Listening to Indians

ALICE SPINKS, Apache
ROY SPINKS, Klamath
September 25, 1975
Muskogee, Oklahoma

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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NO. 42

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Sam Myers:
We're in Muskogee, Oklahoma, talking with two very interesting people, Alice Spinks and Roy Spinks, and it's especially interesting because there are several paradoxes here. Mrs. Spinks has taught weaving here at Bacone College for years, haven't you?

Alice Spinks:
Yes, arts and crafts.

SM: You're a White Mountain Apache lady?

AS: Yes sir.

SM: And Roy is a Klamath Indian from the Northwest coast.

Roy Spinks:
Yeah, I live on the Klamath River.

SM: Did you originally come from the Klamath River, Roy?

RS: Yeah.

SM: Where did you meet your wife? Down in the White Mountains?

RS: No, I met her at a school--Sherman Institute. It's a school down in the southern part of California.

SM: You went down to California to school, and Alice you went west to California to school, and you met there when you were both students. And here you are. Now, how long have you been teaching here at Bacone, Alice?

AS: Oh, about 38 years, maybe more.
SM: Well, now, the paradoxes I mentioned. For example, so many people think of the Navajos as being the weavers, but Alice is an Apache, and she is doing the weaving with the traditional loom, except it's been improved a little, hasn't it?

AS: Yes.

SM: And she's woven some very intricate things. It baffles me how she can keep it all straight. And then Roy, the Klamath Indian here, found his bride from the Apache people and in California. So that's all very interesting and not the usual thing in stories and movies. Thirty eight years, Alice! Did you start out teaching weaving here when you came?

AS: No, it was quite interestin'. See, I just had high school, and they wanted to put in Indian arts and crafts, because I was raised with all this Indian art.

SM: Where did you yourself learn how to weave?

AS: I'm comin' to that. Anyhow, they wanted me to teach. At the time, oh very badly, they wanted to put in an Indian . . . they wanted to express the Indian since we're an Indian college, so they asked me to teach, and I told 'em, "no," I didn't think I'd want to teach. I didn't feel like I was qualified to teach. "Well," they said, "You know what we want, and we'd like for you to teach our Indian students." At that time most of the Indian students were about as bad off as I was. I was come off the reservation, and I had spoken my language, and I was still learnin' English, you know.

SM: You grew up speaking Apache and you had learned English in school?

AS: Yes. I still had difficulty in speakin' English, so I didn't feel
like . . . even, of course, Bacone at that time had many full-blood Indian students who were in that same predicament as I was, so really it wasn't too bad, I guess. But I didn't want to teach, but, anyhow, the president of the college at that time was Dr. Weeks, and A. C. Blue Eagle was the first one to put in the full arts and crafts here. So they kept after me until I finally give in and started teachin'. And I told 'em, "I'll help you out, but one year till you can get somebody else." And every year, of course, it's been that way. And then, of course, the weavin' came in later. We had a weavin' teacher here later on--a wonderful woman--and she had learned to do all types of weavin'.

SM: Was she an Apache woman?

