ROBERT ROSEBEAR,
Chippewa - Sioux - Cree
August 26, 1975
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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.

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LISTENING TO INDIANS

NO. 27

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

Today I'm talking to Rosebear, full Anglo-Indian name, Robert Rosebear. He prefers Rosebear; and ... are you a Chippewa?

Robert Rosebear:

You want the full blood line?

SM: Yes.

RR: I am 50% a Chippewa, I am 25% Sioux, 1/8 Cree and 1/8 French.

SM: You've almost got a war started there someplace.

RR: Not really. How I became Sioux, do you wanta know that? That's a nice story.

SM: Yes, good.

RR: There's an awful lot of languages. You know, our history is handed down mouth to mouth. I asked, you know, how did I become Sioux? Now this is gonna be a little complicated, and so it goes: I can't estimate how many years it was, how many generations back, but at one time--this was during the war between the Sioux and the Chippewa--and what happened was one raiding party of Sioux came and wiped out, you know, one village; that started the war. Then the Chippewas retaliated, and so during this conflict this old man lost his son, but before this he gave him a grandson. Now for some reason the grandson died, they estimated he was 10 years old. His grandson died so there was no more family tree for him, and just then the Chippewa party went to retaliate some more, and it turned out they brought back a 10-year-old Sioux boy to replace his grandson, and that's how Sioux came into our family.
SM: Do you know some of those others?

RR: And over the years there were other Sioux intermixed in, but that's how, you know, Sioux first got a stronghold within the Rosebears, or original name of Redbear, and so that's now why I'm 25% Sioux. Oh, well, if you figure up so many years back, I should be only 1/64 Sioux in the bloodline from that 10-year-old kid that was full-blooded Sioux, but I guess along the way there were more Sioux intermixing. I picked up some Sioux from my mother, and my father had a little bit in him, from that 10-year-old boy.

SM: Well, Rosebear, what is your job here at the Indian center?

RR: Well, I was hired as conservator, which is mainly to restore and preserve the Indian artifacts that come into our museum section. I have no training in it, but over the years I just fooled around, I guess I'm good with my hands, and I started repairin' things, and all of a sudden Ron noticed that, and he said, "Well, since we're havin' the museum section, would you be our conservator?" Because, like if a pipestone pipe breaks, I repaired it and you couldn't even see the crack, and it was strong, it held together, and just, you know, just bein' good with my hands, and so I was conservator. Now bein' a small building, we couldn't have too many employees here, you know; we don't wanta crowd it, so they doubled up on jobs and gave me audio-visual technician. I'm not as knowledgeable in the field, but he said I could pick it up, so I'm bein' instructed as the years go by in this area.

SM: So you're learning audio-visual activities while you're also working on anything that comes in that needs attention?

RR: Right, and that's if somethin's broke in shippin', I repair it before it's shipped to another place after we exhibit it, and I guess most of my work will be as an audio-visual technician. I got a wide
field--I can create a library in video tape, the crafts, you know, all known crafts to us, on video tape--like in two weeks we're gonna go up to the survival school at the American Indian Movement's convention.

SM: Where is that?

RR: It's up by Leech Lake. It's on the White Earth Reservation.

SM: There's a place over there near Mahnomen that they call "the ranch," where they have a survival school or a rehabilitation center.

RR: And they're sendin' me up there for the four-day convention, and I'll be video tapin' and mostly it's to document how it began, how AIM got this school started. I'll be doing those sessions, videotaping--put it on a lot of casettes. I'll have about 20 casettes goin' in different parts of the convention so I don't miss anything, and then come back here and put it all together in a series. Let's say I could present a series and slides--take slide pictures, and I'll have the casettes right with it. People come in and they say, you know, "How did the survival school start?" Or else the public schools want to know and I'd send 'em a package with, you know, the slides, and one a week for whatever class they got, and they'd send it back and I'd send 'em another one in the series. Just develop programs along that range.

SM: About you personally now. Did you always live here in Minneapolis?

RR: I'm 28. I've lived in Minneapolis a total of 19 years. I'm predominantly an urban Indian.

SM: But you had experience in some other locality?
RR: Since birth to four years old I was on Red Lake Reservation. I mostly say, when people ask where I'm from, I say Ponemah. Ponemah on Red Lake Reservation is one of the oldest villages we've got. We have Redby and Ridley, other towns, but there they got paved streets and that. In our town we don't, and I lived outside of town, you know, where it's still with the old ways mostly.

