about 20 miles, and then over the mountain, and finally get on Highway 666 and go north, so we do have road problems out here.

SM: Some of them are beautiful though. That new one going over from here to Chinle is a nice road.

MM: That was just recently completed.

SM: It looks like it. Well now, the school is still under construction, but you're using most of the buildings already?
MM: Yes, I think the only building that's under construction is the culture center, but the rest of the buildings are completed.

SM: Now your office is in a temporary building?

MM: Yes we are. Hopefully we will move into the culture center by December.

SM: That's where your office is going to be.

MM: Temporarily until they get the administration building completed, and that I don't foresee right now.

SM: More funds are necessary? I guess you must have the same problem most of the schools do. You have to find the funds, and get the plans made, and sometimes it takes a few years.

MM: That is correct.

SM: Now some of the classes you have are unique. Of course you do have the regular kinds of classes, like biology and mathematics, that any college has, I suppose?

MM: Yes we do.

SM: But you have some that most schools don't have, like do you have silverworking?

MM: Yes. When a student comes here he's required to take nine hours of Navajo Indian studies. That simply means he has to take courses in history, Navajo history, Navajo culture, Navajo literature; and in the arts and crafts area we have silversmithing, which you know has been quite a boom lately. We have rug weaving, we have moccasin making, we have Navajo basket making.
SM: The students make some baskets, rugs or silverwork, silver jewelry, do they keep it for themselves, or do they sell it?

MM: Usually in their classrooms they do it for a project. During the second semester they take up silversmithing again, they usually sell it.

SM: When they're more skilled?

MM: Yes.

SM: Because you want a good product coming out to be sold?

MM: That's very true.

SM: Do you have any students here other than Navajo people?

MM: Yes. Last semester we had 37 different tribes here represented here at NCC.

SM: Oh, that surprises me. I thought it was pretty much predominately Navajo.

MM: It is predominately Navajo. I usually break it down like this: 80% Navajo, 10% other tribes and 10% Anglo, Chicano and blacks.

SM: So you have representatives from all the culture groups practically in the country.

MM: Oh yes.

SM: Well, that picture we saw showed a band, for example. And the band was wearing uniforms, some of them with concho belts, and squash blossom necklaces. Were those people wearing their own belts and
necklaces?

MM: Most of those concho belts and bracelets and necklaces do belong to the individuals.

SM: They were very striking. The dancers in one part of the film were wearing their traditional costumes, and some of them were wearing angora leggings. Is that a traditional sort of thing too? The angora leggings?

MM: Yes it is.

SM: I suppose the students have been getting themselves organized into various clubs and groups and so on. Is there any generalization in that direction you can make to give us a mental picture of the school?

MM: We are a young college, so all of our organizations aren't up to par yet, but we are working in all the areas with the student personnel services to bring these organizations up. I think the two most active organizations on campus now are the Rodeo Club and the Indian Club. There are two Indian clubs right now. There's one Indian Club, and there's an Indian club called the Red Dawn Club. If they could combine these clubs they could make a strong organization. Right now they have dances, they have dinners for various money-making organizations.

SM: Do you have fraternities or anything like that on campus?

MM: None at this point yet.

SM: I would imagine that maybe that wouldn't be the most popular activity, you know, the traditional Greek letter fraternities of the universities
and the Ivy League schools. Do you suppose they'll ever make any headway here on campus?

MM: I think they would. There's none right now, but we had various faculties that are coming in that are connected with these.

SM: Some of those would help to get them started?

MM: Like a good point here I heard the other day is, "Why don't we have music out here? We don't have any." This is a protest by the student body government, and we've started to work on the fine arts department. We have the University of New Mexico out here helping us to set up our fine arts department, so we need a little bit more time to get these sort of things started.

SM: As far as music is concerned, do they mean a band or an orchestra, choir?

MM: Yes. We don't have them and we're working on it.

SM: What was that band I saw in the movie then?

MM: That was the Navajo Tribal band. That wasn't the college band.

SM: But in lots of ways, especially in attitude and feelings, the Navajo tribal band could just as well be the college band. They have that kind of rapport, don't they? Would you explain that Red Dawn Club? That's an intriguing name.