AS: No, she was a white woman, but she was quite interested in different types of weavin'. So when she left they didn't have anybody to teach weavin'. But in the meantime I had gotten interested through Miss Hamilton, watchin' her and everything, that I would like to learn to do different types of weavin'. I had done this hand weavin'--finger weavin' they call 'em--I had learned how to do that, so I got interested, so Roy made me this little loom out of iron. And it did all right, so I started weavin' a Navajo pattern on it, you know, just learnin', to see whether I can do it or not. So one day the president of the college, at that time Dr. Prentis Thompson was the president. He came down there, they were wantin' a weavin' teacher. He said, "Alice, we need a weavin' teacher real bad. Would you take the weavin'?" I told him, "No, I don't know anything about weavin'. Why do you want me to teach for?" And I was sittin' there weavin' when he was talkin' to me. He said, "Alice, what are you doin'?" And I said, "I'm weavin'." "Well, that's what we want you to teach." And I told him I didn't think I could do it. He said, "Would you please try, and that's what we want, what you're doin' there--that's Indian weavin' that you're doin'." I said, "Yes sir." He said,
"Would you take that job besides your other work?" I told him I'd try, so I went to work that year, teachin' all the handcraft—that included beadwork and tapestry on materials and different things. But I got along pretty good, but not havin' had any weavin', I was very uncomfortable teachin'. I had studied up enough on weavin' that I knew quite a bit even about Colonial weavin', because I had read their weavin' books and looked through it, you know. That's the way I had to actually pick it up by myself. And then, in the meantime, this man from Tahlequah, he was in charge of all the weavin' in government school here in Oklahoma, and arts and crafts, Mr. Ames. He came to see me and I was tellin' him about my predicament that I didn't think I knew enough about weavin' that I shouldn't be teachin' it. "Alice, he said, "You're doin' a beautiful job. I think you should teach weavin'. We need an Indian person in here to do the teachin' weavin'." So he said, "I'll come and see you every now and then. Just write out questions, what you don't know, and I'll help you." So he came and helped me quite a bit, but still with that, I wasn't too sure of myself. So I was workin' in North Carolina with the Unto These Hills every summer.

SM: You'd leave here and go there in the summer?

AS: Yes. In the summertime I worked with the play there, and they gave the teachin' weavin'—they had a teacher from Texas.

SM: Is that the Cherokee people?

AS: Yes, that's the Cherokee drama that they have in North Carolina, and they had all professors were teachin' different arts and crafts, like silversmith, pottery, weavin', different things, even history and so forth. So I just joined the class then, and I took up the weavin' so I could at least know about it. But it really did help me. I didn't learn too much more, but I ... in fact, the teacher
was very young, younger than I was. I was able to help her, and she helped me. And I got along pretty good, and, of course, through that, I was able to come back and felt more free to teach, and I felt like I knew what I was doin'.

SM: It made you feel more secure?

AS: Um hm. I was more sure of myself, puttin' it across to the students. But that's the beginnin' of my weavin', and I've been teachin' weavin' since.

SM: Well I can testify to how beautifully you have learned to do it. So now you have been teaching weaving here these many years, and Roy, your son, teaches silversmithing?

RS: Yeah, teaches silversmithing.

SM: And so the whole family is interested in the student body here, and what they're learning.

AS: Oh yes, uh hum.

SM: You've spent most of your life here, longer here than you did back there in the White Mountains, haven't you?

AS: That's right.

SM: Longer with Roy than with your family.

AS: That's right. It's been very interestin' years, and it's been really very good experience for us, and I think it's helpin' the students, and it helped us too, you know, to live better with other people, and then, of course, teachin' the students, especially our Indian kids, to learn how to live with other people, and to get along with them.
SM: We have several lessons here. First of all, you come from two completely different parts of the country—the two of you—and you've been married all these years, happily apparently, and then your children are teaching too, and then, here you are Apache, but you're teaching the weaving which is ordinarily in most people's minds thought of as a Navajo or Hopi activity. And the silversmithing too. Now your son, you see, who teaches silversmithing, is half Klamath and half Apache, but I suppose he teaches Navajo and Zuni and Hopi, all kinds of silversmithing, doesn't he?

RS: That's right.

SM: That's kind of like a blending of all the traits of all the different areas. And then I saw some of the beadwork you've done too, Alice. Those things are beautiful. They're bolo ties, are they?

AS: Yes, bolo ties, and you can use 'em for necklace—ladies can wear 'em for a necklace.

SM: Very intricate, and the colors are just beautiful. And you say everything you've made has already been sold and you have people waiting?

AS: Yes, I never get caught up.

RS: She has a big waiting list, some of them much as two years back.

AS: Well, I enjoy. I think weavin' and my beadwork is my first love. 'Course I do other things too, like cross stitchin', and I do wood carvin'. I have some wood carvin' in the old house where we were livin'—it's still over there. Maybe I'll take you over there to look at it.