SM: Did you speak Chippewa as a child?

RR: I did. I did. But when we moved to the city my father realized that, you know, we're in a white society, nobody to speak Indian to, so he says, "We're gonna live white, we're gonna live in a white society so you're gonna have to learn to adjust," so he did not permit it at home, and there was nobody in the neighborhood, so over those years I lost it. I went to college and took two quarters of it, but I found it difficult. If you knew it and forgot it and went back, I found it harder than one who didn't know it and took the class.

SM: Where did you take it?

RR: At the university.

SM: Of Minnesota? Here?

RR: Yes. They have Sioux and Chippewa now.

SM: They teach the Chippewa language, or, as they say, they prefer Ojibway, at Bemidji State College. The university has a course in both Sioux and Chippewa?

RR: Well, they got quite a few Indian courses here. The university's American Indian Studies Program developed that, and they had the American Indians' student association, and I belonged to that then,
and just then they started those classes, that was about '67-'68 they started giving classes in Chippewa and started developing more Indian programs.

SM: Well, how's the work going here now at the center? It's a magnificent building.

RR: Well, the buildin' looks nice. I wish it could function as well as the building would say that we should, you know, the beautiful building and all this, it says the people inside should. . . .

SM: It's brand new, isn't it?

RR: Yes, it is. It was just completed. The museum staff moved in, say about two months ago, and, yeah, we had a grand opening in May, but then we had a grand closing right afterwards, 'cause we had no facilities. We just wanted to open it up during Indian Week, yeah. But we had nothin' for the public, so we had to obviously close, and we had a gallery down on the museum floor out there that was local artists, their sculptures, paintings--Indian artists--and, you know, we had powwows every day for a whole week, but ever since then we've been waiting for our equipment to come in, furniture, and everybody else to move in, like the social service, you know, for them, and without them we really couldn't do anything. Like I was gonna develop a visual program with all the social services, you know, like, let's say . . . emergency food. We wanted people to come here, you know, so I would develop a slide program to send around to community places and they would see the slides seein' what we have to offer visually, instead of callin' up, telephonin' them word of mouth to one of their clients. I'd rather show it to 'em visually, it'd have more of an impact, and so I'm waitin' for them to come in.

SM: As far as the center goes, your efforts are in the museum part of it?
RR: Directly it is, but indirectly I could do work for others, like recreation. You know, if they all of a sudden wanted to start, like pro-football, when they have games, you know, our center will have a team, maybe they'd like a record of that--I'd have to teach one of the staff in video-tapin', let's say, or 8-millimeter, 16 millimeter movies, and so they could tape their own and I'd edit it, or some- thin' like that, so I wouldn't have to be runnin' around just for these things, but directly, yes, in the museum section, my own pro- gram. But we won't turn down anybody that comes in and asks, "Well, would you do a program for us?" I'd say, "Yes." The only cost would be for the tapes, but not for my time, 'cause that's a function of my job, for the community too.

SM: Rosebear, before you got started here now, your folks moved to Minneapolis?

RR: Yes, and then I was shipped to Sisseton, South Dakota.

SM: You didn't go to school here then?

RR: I did later. I was shipped there to an orphanage. Let's see, there was four of us in the family then, and the three youngest were sent to the orphanage with one of my cousins, and we stayed there a number of years, and the reason for this was, when my parents moved to the city, my father started goin' to Dunwoody takin' architecture, and he couldn't actually afford us. It's like a placement program the Bureau of Indian Affairs put on. They'll bring you down here, and that never worked, because they bring you down here, and they say, "O.K.," but the programs then were supposed to be . . . they bring you down here . . . direct you in the sense of finance. On the reservation you don't pay the rent, you don't pay that much for electricity, if you had it. You don't pay for water 'cause you had the pump. All these sort of things you did not pay, and up north your food was, you
know, more or less you hunted for your food, you did get commodities and that, the treaties say, you know, furnish food and education for us. So when they came down here, well, my father was going to school, I guess it was on the G.I. bill to pay for the schoolin', but not enough to feed all of us. And my father, since he was goin' to school full time, he didn't work. So they sent us away until he got out of school, got his job, and a decent income where he could afford us, and then he could take us out of the school, the orphanage.

