Listening to Indians

LEE PIPER, Cherokee

November 19, 1975

Midway, Washington

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

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

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

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Sam Myers:
   Today I'm talking with Mrs. Lee Piper. And what is your office here?

Lee Piper:
   This is the Office of Minority Affairs of Highline Community College, and I'm director of minority affairs on campus.

SM: And are you from one of the Indian tribes then?

LP: Well, I'm from a tribe. I'm eastern Cherokee from eastern part of the United States.

SM: Not Oklahoma, but back in the Carolinas?

LP: No. Actually my family are from Kentucky, Kentucky being one of the original eight states that the Cherokee people controlled, and we never did leave. You'll find probably 3/4 of the state still have Cherokee blood.

SM: How did you happen to come out here?

LP: I married a young man from Washington, the state of Washington, during World War II. He was from Seattle, and we settled out here.

SM: During World War II you were pretty young.

LP: Ya.a.a.h, that sounds good.

SM: You must have been.

LP: Not really. I've got six grandchildren. Isn't that great? I'm just delighted. That's my oldest grandson.
SM: He's got red hair.

LP: Yes, his grandfather has red hair, and he's the first redhead in our family.

SM: How old is he now?

LP: He's eight.

SM: Good looking young man here, with a turtle-necked sweater and red hair.

LP: That's my oldest grandson, and then I have four others. I have two granddaughters and the rest are boys, four boys. I have four children, and one son who is the oldest and three daughters, and each of the girls have two children.

SM: Works out nice.

LP: Yes, beautiful.

SM: You came out then because you married a man who lived here, and you're still here.

LP: Yes. I like it very much. I like the climate and the country.

SM: Did you go to school out here?

LP: No, originally I started out at Hunter College in New York, then I went on to Michigan State University. I still call it Michigan State College, which kind of dates me too.

SM: They're famous now for their football teams.
LP: True. True.

SM: And then came out here during World War II. Now these jobs as minority affairs director are relatively new, aren't they?

LP: Well, yes, I think they are. They really came into being when the minority people began to make the move for recognition, and the black people began to be the most vocal and outspoken, and later on when they incorporated the ethnic studies programs within the colleges, then they included all four of the minority races, and that's how our offices came to be.

SM: The four races would be the Blacks, the Indians, the Chicanos and the Orientals?

LP: Asians, right. Actually it isn't quite fair to say Asians because they're broken into three specific major groups, Japanese, Chinese and Philippines, or Malaysian, but they do call them Asian because they are of the Oriental race.

SM: I should tell you something, because when I came in you were in a meeting. I met two Indian girls, then came in the office and met a young black woman, and sitting with the other girls then was a Filipino girl. So here we had all these four groups represented right there. They were all most friendly and helpful, and made me feel right at home. In fact, before I knew it we were busily using your office to tape a conversation with the first two.

LP: That's very nice.

SM: So it's been a pleasant experience already just to come here.

LP: Good, I'm glad.
SM: Now, then, I've explained just briefly what we're doing, how we're going to take these tapes back, but you have feelings, some stronger or less, about this. Do you have any concerns about this whole sort of thing?

LP: Yes. I think one of my major concerns is having some kind of influence on the teacher prep program within the colleges and universities, and that is to have mandatory a section on the ethnic cultural awareness or sensitivities, or whatever title you want to give it, ethnic studies programs, but a mandatory, make it mandatory that before a degree is given, you must take a course in learning about the other people of the world, the minority people of the world. Until you understand about them and their culture, it's going to be difficult for you to work and deal with them in everyday life, and there is no vocation or profession that you enter into that you do not come into contact with minority people. We are different, and it's all right to be different. It is unfortunate that the early founding of this country desired to destroy the culture of all of the people who were here.

SM: The melting pot thing?

LP: That's right. They created a melting pot thing, and that's really bad, and I hope that we can return to a way of brotherhood and love and respect for one another and each other's culture, so that the Irishman can be proud that he's Irish, and he has a brogue, and if that's his way, that's his way, and that's great. If the Polish people want to talk with their Polish language, have a gay festival and wear the bright costumes and do the polka, I think that's great too, and I love to do the polka. In fact, an interesting note is that the thing sweeping the Pueblo countries right today is the polka. Really! I was really surprised. We were down there late this summer, and I'm hearing this polka music on everybody's record player and tape deck, and I finally said, "What's with all the Polish. You
got a Polish band around here?" "No, we've just taken to the polka," and everybody was doing the polka. It's kind of ironic that a culture that had been denied its own dances and its own music, was absorbing a music from another group who were part of the establishment who denied them that right, and yet had lost theirs and we were using theirs they lost.

