Listening to Indians

ROSEANNA SPINKS, Nomlackie

September 26, 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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Sam Myers:

Today we're in Muskogee, Oklahoma, at Bacone College in the museum, and here we're sitting in the midst of a whole room full of interesting things, talking to Mrs. Roseanna Spinks. This is a fascinating room. Where did you get all these things? Are they purchased by the school, or donated, or what?

Roseanna Spinks:

These are all given by friends of the college. The lady that went around collecting money to have the building built, collected a lot of the artifacts from her friends.

SM: To have this building here built?

RS: Yes. And it was originally an art building, and they had the classes in here, and they had the Indian artifacts around so the students would perpetuate their native culture.

SM: To describe it a little bit. Now you have this massive stone fireplace with a niche in the center with a statue or a bust of Will Rogers. Right?

RS: Yes.

SM: Who did that one?

RS: That was done by Willard Stone. He was a student at Bacone.

SM: Now he's a well-known artist?

RS: Right.

SM: And, in addition, it's a vaulted, open-beamed ceiling, with Navajo rugs, and across the room there's a marvelous collection—
ten panels of arrowheads and spearpoints. And you said they came from
a man in Missouri?

RS: O. D. Evans from St. Louis.

SM: Did he donate those to the museum?

RS: Yes.

SM: I've never seen such an imposing group or collection before.

RS: And I've heard he has another collection almost as big.

SM: Now they not only come from Missouri, but from all over the country?

RS: I don't really know. I've never seen anything written on them.

SM: They look like many different kinds of stones, for one thing. Right
here in front of us, to our right, this is a Navajo rug, isn't it?

RS: Yes. That's a chieftan's rug.

SM: It's called a chieftan's rug because it was used by a chieftan only?

RS: Now I couldn't say, I really don't know. It can be folded any way
and complete a pattern, which the other Navajo rugs cannot.

SM: In other words, if you fold the two sides to the middle you get this
same pattern again. If you fold the two ends to the center you get
another pattern, and if you fold that again you get another pattern?

RS: You can even fold from the corners and get a complete pattern, which
may or may not be the same pattern that you started out with, but it
is a complete pattern.

SM: If you take this corner and match it to the opposing corner, then you get another pattern.

RS: Um hm. Four corners will make a square.

SM: It's a remarkable geometric design, isn't it?

RS: Especially since they didn't use numbers like we do nowdays. This was in their head.

SM: They did it all from memory on the loom. Now your mother-in-law is quite an accomplished weaver. She's almost famous, wouldn't you say?

RS: She is for many things.

SM: Yes, but weaving is one of them. She is weaving these 12 panels for a church up in Tulsa.

RS: Let's see, Community Baptist Church.

SM: That's going to consume at least a couple of years more, isn't it?

RS: I believe they have almost seven done. She has another lady helping her.

SM: I saw the one finished panel and another one on the loom, and they are unusual in that they are weaving into those panels various religious symbols, which is a departure. Now they are religious symbols for that particular church, and these, of course, are Navajo symbols. Have you been here at this museum quite a while, Roseanna?
RS: Let's see. I worked for public relations since '65, and we had our office in the other building, and I don't remember which year we moved into this building. And this was just a museum which was closed up at the time, and when anyone wanted to see it we had to bring them down, unlock it and open up. So this way we're here for people to come through, and we have approximately over 1,000 people every year. Of course, now we don't advertise it as a museum as such, it's part of Bacone. Most of the people that do come through have some connection with Bacone. We're listed in some travel guides--now I don't know which it is--so we do have people who come through that know nothing of Bacone. And when they come through they're looking just for museum pieces. Of course we give them a tour of the chapel and the art building, and before they leave they're friends of Bacone.

SM: For example, other things you have in here that are outstanding—you have a whole shelf of pots from Maria at San Ildefonso, and that one shelf almost makes you feel like you need a guard at the door there, they're so valuable.

RS: Right. 'Course everything in here is just as valuable, because nothing can ever be reproduced in its form as it is now. It can be reproduced, but it will never be the same.

SM: And you have a collection of baskets from various tribes?

RS: Yes, uh huh.

SM: Can you name some?

RS: Oh, we have Pomo baskets, Alaskan baskets, all from the Southwest, I guess.
SM: Any from California Indians?

RS: The Pomo.

SM: They're kind of the border?

RS: They're southern California, I believe, below San Francisco anyway.

SM: Near the desert area. By the way, now you are from California yourself, that is, your people are, at least. And what tribe is it that you are from?

RS: Nomlackie.

SM: They were located in the area of Sacramento, California?

RS: Well, it's Sacramento Valley, which extends from San Francisco all the way up to Redding or up in there. We're up in the north. I lived up in the north. I graduated from Corning High School, which is a little ways from Chico, and below Redding.

SM: Are there any reservations up there?

RS: Oh, we don't really have reservations. We had a reservation, but no one lived on it, and they sold it. I think almost all the California Indians have been so assimilated. There are rancherias.

SM: Would you explain that rancheria? What is it, a big ranch?

