Listening to Indians

RAMONA NEZ, Navajo
October 25, 1975
Provo, Utah

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

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

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

This transcript series was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and by support from St. Louis Community College.

Copyright © S.I. Myers 1978
LISTENING TO INDIANS

No. 88

RAMONA NEZ, Navajo
October 25, 1975
Provo, Utah

Glen Rock, New Jersey
Microfilming Corporation of America
1978
Sam Myers:

Today I'm at BYU in Provo, Utah, talking to a young lady who is from Chinle, Arizona, and her name is Ramona Nez. You're Navajo, aren't you?

Ramona Nez:

Right.

SM: And you are the president of the Tribe of Many Feathers, that's the biggest club on the campus?

RN: Um hm.

SM: Do you have a private office here?

RN: Yes I do.

SM: Well, Ramona, were you born and raised in Chinle?

RN: No, I was born in California, in a town called San Bernadino, and I only lived there for about a year. Well, I lived there longer, but I went to kindergarten there, and I left and I went to the reservation, and I've grown up from the reservation ever since, so actually I started first grade in Arizona, and graduated from Chinle High School.

SM: Now Chinle is a town near the west end of Canyon DeChelly. And how big a town is that?

RN: Oh as far as population I really couldn't say, but it's small, but it's not big either, it's not as big as Provo.

SM: This is a city of 56,000.
RN: But most of the people, they're not necessarily living in the town part, they're scattered out more or less.

SM: Then you have a lot of traffic through there, a lot of tourist traffic, don't you? Because of that fantastically beautiful Canyon de Chelly. Did you ever go through it?

RN: I've gone through it lot of times. Every time I go home I go down that canyon. I love the canyon. I'm certainly proud of it. I know that. If anybody ever mentions they've gone to the reservation, I always have to ask them, "Did you go to Chinle? Did you see the canyon?"

SM: Well, you went to school in Chinle then. Grade school?

RN: I went to grade school and I went to high school there. In high school is where I started to really, I guess you might say, develop myself in leadership aspects, because my senior year I became the student body president of my high school.

SM: There's a lot of kids in that school too, aren't there?

RN: Yes, there's 800, going on 900 now.

SM: Pretty big school. Is that a BIA school or a public school?

RN: It's a public school.

SM: Mr. Roessel is the superintendent of the public schools in that area.

RN: Right. Um hm.

SM: And Mr. Roessel, Dr. Robert Roessel, he's a pretty famous man. Then
his wife is Navajo, and Dr. Roessel is not?

RN: Right.

SM: And you know her too?

RN: Yes I do. I know the whole family.

SM: They have a daughter, don't they?

RN: Um hm. She's my best friend.

SM: You didn't go to Navajo Community College?

RN: No I didn't. I came straight to BYU and I've been here for two years. I'm a junior, and I'm majoring in English pre-law.

SM: And are you going to pursue a law career later?

RN: Yes I am. I plan to go to law school. I'd like to go here.

SM: They do have a law school here?

RN: Yeah, we just had it built recently.

SM: Do they accent the problems that a lawyer interested in Indian affairs might cope with?

RN: Yes.

SM: This is a beautiful campus here. You have over 25,000 students, and of all these, your association, your club is the largest. Your club is composed of any kind of students?
RN: What our club is, it's a service organization, not only to this school within itself, but to the community as well. So we not only try to meet the students' needs in three areas, but we also try to meet the community's needs. So we're a service organization, you know, that's what we stand for.

SM: That needs a little more explanation.

RN: Like basically, everybody wants to know . . . O.K., like, for example, you being here, and saying that you would like to know a little more about Indians, you want to see it for yourself, you'd like to talk with some people. We've got several different people to talk to. In those areas we meet their needs, but culturally, we go out and we display what we know, our knowledge of our culture. We talk about what we're so proud of, and we're so glad that we have it, that we go out and give of ourself. We say, "This is who we are, and this is how we believe, and this is how we work, this is how we function."

SM: You explain why too?

RN: Um hm. We show them our costume, we do our traditional dances, just like you saw this morning, with one of the groups.

SM: We should explain that I have been here since 9:00 o'clock this morning, watching a large group of all Indian students. Are there any Polynesian in the group?

RN: Well, there was a couple Mexicans and Polynesian.

SM: This was a practice session for several different shows you put on. You're going to have a half-time show at the professional basketball game in Salt Lake tonight?
RN: Tonight, right.