SM: My office mate will be pleased to hear what you've said, because he's right now working on a whole course in ethnicity. He is working on all the various ethnic groups in the city of St. Louis complex area, and that means dozens of those. He's trying to put it together in some kind of an organized form for courses that we'll offer. Now they won't be required, as you said, but they at least are a step in the direction.

LP: That's good.

SM: Another encouraging comment. A school up in northern Minnesota, which six years ago had a couple of dozen Indian students, now has a full-fledged Indian studies program, with half a dozen people involved as instructors and a couple of hundred students.

LP: Terrific, beautiful.

SM: And that's just been in the last five or six years.

LP: Yes, it has just been in the last six years that we have really progressed at all. For a long time education was something that the Indian people felt wasn't a part of them. Primarily because their parents and grandparents are products of the boarding schools, where they had unpleasant experiences; where they were not really trained in anything, and were alienated against their own people, and so their recollections or memories of school were not good. And when their children came along, they entered into other missionary schools,
or they too were involved with boarding schools, or with local school districts near the reservations. They were not encouraged to go, and if the child didn't show any interest in it, the parents agreed, "Well, that's all right because it's not very good anyway, it never really helped me," and so we have a kind of an apathy about education. "It's not going to do us any good. Yes, it would be nice if we could do these things, but the education they give us doesn't qualify us to do anything, so why bother?" Now we know that the only way to beat the system is to know it, and we are at that point. We are learning. We have turned out many, many college graduates; we have many people in the masters' programs and doctorate programs and who are now taking their place in the various colleges and universities, at a sacrifice, I might add, to help get the Indian people through the system, and to be able to have a better economic standard of living. And that's really what we're after, to raise the economic level, better health.

SM: Do you have quite a few Indian students here at Highline College?

LP: We usually range--and I don't have a statistic print-out on that yet--usually we run between 93 to 100 students on the campus.

SM: And then you have other groups here as well?

LP: Yes. Usually it will run, oh, 80 to 90 blacks. All of these are up this year so it's kinda hard for me to know just . . . but like from last year's figures, we have about 130 Asians and we had about 35 Chicanos.

SM: Chicanos get up here too? Do they come up along the coast?

LP: No, primarily they come up through the Yakima Valley. Many of them are from the migrant workers, and they get into the Yakima area, and many of them do come over to this area to work in some of the
plants and some of the factories, and then they stay and begin to
grow roots, and so now they are getting into the educational system
too, which is good.

SM: So you have quite a cosmopolitan flavor to the college here, don't you?

LP: Yes, really.

SM: I imagine, then, that your division or department . . . or how do you
call it?

LP: Well the minority affairs office is a part of the student services,
and my particular position is one of administration, so I work with
the administrators, am classified as administrator, working within
the administration function of the college, rather than faculty or
staff.

SM: Do you get a chance to work with the students quite a bit?

LP: Yes, oh yes. Yeah, that's pretty near my whole life.

SM: Do you have other people--counselors and that sort of personnel--
helping you?

LP: Well, not really. I am the person in my office, along with my secre-
tary, and we have a real good working relation with the counseling
center, which is fully staffed with counselors, and we have the
student government office at the other end which deals with all of
the students, the student functions, clubs, the senate, all of that,
which are actually the students themselves and their coordinator, and
we function pretty much on our own really.

SM: It seems to be a place where the students react favorably.
LP: Gravitate to. That's right.

SM: They like to come in here, apparently, so that's a nice, happy thought. This is one of the larger community colleges in the state, isn't it?

LP: It's probably the largest FTE and student-wise, really. This year we have nearly 9,000 students, which is terrible.

SM: Yes, that's a big one. They are all state operated here, aren't they?

LP: Yes, right. The only problem here is that they are state operated, and our funding depends solely on the legislature, and most of the time the legislature hasn't really approved of community colleges.

SM: They like universities better?

LP: They like the universities.