RS: I really don't know. It is where the Indians live. It is like a reservation, but I really don't know the difference. My aunt, they lived on a rancheria.

SM: It sounds like it would be a large area like a big farm, where a
group of people would live together.

RS: It's somewhere around the lake area, Clear Lake.

SM: Clear Lake in California. That's in the north end of the Sacramento Valley?

RS: Yes.

SM: Nomlackie. There aren't very many, are there?

RS: We're so assimilated really. As I was growing up I knew what tribe it was, but it wasn't... no one really paid any attention to it. You really didn't know who was what tribe, and they intermarried and most of the tribes just assimilated.

SM: Did you come from California yourself?

RS: Yes.

SM: Did you come to Bacone here?

RS: Yes.

SM: Is that how you met your husband?

RS: Yes.

SM: Ah so, now.

RS: Came for my MRS. degree.

SM: You've got your MRS. And you've been here ever since?
RS: I went home, but then I came back.

SM: That's nice. Do you like it here? It's a pretty place, isn't it?

RS: It's nice. It's a pretty place. We went home this summer, and enjoyed it—took the kids and let them see the ocean.

SM: Is part of your family still out there?

RS: Yes.

SM: What did the kids think of the ocean?

RS: Oh, they loved it. It was so cold, we about froze to death. And, of course, this was in August, and they were right out there. I didn't see how they could stay out there.

SM: Where did you go?

RS: We went to Fort Bragg.

SM: That's north of San Francisco?

RS: Right.

SM: That's interesting country there too. Well, your husband works here. His father and mother, Roy and Alice Spinks, have been here a long time?

RS: Did they tell you how long?

SM: I think they said they lived in that house over there 40 years.
RS: I think this was their 48th year.

SM: Well, she said she taught here for 38 years.

RS: They came in 1927, whatever that makes it.

SM: 1927. Now she doesn't look that old, really, does she? She's a very busy, active person, and Roy seems to be healthy and active too.

RS: He looks the same.

SM: He seems to think an awful lot of you.

RS: Yes, he's one of the best.

SM: They're very proud of their daughter-in-law.

SM: Roy and Alice Spinks are two people who work here, and they live over on the other side of the campus, and they talked with me this morning and I have some pictures of her loom and those panels she's working on, and some of her wood carving and her beadwork. What else does she do?

RS: You name it. She's done a lot of things. She made all the choir costumes. I don't know if you've seen our choir in costume. Well, we have a concert choir, they travel all over the United States, they wear Navajo tops, the beautiful velvet tops and the big billowing skirts.

SM: Have you got a picture here of them?

RS: I'm sure we have, and she's made all of their costumes all through these years, and that's quite a hard job. And, of course, Mr. Spinks
used to drive for the choir until recently.

SM: He was telling me a little bit about driving for them, but I didn't know about the costumes. And then he also got interested in recording some of their voices, didn't he?

RS: He used to make records quite often.

SM: Because he said that some people who sang very well, well, after they'd gone, nobody would have a chance to hear them, and he thought it would be nice, so he started recording their voices and he's been doing this for years.

RS: Yes.

SM: Did you ever sing in the choir?

RS: Oh yes, I was in the choir. We went to Cincinnati the first year I was in the choir, and that was '58, and the next year we went to Montana.

SM: That must have been quite an experience. Where do you sing then?

RS: At churches. Our choir's main goal--we go to different parts of the country--is to let the people see a part of Bacone. They're really ambassadors for Bacone, good will ambassadors, and we would sing in a church in the evening, stay all night with the people in their homes, and have supper and breakfast, and start out the next day and travel all day until we'd get to another town. And a lot of times we would be going for one specific event. Like when I was in the choir we went to Cincinnati for the American Baptist convention, and we got to sing for that, which was really something. And they sang at the Continental Congress in Washington; they've gone to
California and all over.

SM: We might clear up one thing. This college has no specific religious connection, does it?

RS: We're sponsored by the American Baptists.

SM: Oh, are you? But it's non-denominational?

RS: Non-denominational. We do have an organized church, and we meet on Sundays. We have our own pastor.

SM: Is that over here in the chapel? It's a beautiful chapel. Then the services are conducted by the American Baptists?

RS: The director of religious life is an American Baptist. Our chapel hour--we call it the Bacone Hour now--and we do have convocation services, but we do have lot of people come in and just give programs for us. We have lot of religious groups come through--singers, and we had a group come last week, a dramatic group, and they gave some nice little religious plays.

SM: But your students here are of all religious denominations?

RS: All denominations. Our teachers are all denominations. Our president of the college is not an American Baptist--couldn't tell you what he was. I can't remember. I think he's a Church of Christ, so it is for everyone.

SM: Not restricted to the American Baptists by any means.

RS: Nor is it by race. We have all races.

SM: You have blacks, whites and Indians?
RS: And we've always had foreign students here, except last year, and last year we didn't have any. But this year we have some boys from Vietnam attending school.

SM: That's interesting. How did the Bacone name come about?

RS: Almon C. Bacone.

SM: That's the name of a man?

RS: Yes. Came to Tahlequah to work in the male seminary. While he was there he noticed that the real need was for a school for Indians, and so he started his school in Tahlequah with seven students, and by the end of the year he had 52.