MM: I don't know too much about it at this point, but the Red Dawn Club acts like the Indian Club, and that's the reason for me saying, why don't they combine them in one. And they present a basketball tournament, they hold school dances, they sponsor various trips to and from Phoenix, Denver, for example.
SM: So they're social as well as school-minded as a promotional group. The Red Dawn Club. It might strike an outsider that if 80% of the students are Indians, why do they need an Indian club, but the idea is that it's simply a way of getting together for social functions.

MM: Yes. Now the Rodeo Club is another big organization. I think the reason why is it's one of our inter-collegiate sports on the campus. We only have two. That's the Rodeo Club and the Archery Club.

SM: And they both are backed by these clubs, but you have other athletics?

MM: Yes we do. We do have other athletics, but they're all on an inter-mural basis.

SM: So if you have basketball and volleyball, they would be inter-mural. Do you have any other organizations on campus, like AIM for example?

MM: Yes, we do have quite a few members that are enrolled at the college.

SM: Are they pretty active here in this area?

MM: Yes they are. The national secretary, he lives down in Fort Defiance which is not too far from here.

SM: Do you know his name?

MM: His name is Larry Anderson.

SM: Wasn't there up here in Farmington, last winter, a protest or a take-over or something that broke into the news? They were the head of that, were they?

MM: Yes.
SM: Did they succeed with that and get the complaints corrected?

MM: Well, they got them aired, as far as I'm concerned. The group up here, they did quite a few things for us. In major events they helped us in the parking situation, and in a very large dance they helped with the security department, maintain security on the grounds.

SM: This is a side of AIM that most people aren't aware of?

MM: That's right.

SM: Because this is the kind of activities that they do engage in that doesn't break into the news.

MM: Right.

SM: Are most of them boys, or are quite a few of them girls?

MM: They're all mixed.

SM: You do have some non-Indian students. Where do most of the Anglo students come from?

MM: It's usually the local area, the surrounding towns, Gallup, Farmington, Flagstaff, Winslow.

SM: People who have lived here are taking advantage of the proximity of the school.

MM: And we do have quite a few high schools on the reservation now, public schools.

SM: And the public schools are the largest in number now, aren't they?
MM: Yes.

SM: And you also have other kinds of schools on the reservation?

MM: We do. We do have boarding schools here.

SM: And mission schools. They're fading out more aren't they?

MM: Yes. They're gradually fading out.

SM: So it's the BIA schools, boarding schools, mission schools and the public schools. Now this one, I suppose, would be a public school, wouldn't it? In the sense it's run by the people of the whole area?

MM: Yes, it's a community college.

SM: Like ours is a community college, it's run by the people in that area, and so on. The board of regents in your case are . . . .

MM: All Navajo. There's 10 members. Last year we had one non-Navajo one, that was Ed Hopkins. He was from the San Carlos Reservation.

SM: Apache Reservation?

MM: Yes. And he served for a year, and now we have a Navajo student body president on the board of regents.

SM: That unusual, isn't it?

MM: Very unusual.

SM: A good idea though?

MM: We like to involve our students.
SM: So he has one vote in ten. Anyway, to continue with our over-all view of the college. Do all of your people live on campus, or do you have commuters too?

MM: Yes, we have a lot of commuters, but the majority of students do live on campus. That's about 300. And we have, of course, evening classes, like in Chinle, and we have a branch in Shiprock. We have evening classes in Window Rock.

SM: You're already branching out.

MM: Yes we are.

SM: Now the staff. How is it made up?

MM: The staff is composed mostly of Anglos, and likewise with our faculty. I think out of a total of 55 we have about six or seven that are on the faculty.

SM: Of Navajo people?

MM: Yes.

SM: I just assumed that since most of the students were Navajos maybe you'd have a higher percentage of Navajo people on the staff.

MM: I hope that that trend will change. We're working in that direction.

SM: Do the students like that idea, of instructors from their own cultural background?

MM: Yes. I think our main problem out here with Navajo and Indian instructors is we don't have the living conditions they want. The main reason they usually leave us is better living conditions elsewhere,
better pay.

SM: They're in demand all around the country, aren't they?

MM: Very true.

SM: I would like to explore this cultural program, but probably I'd best do that with the instructor in that area, as I think you suggested before. Well, you've given me a good view, an over-all view of the college. I appreciate that because the college is of unique interest across the country, and so I want to thank you. I appreciate your help.