SM: That's a problem that we in community colleges have had to struggle with a little. I think they are going to make it.

LP: Well, I hope so, because, to me, that is the real way to go. It's very difficult to take an 18-year old out of a fairly secure school situation where he knows everyone, he has all of his friends, he is familiar with his own, his surrounding community, and to lift him out of that community into a totally foreign situation, where he becomes really a number, and that number totals 30,000 to 40,000 people, he soon gets lost, and they're doing a few more things towards helping these young students in the beginning within the universities, but they're not doing very much, and they're losing them just left and right. But, I don't know, it seems like they don't care enough. In
the community college situation, the student, he lives within that community, he's familiar with most of the people around that community, his home is generally within that community, although we have commuters. He's not too far removed, and he has some changes--they're gradual--he knows his professors, his teachers, and he can have a more personal kind of relation interaction that he gets to know the teachers and they get to know him, and therefore makes a lot of difference in his attitude towards his class and the grades he's getting and even the vocation that he wants to take for a life field, makes the adjustment easier.

SM: Do you have to go out and recruit some of the Indian students?

LP: Yes I do.

SM: How do you go about that? Do you go out and talk to them in person?

LP: Well, generally, the high schools will have a career day or awareness, and they invite the college to come and set up a table and have the fliers and things passed out. They pick out a specific school, and they invite other schools within their district, and the colleges come into the school, the other high schools also come into the school, and you can visit and talk with each other in the school that you're particularly interested in, and in that way we do talk with the students as individuals. We give them all kinds of information relating to the courses we have on campus, the catalogs and all that sort of thing, and are available, of course, to answer any questions they might have. We also have several colleges within an area--now tomorrow is a recruiting day. Tomorrow here on our campus we have invited probably eight or nine high schools to come in here and we will talk to them about Highline Community College. I will be going from my campus to another college, and they are doing the same thing, and I will talk to them . . . I will have a table, and anyone who is from my area, or who thinks they might come into my area, they come to my table and
talk to me and ask me any questions relating to the school. Now that is for minorities, for minority students. The others are for all students, and we talk to all students too.

SM: We have so few Indian students in our St. Louis system, we wish there were more. Are there any other programs going on here in the area now that are helping in all this greater understanding?

LP: Well, I like to think that the Northwest, or particularly Washington and the Puget Sound area, is probably one of the most advanced areas in the whole country with regard to Indian education. We have, within the Seattle public schools, the Indian Heritage Program, which takes children from, I believe, nine, ten, eleven, around that age group, say, usually fourth through the sixth grades, and two or three times a week they'll have Indian Heritage, and they go into the school—these are Indian people, teachers—they also have counselors who serve to help the students who are having problems. They have a tutoring program, they have a health counselor, a family liaison or counselor. They're all really kind of counselors who work with the family and the school system itself, the students and the family, kind of round robin, and in the school, during the class, they teach them about the Indian way of life. They ask the students if they know what tribe they are. If they do not know, then they try to identify the tribe, and they pick, like what area did you come from, what area was your grandmother raised in, or your grandparents, or your mother, and then they try to identify the tribe from around that area, and then the child takes that—if he doesn't know his tribe—he'll take that as his tribe, and he learns all about them—how they lived and where they lived and the food they ate and the clothes they wore, their art work and all the things that they had. And then they also have an art period where they learn how to do some of the
Indian drawing, making baskets, doing beadwork, all kinds of things, woodcarving. And they also have United Indians of All Tribes, which is a separate group, with various programs funded through the federal government and Title IV. They have cultural programs where they teach children cultural things. And adults, they also have adult basic education; they also have a group who do curriculum development for Indian children. We have terrific health service programs. We have a Seattle Indian Health Board which has a clinic up in the PHS hospital, and they service all of the urban people. We have STOWW who also has a public health program which services 21 different tribes and landless Indian people who live around in this Northwest area. We have, of course, an Indian Center in Tacoma, and a center in the Seattle area which are to serve Indian people with clothing, referral, emergency foods and that sort of thing.

SM: The whole thing, then, seems to be going pretty well?