SM: And brought you back here?

RR: Right.

SM: And then you went to school here?

RR: Yes. They sent me to parochial schools, but I couldn't hack parochial, because of Sisters. You know, you have nuns there. I would say I'm a non-vegetarian. I eat only meat and starches, because my body rejects vegetables, which is due to a ... you could say, to the beatin' I got there. Like I remember one incident--I was young then--I wouldn't eat string beans so one held me and one fed me, and then I just threw it up, and they got another plate and did it again. So I'm quite down on vegetables for that reason. My body can retain it, but my mind won't let me, and so that's why I couldn't hack parochial school. I came down here, all of a sudden, you know, I developed a speech impediment. Every now and then it comes back. And so I'm on the playground, see, "Hey, throw me that ball," you know. It would come out from a distance like, "Hey, I got foul language." So I'd go in and the head Sister would take you and put your finger in a soap bottle, liquid soap, then you'd have to suck your finger all day, and they'd make sure you didn't go to the drinking fountain. Things like that. It was St. Elizabeth's. It's torn down now. And so they put me in a public school, Clay school, which
is torn down now, it's by Wilson Library at the university. That
now occupies Clay school's foundation, and there they gave me two
year's speech therapy. I rather liked that 'cause I learned to talk
clearly.

SM: You seem to have no speech impediment now.

RR: Oh, it comes back when I'm nervous, or excited, or also when I've
got a lot to say, all of a sudden. . . .

SM: It rushes out and piles up?

RR: More or less. Yeah. Or else I can't say a word. It's in my mind,
but it ain't gonna come out of my mouth, you know, it's more like
Porky Pig thing, you know, and from there to Phillips Junior High.
It's still there, and then to South High. And then to Metropolitan
Junior College to get my English out of the way, because the Univer­
sity of Minnesota will kill you in English, and stayed there . . .
well, beyond 12th grade I had a total of five years of college, no
degree.

SM: Beyond the 12th, so you had five years of college, at the university?

RR: The university and the Metropolitan Junior College, and I took a
21-month course at Vocational. This was after the two years in
Metropolitan, and I wanted to be an architect because I love drafting,
more or less follow in my dad's footsteps, but not in the same form
of drafting. And so I got 14 months, and then the economy changed--
this was in '67, and the economy, and also the people that graduated,
I talked to them. I knew them 'cause we had overlapping classes, and
only one was in an architectural field, the other ones were all
cooks, and all this, 'cause there was no money to build, so there was
no money for people to draw the buildin's that nobody wanted to build.
So I got out of there after 14 months, and then I went to the university. So that's a total of five years of school beyond 12, but, like I said, no degree, because I couldn't understand—I had a hassle with my advisor at the university—but I couldn't understand certain courses I had to take I wasn't interested in, was never in my field, but they round you out, and then give you a degree, you know. I couldn't dig that, so I went into physics and ecology, and those two don't click for any kind of degree, so I just took courses I wanted to take, and I enjoy that.

SM: So that's the type of the educational background that you have, but you didn't get a degree.

RR: Right.

SM: Well, now, the work is going well here, and you're certainly involved in a fascinating activity.