SM: Good. And you make Ojos de Dios?
AS: Oh yes, I started on that. I seen those in Arizona and New Mexico. I was kinda fascinated.

SM: They're fun to make, aren't they?

AS: Yeah, any art, you know, it fascinates me, and the colors. I enjoy doin' it.

SM: When I look around the house here, I see pictures of your children and grandchildren.

AS: Yes, we have grandchildren, and those are some of my nieces and our granddaughters.

SM: Some pretty girls up there, and some cute little bright-eyed kids on this picture. And how about pottery? Have you ever tried that?

AS: Yes, I tried pottery, but I never did have too much luck with it.

SM: Did you make some of these?

AS: No, those were give to me by one of our former Bacone students. He works in a museum in Chicago.

SM: Another interesting detail that I can't resist mentioning. When I talked to the dean of instruction, I asked him if he knew Eugene Wilson. He said no, that must have been before his time, but you knew him.

AS: Yes, we knew him.

SM: Do you know him too, Roy? He was a student here.

RS: He worked for me. I used to be in the maintenance.
SM: He was one of your helpers? He's got a job now in Phoenix with HEW. He's the tribal affairs officer for four states; he's got a pretty important job out there. He said I should be sure to stop at Bacone, and that's how I met you today. He said he went to school here, and it's a wonderful place, and a great bunch of people.

AS: Well, it's really interestin'. Beside my teachin', durin' the depression years Bacone was pretty bad off financially, and they put in their own laundry because the laundry was costin' 'em money. And there again, I had worked in a laundry when I was goin' to government school, but I didn't run no machine, I just ironed. But here the business manager--he was an Indian fellow, Roy Gourd was his name--he said, "Alice, would you like to run the laundry for us?" I said, "My goodness, what do I know about laundry? I worked in a laundry, all I did was iron." So he said, "You're not so stupid to learn to run the machines, are you?" 'Course when anybody tells me I'm stupid, it makes me want to get up and show 'em that I can do it, so I told 'im, "O.K., I'll try." And I went into the laundry business. I had to learn how to run the machines, even watched the boiler. Then I had to train the students to work in the laundry, you know; we did everything. We had pressin', laundry, we mangled. I taught eight hours a day, and then after school I worked with the students.

SM: That's when you were teaching weaving?

AS: Yeah, I was teachin' the whole bit--arts and crafts, beadin', handwork of all kinds--and in the evenin' I worked with the workin' students that need to work their way through college, so it made it really interestin'. The other day we had a visitor here, one of our workers in the laundry. He always laughs at me, they call me "Maw." He said, "Maw, so you're the one has got me interested in the laundry. Now I have got a great big cleaning establishment in California. I have
taught my brother, now we both have a cleanin' establishment, and doin' real good."

SM: From working with you in the laundry at Bacone?

AS: He got interested in it, so he continued with it after he left school here. And he's made his livin' by it and he is doin' real well.

SM: Tell me a little bit about Bacone now. Was this a church-connected school?

AS: Still is.

SM: But it's non-denominational?

RS: No, it's all religions.

SM: And you can belong to the Native American Church or any Indian religion if you want to too, can't you?

AS: Oh yes.

SM: I mean, you don't have to be one of the Christian religion denominations?

AS: No.

SM: Do you have students other than Indian students here?

AS: Yes, we have whites and blacks.

RS: Yes, there's about 700 students here.

AS: Altogether. And we have, of course, more Indian students from all
over the country, and now we have more Navajo students than we do of any other tribe.

SM: They have a couple of community colleges of their own on the Navajo reservations. But they are the greatest number of people, the largest reservation, aren't they?

AS: Oh yes, they're about the largest tribe, I think, in the United States right now.

SM: Are you still teaching now, Alice?

AS: No, I'm retired this year.

SM: They finally let you have your own way. You're certainly not sitting down doing nothing?