LP: Yeah, I think so. I think so. We're really pushing, and with the aid of the federal government on this Title IV Indian education money, we're able to do a lot of things to help Indian people. One of the real big concerns is curriculum development—having curriculum that is meaningful to Indian people, Indian and Alaskan natives. You know, it's one thing to teach a non-Indian person about Jane and Dick, who have their particular kinds of clothing and dress, and the kind of home that they live in of the average middle white. It doesn't have too much meaning for an Indian family who are living in a tent or an old car body, or in one of the tenement dwellings, whose father they maybe have never seen or rarely see, or whose father certainly doesn't go to work in a business suit, and he doesn't get off exactly at 5:00. And sometimes, if you look into their houses, they don't look the same, so it's kinda hard for the Indian student to relate, to understand that, to understand the words that relate to that. And so we have been concerned in curriculum development in having things that are pertinent to the Indian child. And I think that could be
taken even to the non-Indian community in the low white income communities, like Appalachia, and some of the heavy urban areas that are heavily populated that really don't relate to the kinds of things the average white would be exposed to. The average white comes from a highly academic kind of background--newspapers, books, reading, writing, a proper grammar, good manners, or what they call good manners, say a set form or way of living, and the non-Indian people, their way is different, and it doesn't mean that either one is right and the other is wrong, but it means that they each should respect one another, and not condemn the other.

SM: Do you think we've been making a little progress in that direction lately?

LP: Well, I don't know. I hope so. I really do hope so, but sometimes some of the young white people that I speak to are very racist, very racist. They don't understand, they are not familiar with things that happened. They always give you this old thing of, "Well, it's not my fault. It was my grandfather's fault." When it is their fault. It's their fault for perpetuating myths, stereotypings, for turning a mute ear.

SM: And they do do that sometimes?

LP: That's right.

SM: I was going to ask about the fishing situation on the Sound.

LP: The young lady you talked to today, her family is involved in fishing, so she is more knowledgeable about that kind of thing. I will give you a copy of the Boldt Decision. It's up to the people to obey the laws that have been presented by Congress. When they throw out the treaties, they throw out the law, and when you do that, you have a lawless land, and the Indian people, when they signed treaties,
didn't always recognize what they were signing, and that's true. They were deceived many, many times, and many times the non-Indian people, in presenting treaties, said one thing, wrote something else, and the Indian interpreted something else, and so we really have something that's kind of interpreted three different ways, but written one, and, in the end, when the Indian reads the law and he understands it to say, "You will be allowed to fish and hunt and gather berries in all of the usual and accustomed places," it means just that, and that is what he expects the law to uphold, because it is the law, and the people to support and respect that law.

SM: Is that the big problem right now? The Boldt Decision was handed down, but the law enforcement people, it is claimed, are not carrying it out?

LP: Are not carrying it out. That is right. And so they defy the law.

SM: And right now, well, are there more court cases pending that would attempt to settle it more specifically?

LP: I think there are. I think there are other court cases. And, of course, the harassment the Indian people have had to go through in this whole thing is really bad. In the first place, the Indian people who are doing the fishing are fishing for food on the table, and the sports fishermen, nine out of every ten never eat the fish they catch.

SM: Then commercial fishing is involved on both sides too, isn't it?

LP: That's right. And the commercial fishing, with these great nets and seine sweepers which sweep the waters bare, you know, there's where the fish depletion is. And also, the foreign fishing fleets which sit out here off our coast, and they really sweep the bottoms bare.
I've talked with fishermen who say that both Russia and Japan have these great big mother ships, and their fishing fleets will just drag the bottoms and then go dump their load and come back and drag again. And when these big masses of fish are coming through, they get stopped before they hit the mouth of our waters, before they ever get in here. And they're fishing pretty close to our shoreline, within our limit.

SM: What is it, a 12-mile limit now?

LP: Yes, um hm.

SM: They come right up to it?

LP: Right in, and sometimes over. So there is something they need to look at.

SM: Yes, international enforcement of good conservation, as well as the laws.

LP: That's right. You know, all of the tribes I know that do fishing have a regulated time for fishing, and they fish so many days, they're off so many days, they fish at certain hours during the day, and so it's pretty well regulated.

SM: By themselves?

LP: Yes, by themselves. They've always done it that way, always.

SM: Well, I hope it can get settled somehow amicably so that it works out.

LP: I do too.
SM: Lee, I know the time is pressing, so I thank you very much for helping today with this.

LP: Oh, that's all right. Glad to have you.

SM: I appreciate it.

LP: Thank you.