SM: Are you going to participate in that one?

RN: Yes.

SM: And then you have another show that you present?

RN: O.K. We have another show, it's our full show. It's two hours long.

SM: How many people?

RN: We usually have about . . . close to 50 members altogether.

SM: Fifty members, plus the technical people and the director. Who is the director?

RN: She's Janie Thompson. She's pretty famous. She's a professional singer and dancer, musician, composer. She's everything, and she's the one that started the group, The Lamanite Generation. That was part of her dream.

SM: The show is called. . . . ?

RN: The Lamanite Generation.

SM: Now that's a term that some people won't understand. Will you explain what that means?

RN: O.K. I don't know if you know this, I don't know if you said this, but being here at BYU, a large majority of us were Mormons, and BYU is a Mormon school. It's a private school, and the majority of us are members of the church, so we believe in the beliefs of the Mormons,
and in the Book of Mormon which we've read. It's a history of our people, and in the Book of Mormon it speaks of the Lamanite, and the word Lamanite comes to mean that we are all related: Polynesians, Mexicans and Indians. We believe that we are all related in some way, and so this is what Lamanite means. It distinguishes the three of us, that we are related, and so in this group, since we have Polynesians, Mexicans and Indians, then we are Lamanites. We call ourselves The Lamanite, and that's where the term Lamanite comes from.

SM: Now I was asking one young man about this, and we were talking about the Navajo culture, Navajo religion, and so on. And then I discovered that he, too, was a member of your same church. I asked him if there was any conflict and he said, "No."

RN: No, there isn't.

SM: Which makes it a happy combination of circumstance, doesn't it?

RN: Right. In fact, it helps us to balance our lives. I think the church has done a great deal for us, you know, realizing just what we're taught in life. To me it has made the most sense than any other church. It's simple, and if you just listen to it and try to understand it, everything's logical behind it, and the way they build you.

SM: Would some of the old medicine men of the tribe be against the idea, or do they go along, or do they tolerate it?

RN: I don't know. I find a lot of the people accept it, you know, and they're so strong in their beliefs in a lot of ways that they would never change, no matter what the circumstance was, because that's what they've grown up with. But like for my grandfather, for example, he's not a member of the church, and I talk to him about the Book of
Mormon, and he says, "Well, you follow those people, because what they've told you is true, because I have the same story too."

SM: He says that and he's not a Mormon himself?

RN: He's not a Mormon. But the reason, I guess, he would never join is because it was hard for him to understand because my grandmother died long ago and he would never remarry again, and he is a dedicated man, but he never put us down; he supported us, and, in fact, when you look at it realistically, you come to find what one thing can do the most for the Indian people. And that is the Indian people to be able to help themselves, to do what they need to do, to build themselves.

SM: And the university is doing a lot in this direction too?

RN: Yes they are.

SM: You have a whole division of Indian services?

RN: Yeah, we have Indian education.

SM: They're separate and distinct, but they are helping each other?

RN: We're together actually.

SM: Like this Indian services operates all the way from Canada through the United States to Mexico, and helps people with the daily problems of how to fertilize their crops and everything else.

RN: Right.

SM: And then with all the facilities of research at the university backing it up.
RN: Right.

SM: Tell me more about the dance group. It's just beautiful to watch.

RN: Sign language is a natural thing for the Indian.

SM: Is that what you're doing?

RN: Yes. We do sign language to a song that means a great deal to the Indian people; which has, in fact, helped lift the people here at BYU, because we look up to this song, because its significance behind it is that an old Indian chief was telling his son to go and get an education, and he explains why the son should get an education. So the song has become very popular and means a great deal to us. It is touching to the Indian people, and it is called, "Go, My Son," and we do sign language to the words that the Indian chief has spoken, and this is what you were watching us practice this morning. And also we have a group of girls called The Lamanettes, like most groups would call pom pom girls, or whatever. These girls are called Lamanettes, and they do modern dancing.

SM: The motions, the movements, and the way you used your hands, and the whole thing looked almost like a group of professionals.

RN: We try. We work hard. Sometimes we practice from four to six hours a day.

SM: And that Hoop dancer. That's something else too.

RN: Yeah, he learned that as a little boy, and he's been doing that since. He's Navajo.

SM: The Plains Indians used to do Hoop dances also, I believe, but I had
never actually seen one do it as intricately as he did. How many hoops did he have?