AS: No, I try not to. I have some weavin' here that I'm doin' for a church in Tulsa, it's a Baptist community church.

SM: This church has commissioned you to do several pieces of work?

AS: Twelve of them. They're eight feet long and a yard wide.

SM: How long will that take you?

AS: I have trained another woman--she is a retired woman--and she is helpin' me weave, so we've got five more to go. I hope we'll be through by Christmas or the first of the year.

SM: Have you been working on it over a year?

RS: She don't mean this coming Christmas. I think she means next one.
AS: No, it won't be this comin' Christmas. She's been workin' on it, I've been teachin' and didn't have much time actually to do any of it, and so I try to spend two or three hours each day, 'cause I do other things besides--bead a while, maybe sew a while, weave a while.

SM: Is it hard on your eyes? It's all close work, isn't it?

AS: No, it hasn't bothered my eyes too much, because I have tried to take care of my eyes and get my glasses changed every year, have my eyes tested.

SM: I don't know about the weaving, but the beading would be very difficult.

AS: The beadin' is the one. The weavin' is not too bad on the eyes. It's interestin' work.

SM: How in the world do you keep all those intricate patterns straight, so you know where the threads go?

AS: I don't know. I have a pattern I'm followin' right now. 'Course I measure the most of them by inches, or you count your threads. It's not too hard to do.

SM: Roy was showing me where you press the pedals on the loom. Are those the warp threads?

AS: Yes. The pedal is the one that opens up your head to weave, the way you put your thread through.

SM: So the shuttle, is that what you put through, the shuttle with the thread?

AS: Yes.
SM: So it goes through much more easily, and then you press a different pedal and that raises the opposite thread, and then you go through another way with another one. How do you stop and start when you come to one of those different colors? Do you have to tie a knot?

AS: No, I weave it right back in so it will be smooth on both sides.

RS: She'll come back from one thread, and then with the other color she comes with the same thread back the other way.

AS: They kind of interlock.

SM: So there is no lump there.

AS: Oh no, not any.

SM: Until you see someone or ask someone, you don't know how it works.

RS: On these colonial weavin's . . .

AS: 'Course the other ones are clear through, so you don't have to worry.

SM: Colonial weaving, that's what the early colonists used to do back on the east coast?

AS: Yes.

SM: That's a pretty piece you've got there. It's thick and heavy, and it's third dimensial with the raised effect of some of the threads.

AS: That's a rug.

RS: I did a piece.
SM: Did she criticize you when you were doing it, Roy?

RS: Well, I'd say she did. They was havin' a exhibit out there at Gallup, and I wanted to put mine in for exhibit, and she just looked at it and laughed. And then she went to the instructor, Dick West, and said, "What am I gonna do with Roy. He just keeps wantin' to throw that old rug in there?" He said, "Aw, send it." So she sent it, and I got second prize.

AS: I never did live that down. In fact, they told him, they gave the dimensions, if it was a certain dimension he'd have won the first prize.

SM: But he was a little bit off on the dimensions from what they had in mind? Well, that was interesting.

AS: It was interesting.

RS: I wasn't thinkin' about no dimensions at all when I made the thing.

SM: Have you still got it?

AS: I think we do, but I don't know where it is. We have moved into this mobile and we had to dump everything over here from my other house.

RS: And then we've been tryin' to straighten up ever since.

SM: And when you retired you moved into this mobile home? Where did you live before that?

AS: Down the road here. That's where I want to take you to show you some of my wood carvin' that I done, that I hope I will continue with. When we leave here we hope we will build us a shop.
SM: You're going to leave here? The place might collapse. You've been here through how many presidents?

AS: Good Lord, I don't know.

RS: I wouldn't try to mention 'em 'cause I wouldn't have 'em in order.

SM: Well, I think the whole place would be sad if they ever let you go. Do you have any place in mind?

AS: We're kinda lookin' for a piece of land right around here.

RS: All of our children are around here.

SM: How many children do you have?