RR: Well, see, I'm here because of Ron Libertus. I more or less idolize him, in a sense—his ability. When he has an idea, he can put it on paper, large ideas, not just for himself, but a large idea for an idea to work. He puts it on paper in a proposal form, gives it to the government, and then they fund it, and then you hire the people also and you direct it for the people. I rather like that, and so I stuck with him, and I met him when I was goin' to the university, and I was in a program, I was their token Indian, but I benefitted from it. They needed an Indian in their program, because it was a government program and they had to have it balanced, and it was called, "Careers in Urban Planning. That's how I got into this field, so I go to school part time, and they sent me to the—you work the other part time—Minnesota Indian Affairs Commission. At that time the person in charge was . . . I didn't get along with, 'cause I had long hair then too, and whenever we went to tribal conferences and
all that, he'd introduce everybody and then stop at me, and that's it, you know. And I had to pay my own way, you know, where everybody else got their ways paid, and I said, "This isn't workin' out," so I went to the program director of Careers in Urban Planning, which is called CUP, that's no longer existing, and I says, "Hey, I'm not getting anywhere." Well, "Work out something, just so you're gettin' some knowledge." So I said, "O.K." So I took off out of there, and I was liason between them and this Minneapolis asphalt reservation, Franklin Avenue, you know, and so all of a sudden they start developin' the idea for this, you know. That's where I met Ron, and Ron says, "Start gatherin' some statistics of why the building is needed, and all this; compile it for me," and then he'll put it in the right context. O.K., and then we're in one building, I'd meet him at one building, I'd work there, and it was a model cities building, it was over on Lake Street. Also, then he had more files, I used his files. I just have to find all the little bits and pieces, and so I went to his office at Minneapolis Institute of Arts. O.K., I followed him there, and all of a sudden I quit CUP, and I started workin' for him at the Institute--miscellaneous jobs, electrician and all this, until this portable museum was developed there, another one of his ideas, I guess. He borrowed an exhibit--the first one was Phillip Pillsbury's collection of west and central African art, musical instruments, wooden sculptures, you know things like that. Then we built the display cases, bought movies of that region, animated ones, because they mostly went to public schools, lectures and that, so I read up on all the material as we were buildin' a case, and ready to go. Schedule all the schools, you know, one school a week, get all the students in one hour, 30 kids per hour, and you know, lecture to six classes a day, and then we got an Indian mobile gallery started. So we had two of 'em, and I was just pickin' up, I was learnin' how to lecture, I was learnin' how to be unshy about it, how not to stutter when I got nervous in front of a lot of people, and then I started goin' to colleges lecturin' too, because, you know, more
reading, more pieces, and . . . it didn't stop there. All of a sudden the Institute started goin' bad financially. The rich people stopped dyin' and a long time ago there was a thing—to leave your money, half of it to a museum or somethin'—people stopped doin' that, so their money stopped comin' in slowly, so you're cuttin' back so I quit . . . no, I got into a hassle. I was drafted in '66, '67, '68, '69 and '70, and fought 'em all . . . or I got deferments.

SM: For each of those years?

RR: Yeah, each of those summers. I got deferments then. This one year I got two in a row, and so all of a sudden I ran out of deferments, and I says I'm still not goin', and they took me to court. At that time I was workin' at the Institute, and they sent the FBI after me, and some people at work said, "Don't come back to work here," so I went around and I found American Friends, it's a Quaker group—they put my bail up and so then I reported in. I says, "Here I am." I went down town to the marshall, and he just put me through the whole booking thing, and he says, "You're free to go now," and I says, "What about those people back at work?" So he calls me into the FBI office and I says, "Hey, call your dogs off." He says, "What did you call them?" I says, "That's what we think of them, not much of anything." O.K. So they left me alone, and a year later I came to court, and I was sentenced to two years in Sandstone, that's a federal prison here up north. And I went back to work, I had ten days to report.

SM: To report to go to prison?

RR: Yeah, right. And ten days to straighten out all my affairs, you know, pack my stuff, store it and all that. So I went back to work, you know, kinda dismal, and the director of the museum there, he wanted to see me. So I went and saw him. So he says, "What's this
I'm hearin' about you?" So I said, "I've been drafted many times, this one went to court, and they sentenced me to a two-year sentence." "Well, why didn't you tell me?" I says, "I never followed the policy to go to anybody and say, "Hey, I'm in court, what can you do for me." How many people do that, or who do you think you should go to? I, least of all, thought to go to the director of the museum and say, "Hey, I'm in court." I couldn't imagine what he could do for me. He says, "Well, the trustees, two of them are lawyers with their own firms, and they went to school." Now I don't know if this should be on tape or not, but anyway he says, "We could of talked to the judge, or we could of worked somethin' out." I says, "What do you mean?" They didn't say it verbally, but it turned out poor people go to jail, people with influence and money get off, or else suspended sentence or like that; it dawned on me later it turned out to be true. So he says, "What are you gonna do?" I says, "I'm gonna report." He says, "Aren't you gonna appeal it?" I says, "That costs $5,000, I haven't got that. I already owe $2,000 for just goin' to court." And he says, "Well, appeal it and we'll see if we can pay for it. I'll talk to the trustees," and all that, so they said they would pay my appeal, so we appealed, and in the meantime they talked to the judge who sentenced me, and it came out that if I lost my appeal, the judge who sentenced me would reduce my sentence--I could work as alternative service--in a sense you reduce it.