RN: I think it was 22 hoops.

SM: And he had them all tangled around him in a whole systematic design.

RN: He depicts different flowers, plants and animals. He depicted the eagle and he depicted a flower and a web.

SM: Do you have movies of this?

RN: We have some slides and we have some pictures. They are making a movie. You see, Generation has travelled just about everywhere now. They've gone to Europe, South America, and Canada, so we've really gone all over the place, and the United States, and they're making a documentary film of The Lamanite Generation when they went down to South America.

SM: I suppose if you make a movie, it'll be available for other schools, won't it?

RN: I really couldn't say.

SM: Well, usually they're available. BYU has a whole film-producing division here. Another student mentioned other films.

RN: Is it about Indians?

SM: Yes. "Go, My Son" was one of them.

RN: "A Different Drum?"
SM: And "A Different Drum" is another, and there's a third one. Anyway, I'm going to find out if they're available, because we use a lot of films at our school. Is "Go, My Son" available in any kind of a little booklet or record or anything?

RN: There's a record. I give out 45 records. Like we're gonna go to a convention, and we'll be giving out several of these records, and I could be able to give you one, I wouldn't be able to let you buy it, I'd give it to you.

SM: I have somebody specifically in mind that I want to have hear it. I can also take it back to my school, I'm sure they would like to hear it, 'cause it's a beautiful song, and the way you perform it!

RN: Well, let me tell you, they sell these two big albums in the store that not only have "Go, My Son," but The Lamanite Generation also has their own record--they sell that for $5.00--plus there's two records in the bookstore. One is "Go, My Son" and has some other songs on it too that Indian students here put together, wrote and sang, and then there's another one called "The Eagle's Bed." That was a pageant that was put together once and the songs in there are just . . . so.o.o . . . they just touch you, they really do. And I would recommend you get those three, because you can buy those three records. The Lamanite Generation you can buy through the Lamanite Generation, the other two records you can buy in the bookstore.

SM: Now the bookstore is open today on Saturday, all day?

RN: Um hm.

SM: Another thing that you're doing is that you're a silversmith.
RN: Right.

SM: You're wearing a pendant that is just beautiful, and two very striking bracelets.

RN: One I didn't make.

SM: One your dad gave you, and the other one you made.

RN: And the rings I made. Three rings.

SM: You're a very accomplished silversmith.

RN: Well thank you.

SM: Do you sell the silver for helping with your expenses?

RN: Yeah. I did it more when I was a freshman, but now I have a part-time job on campus, so I do it but not as much as I used to. I do it more or less like a hobby now, but because of school and because of my involvement. See, I'm in Lamanite Generation, which takes a lot of my time in the evenings. I'm president of The Tribe of Many Feathers, which I'm in charge of eight different departments in the organization, plus going to school, plus having a part-time job, and then trying to study. That's five different areas I'm involved in.

SM: So you don't have much time to work in silver any more?

RN: Not as much as I'd like to. I plan to go back doin' it by this Christmas during the vacation time, because the organization that I'm in charge of, we put on one of the best Indian Weeks of any university, we've been told several times. We have a big Indian Week up here, and I'm planning to enter my jewelry in a contest.
SM: At Christmastime?

RN: No, it'll be in February, but I'm going to start preparing at Christmastime.

SM: This will be a show, a display?

RN: Indian Week. It's a big Indian Week.

SM: Do you have all kinds of activities?

RN: Going on for a whole week. Right. Fashion shows, talent shows, speakers.

SM: I met a very talented artist yesterday.

RN: Dennis Jeffrey. He painted a painting for me.

SM: I'll bet you're proud of that. You'd better hang on to that. That's going to become valuable some day, because he's going to become famous, I think.

RN: I think he has a real potential.

SM: Well, how did you learn to do this silverwork?

RN: Well, I started back home. My grandfather was a silversmith, and as a child I was very interested.

SM: You probably knew more without even trying than most people do by going to a class.

RN: Right. It was a lot easier. He's very good, and he was very patient
with me in the beginning, 'cause at first he wanted, I guess, my brothers to learn, but my brothers didn't seem to be really that interested, you know, and I'd always watched him, and after a while . . . I loved drawing. My brothers are all artists. They're not famous, but they do a lot of art work.

SM: Painting?

RN: Um hm.

SM: Do you have several brothers?