AS: Two girls and two boys. One of our daughters is teachin'. You know, people think they're too old to go back to school. Like our daughter, she got married when she finished high school—she wouldn't go to college. We tried to get her to. She was right here, had the advantage and everything. No, she got married. Now she's raised a family, and she decided she'd go back to college. We told her we'd help her to go back to school, which we did help her. So she came back to Bacone here for two years, and then she went to Northeastern here at Tahlequah, and she got her master's degree. She's a counselor for Muskogee school here, counselling all Indian children in Muskogee.

SM: One of the Muskogee public schools?

AS: Yes.

SM: So she lives in the area too. And she's had a lot of experience, she's grown up, she has children of her own, and then she's got a master's degree in counselling.
RS: She was going with her children.

AS: She went to college with her children, and she got on the honor rolls. Her children told her, "Mama, you're just too old to go back to school." I always say I don't think anybody is too old to learn. If you want to learn, go back to school. I think you should, it keeps your mind alert.

SM: We frequently have students from 16 to 65.

AS: I think that's wonderful.

SM: The older students usually are very good students, because they have a purpose and work hard. Well, you are still weaving, and you're still doing beadwork, and you're making some Ojos now and then, and you're planning to get back into wood carving. What else?

RS: Not much else.

SM: That keeps you pretty busy?

AS: Oh yes, it keeps me occupied. I enjoy doin' it. 'Course I've been lookin' forward to retirement.

SM: When did you retire?

AS: Just this spring.

SM: Roy, are you retired yet?

RS: I'm semi-retired.

SM: You're working part time, short hours?
RS: Yeah, in the afternoon I put in about four hours.

SM: So you're semi-retired. You have duties to perform on campus, but you don't have to work a long day. That's kind of nice, and you're right here where you've been a long time, and you know the people, and obviously you like it here. I don't even have to ask you.

AS: Yeah, we'll be lost when we leave Bacone, I imagine.

SM: Well, how's everything else going? All the kids going to school and doing well?

AS: Oh yes. All our grandchildren are in school right now. They're all enjoyin' school, and of course we encourage them to continue their school and study hard. Like one of my grandsons said, "If you wanta know something, just ask Grandma, she knows everything." It's nice when they think you know everything.

SM: They like Grandma all right, and then they go to Grandpa for other kinds of things?

AS: Yes. He helps them with their—like our grandson, he molds, and he helps him with his machines and things I can't do. So we enjoy helpin' our grandchildren.

SM: I think you're part of the institution around here. When I walked in this morning it was Roy took me in hand and took me to the dean of instruction's office, and they were busy, but he walked right in and got me in anyway, so he's sort of like a vice-president himself around here. Now that rug, that's one that you are doing for the church in Tulsa, one of the 12 pieces. They are not the traditional thing that people expect when they think of weaving like this?
AS: No, that'll be the only one in the United States.

SM: The only set like this. And it's symbolic of something in the church?

AS: Yes, it's all symbolic of the stories in the Bible.

SM: Each piece represents something. What are they going to do with them? Hang them on the walls?

AS: Well, I tell you. The front of the sanctuary is kinda in the center of a classroom on either side, but they don't want to wall it. What they want is something they can hang up where they can see the pattern on both sides.

SM: They'll be out in the open?

AS: Yes, there'll be a classroom on the other side, and the church sanctuary is situated right in the center. I told 'em that I couldn't do it at that time really. I just didn't feel like it, so I had sent them to different places, told 'em to write here, and sent 'em here and there, but they come back to me. They said, "They tell us to go see Mrs. Spinks at Bacone." I said I was sorry and just didn't have the time. The last time they came back they told me. The minister told us it can't be done." 'Course that kind of raised me too, so I said, "It can be done." So at that time I was doin' some pillow tops with the Navajo designs, and I told them to look at both sides, and they did, and they said, "That's what we want."

SM: I'm sorry our time is up now, so thank you very much, Alice and Roy Spinks.