SM: A waiver. You could work, but under probation?

RR: Yeah, that's if I lost my appeal. O.K., and he didn't put it in writing, this is verbal now. And I lost my appeal, and just before I lost my appeal, that judge died of leukemia, so I lost out two ways there, and it came back, and there was a thing called "Judge shopping." So we were gonna go back to a judge for reduction of sentence.

SM: With a different judge?
RR: Right. Judge shopping is look for a judge that you want that's sympathetic to this sort of case. It was in the paper at the time we were judge shopping that they were tryin' to cancel that out, you know--ask for the judge that you want--and I think they did, but anyway, it was before we got the judge that more or less did not believe in rehabilitation in the sense that the prisoners could do a hundred per cent on certain, you know, on certain people it's good, on certain people it's not... it's not necessary for this rehabilitation, or... I forget what the word was. And so I went before him and he says, "Is there anything you can say before I decide on sentence?" And I said, "Hey, look. Going to prison is to make a better citizen out of me? Like I broke the law and you're gonna send me up there, you know, to learn not to break the law. O.K., there's only one law I broke. I choose not to go to Service at this time. You know, first they take me for six months, teach me, you know, how to defend myself... against what? I can do that now. But this is more sense to go someplace and do it to a stranger. Fine. I couldn't dig that, and I couldn't dig not takin'... well, I had to take training even if they didn't send me to Viet Nam. Wherever they sent me, I'd be takin' up a slot where someone else could go. So either way I didn't approve of it. Now that's why... you know, that's the law I broke. I choose not to hurt fellow men, you know, more or less to kill, let's say. Now I'm askin' for reduction of sentence, two years in Sandstone, because you're gonna send me up there to do what? To rehabilitate me and make a good citizen out of me? The only way I'm not a good citizen is, I choose not to kill. Are you gonna send me up there to teach me how to kill? When I come out I'll be a good citizen--I'll have that feelin' of killin' you know, to teach me it's my duty to kill." I don't know how I said it, but someone said I had a silver tongue that day. But the judge just smiled and said, "H...u...m...ph." I guess he heard it before, but it was the form I put it in. "Well, O.K., now you submitted a place where you could work as alternative service." He gave me a
choice. He says, "Well, how about just for the experience of it I send you up for 30 days?" And I says, "Hey, man, that's less than two years. Yeah." And then my lawyer intervened and said, "Your Honor, I don't think he understood." And the judge said again, "Would you take 30 days in prison and two years probation, or one year's alternative service and two year's probation?" I took the one year's alternative service of this place as a choice, 'cause this place and building is non-profit, and two year's probation. Just last May I got a notice that I'm off probation now. I was one year here alternative service, plus one year probation, and then they cut off the other year of probation. So I'm free now, but I'm convicted. I just talked to my lawyer the other day.

SM: You were convicted?

RR: I'm a convicted felon.

SM: Yes, but you're free now.

RR: As Ron says, "I'm an alleged and convicted felon." He loves to say it that way, you know, 'cause I was put in his care. And so, here I am, and I stayed, you know, even after that.

SM: That was an experience, and it did work out fairly well, under the circumstances.

RR: Yes, but the judge who reduced my sentence also was talked to by the people from the Institute, because they too went to school with this judge. See, with the money and the influence, you've got it. But I still . . . you know, I took up some of that money, like we had a gentleman's agreement I'd pay back whatever they'd put in, so I wouldn't owe anybody, and so I pay that back as much as I can. I only got a thousand dollars left to go, but my lawyer says now I can
get my conviction . . . eliminated, because of this amnesty program.

SM: Can you?

RR: Yes, he says it can be eliminated.

SM: Get taken off the record?

RR: Right.

SM: So then ever since you've been here working with Ron?

RR: Right. I've been here since January.

SM: And then over here at the center?

RR: Right. See, first they had temporary offices. Now I couldn't start workin' as soon as the judge let me go, because there was no finances for me, and there wasn't a job placing yet, you know, there wasn't a job opening, or this job was not developed yet on paper, to say that we needed one. So I waited six months, and in January of this year is when I started. So I was six months on unemployment, and six months here, and that was a full year.

SM: We've come to the end of the tape, your friends are waiting for you, so, thank you, Rosebear.