RN: I have five brothers and two sisters.

SM: That's a good-sized family.


SM: The Navajo families are usually close too, aren't they?

RN: Yeah.

SM: I've got this feeling from several people I've talked to, and it sounds like a beautiful idea or way to live. I think it would be quite a lesson and a message for some of us who have, well, gotten away from the family.

RN: Oriented. That's what I like about the Mormon Church, that's what it is, family-oriented.

SM: But it isn't just the Mormon Church, it's the Indian people themselves too, because some of them haven't been Mormons that I talked to, and they have the same feeling too.
RN: That's what we find interesting about the Mormon Church, because a lot of what we have, we find that we have a lot in common, the Indians and the church. Maybe that's one reason why we're able to understand it, because we find and we search out just what common grounds we have, and a lot of it's really common.

SM: You have the largest Indian population of any university in the country here don't you?

RN: Yes we do.

SM: They come from many different tribes?

RN: Seventy-seven. There may be an increase this year, but last year we had 77 different tribes.

SM: One is a young lady from way up in northwest Canada, almost to the Alaskan border. She is a Haida-Tshimshian.

RN: What's her name?

SM: Lyndale Hutchingson. Do you know her?

RN: Yes I do. She's in The Generation.

SM: And then Deanna. . . .

RN: Crowfoot, she's Miss Indian BYU, Deanna Crowfoot is. First Canadian.

SM: She is Blackfoot-Saultaux, she said. It's been a great experience being here on your campus, meeting the people, talking with them. And now, is there anything you can tell us more about your silver? Are you going to make any more as a profession, or are you going to give that up?
RN: Oh, I'll always keep it, it'll always be there.

SM: More as a hobby though?

RN: Yeah, I'd like to go on professionally, but I really want to go to law school. I think I could do more in law school to help my people than being a silversmith. Silversmith, you know, is an art work, and I think if you always continue to exercise it, and keep doin' it, you're never gonna lose it. But it's not something that I'll really make professionally. I won't take a whole lot of time to do it as a living, because I'm really determined to go to law school.

SM: While you go to law school and become a lawyer and practice, you could do it as a sort of relaxing hobby, couldn't you?

RN: That's kind of what it is right now.

SM: Now if anyone wanted to buy a piece of silver from you, could they?

RN: Yeah, if they wanted to buy a piece of silver, or if they wanted to buy something made, anyway.

SM: Well, something made by an individual person, where they know it's not turned out in some factory.

RN: Right. I'd do that.

SM: But you don't make things up ahead of time, and keep a supply on hand, do you?

RN: Well, I did have a supply, but I just sold them all. About two weeks ago.
SM: So then from here on you're going to have to make up more, or make things to order?

RN: Right.

SM: And when you make things to order, how can you do that? I mean, if I wanted a ring to give to somebody as a gift, what would I do, try to describe something to you?

RN: Well, that's what's always hard is the description. Sometimes you just let the person say, like, O.K., like a ring. All I need is the size, because whatever kind of stone the silversmith has to work with, it's him that really creates the design, unless you are furnishing the stone and you already had a design made out in your mind. Some designs you can use, and some you can't.

SM: Now you never make anything exactly the same twice, do you?

RN: I try not to. I've only done it once. That was for my family.

SM: If I gave you this ring I have here and said I would like something similar to it, you could do that, couldn't you?

RN: Yeah, I could do it just from looking at it.

SM: But you wouldn't make it exactly like that?

RN: I could in the case like wedding band, stuff like that, you know, but if you really desperately want it, then it's possible. It's just that the things that I treasure the most I don't like to duplicate. Like my bracelet for an example. It's my bracelet and I don't want anybody else to have it. Like if I make something and the person says, "Don't ever make another piece like this, you know, because I
want to be the only one to have it," then I won't, but if it's the same couple says, "I want another piece like that," fine.

SM: Then you would. Because that's one of the great values of the genuine southwestern Indian jewelry, that each piece is by itself unique, and when you start seeing them lined up in a row, all like a bunch of automobiles out of a Detroit factory, then it's no longer genuine, it's probably factory-made.

RN: Right.

SM: How is your club coming? Is it having a successful year?

RN: Oh, it's really had a good start. In fact our advisor told us that he was very pleased with the organization because he said that the organization, for the first time, has done more in one month than any other club has for the start. We really have a good club.

SM: When did you take office?

RN: In April. I've been working since April.

SM: You want to go all through the summer, and when does your term finish?

RN: April.

SM: And then, can you succeed yourself?

RN: I can run again, yes. I can go on, continue.

SM: Do you plan to?

RN: I don't know at the moment. I may not be here next year. I may take
a year and a half off. I'm planning to go on a mission.

SM: Oh, do girls go on missions too?

RN: Yes, girls go on missions too, for a year and a half.

SM: Boys go for two years.

RN: Right. We can't go until we're 21. I'm only 20.

SM: Can you go longer if you want to?

RN: If you ask them for an extension.

SM: I see. You pay your own way too, don't you, which is pretty expensive?

RN: Yeah. You save up money ahead of time, then you go off for that year and a half. You earn enough money to put you through one year and a half.

SM: Your folks could help you if they wanted to. I know one lady who was working to put her two sons through their missionary period, but a lot of you kids earn the money yourself?

RN: Yeah. I will be putting myself through the mission field.

SM: You haven't quite decided yet?

RN: Well, I won't know definitely until I get my call. See, you're called by the church to go on a mission. You go and let them know that you desire to go on a mission, and they'll let you know where you're called to, what area of mission field you'll be going to.
SM: Do you go wherever you're sent, or can you put in a request?

RN: Well, you can say, "I'd really like to go here," but we believe there's only One Person that makes the final say, and that's the Lord Himself, and the church, the board, decides where we go and stuff, because they know what is going to be best for us.

SM: And where you can do the most good?

RN: Um hm. Most likely probably go on an Indian mission back home in Arizona, because that's... ...

SM: Because they'd probably tend to send you there where you'd have rapport with the people and be most effective, instead of sending you to New York City or someplace?

RN: Right.

SM: Would you like New York City?

RN: I don't know. I've never been there. I've heard so many things on the news about it. Well, it might be interesting to go there.

SM: Well, when you drive around this Navajo Reservation of yours, up here south of you in Arizona, the spectacular scenery, it gets to be overwhelming almost, doesn't it?

RN: Yeah, I like the openness.

SM: It certainly is open. Open spaces. Beautiful. And now here you're in Utah, and this is no slouch as far as scenery goes, because your town, Provo, right on the east bank of the largest fresh water lake in the whole state, and the college is right touching the feet of the
mountains. What mountain range is it?

RN: Wasatch Mountains.

SM: And they go up into the sky there until you can't believe it.

RN: Right.

SM: And just off to the north one is all covered with snow this morning.

RN: That's Timpanogos. There's a legend behind that, an Indian legend.

SM: What's that?

RN: When you look at Timpanogos, it looks like there's a lady sleeping. She has her hair down like this, and, you know, you have to really look at it good. People say, "I don't see anything," but if you really look at it you can see it, you know, and the legend behind it is there was one time they gave sacrifices away—an Indian tribe practiced giving sacrifices, and they'd always pick the prettiest girl of the tribe that they would sacrifice. Well, she'd evidently fallen in love with one of the Indian braves, and he really wanted to marry her, but they were going to sacrifice her, and they were so broken up and so heart-broken, that he ran away to the mountains, and she went on and climbed to the top of Timpanogos, because she believed in the gods and stuff and the Great Spirit, so she climbed Timpanogos and threw herself off from the top. And evidently the brave had been gone for a long time, and there happened to be a cave up there, and the brave came out of the cave and just happened to catch her, and so that's the happy ending. And they say there's a heart in Timpanogos, if you climb it there's a red part there that looks like a heart, you know, thumping in there. So there's that big legend behind it, there's the cave that her and her lover lived in.
SM: I'll have to take a picture of that mountain now so I can show people what you're talking about.

RN: Yeah, do that, it's real pretty.

SM: Every morning when I come out of my motel room and I open the door, there are the mountains right in my face. It really is spectacular. How's your schoolwork coming?

RN: It's going great. It's really going good. I like keeping busy, 'cause if I'm not busy I get bored. I like being involved, you know, that's what life's all about, is enjoying life and being involved and getting out and doing things, you know. I think this is what I like here about it, it's helping me to build me in my areas that I think I need to exercise the potentials that I have.

SM: Well, I think you're certainly doing it, and I think the school here, the people in the school have recognized it, because they have honored you by electing you, and they certainly appreciate you. And I appreciate being able to talk to you today.