SM: When was that?

RS: In 1880. And he began looking for a central location. And this hill, which the old graduates call The Hill, you know, Bacone was owned by the Creeks. And so they negotiated and finally consented to give us 160 acres, which later on they gave us some more, and it was put here for Indian education primarily, and although we are more or less a college for the community, Indian education is our primary goal. We have students that come that normally could not attend college, either because their I.Q., their ACT scores are too low to get in some colleges, universities; or financial trouble. They don't have that much money, and so we have our programs where they get financial aid, and can attend, and let them go on to four-year colleges.

SM: Do some of the students come from town, from Muskogee?

RS: Yes, quite a few.
SM: And I suppose this being the closest college is helpful for their finances too.

RS: Yes. They have Connors, and also they commute to Tahlequah.

SM: Do you have commuters from over there?

RS: Well, they go to Tahlequah, so there's three colleges in the area, Bacone and Tahlequah—it's a university now—and Connors College, and that's not too far from here.

SM: But it was primarily set up by Mr. Bacone back in 1880 for Indian students?

RS: Yes, and this was a university. It was known as Baptist Indian University, and in 1910 they changed the name to Bacone College in honor of Almon C. Bacone. And we have our own little graveyard where he's buried out here.

SM: The north side of the campus?

RS: Yeah.

SM: Yes, it's a pretty place out here with big trees, spacious lawns, and buildings that are attractive too. Some of them are older, some are newer. The chapel has some interesting art work in it. That scene behind the altar in the chapel was painted by one of your previous students or instructors?

RS: Yes, he was a student, and later came back to become head of the art department. He was here 22 years as director of art. Dick West. He's Cheyenne. He painted the picture in the early '50's, and gave it to the church on Easter Sunday morning, and it means quite a lot to everyone here.
SM: Could you describe it?

RS: It's called, The Indian Christ in Gethsemene, and it shows Christ in the garden at Gethsemene with three disciples sleeping in the background. And he's not saying Christ is Indian, but Christ is universal, and Christ is to everyone.

SM: And he has Indian features.

RS: And Christ was created in our image, and no matter who you are, that's the way you think of Christ.

SM: That was what he was trying to put across?

RS: And his wife was white, and she had an illness in those days, and she recovered, and this is the way he gave thanks, and it took him 20 hours to paint the picture. He said that this was the only painting at the time that he had ever painted without going back and making any corrections. It was as if someone guided his hand, and he just painted straight through.

SM: It's a marvelous story, isn't it? And it's true.

RS: It is. Especially if you know his wife. She later passed away.

SM: I know him, and I have some slides of his work. The window just above the painting over there in the chapel, does that have particular significance?

RS: That was arranged by Woodrow Crumbo who was Potawatomi, and he took a beaded pouch bag, a tobacco pouch bag, took the design from the pouch, and arranged it so they could cut the pieces of glass and put it into a stained glass window. And this is in memory of
Charles Journeycake, the last chief of the Delawares, and this was paid for by one of his descendants.

SM: And it's a round window, you call it the Rose Window, and it has symbolism too, and it is designed from the pouch bag.

RS: Yes, and I couldn't tell you all those symbols. I know they say there's a bird in it, of course the bird is a religious symbol, and I don't know what all.

SM: And the circle, the universal circle, and so on.

RS: And if you look at it, there's a lot of arrow points.

SM: Yes, it's a beautiful window. I appreciate your putting the lights on so I could see it. How long have you been working here in the museum now?

RS: Well, I started working for public relations in 1965, and, of course, I gave tours in those days, and I came here, and I don't remember the year we moved our office down here.

SM: I didn't get you for a tour guide today, I got your father-in-law.

RS: Well, he knows more than I do.

SM: He was very nice, and took me around and introduced me to everybody from the president to some of the students, and I'm going to talk to more of them tomorrow. I'm glad to have this chance to talk to you today, because you've had a busy day today, haven't you?

RS: Yes.
SM: Visitors in, and that's part of your job to take them around, show them the campus, show them the things in the museum. You're kind of still a public relations person.

RS: Yes, this is our public relations office—we call it our communication department now, but we do the same thing. And of course we send out all kinds of notices, and newspaper items to newspapers, write letters to different people, and we communicate with most of our donors, make pamphlets, brochures.

SM: If one of my students in St. Louis decided they wanted to come here, they would get in touch with you and you would send them the information, the literature on this school?

RS: Right.

SM: It's a two-year school?

RS: Junior college, liberal arts.

SM: But then you have a lot of things that other schools don't. For example, you have silversmithing.

RS: Yes, uh huh. We did have a lot of the crafts. Of course they don't have a beading teacher yet, my mother-in-law resigned. And they did teach beading and weaving and silver jewelry making and all the Indian art.

SM: Are they planning to get back into the weaving and beadwork?

RS: Yes, uh huh.

SM: They're looking for an instructor now?
RS: Yes, I believe they have someone in mind that's still in school.

SM: And then you have all the conventional liberal arts courses as well?

RS: Yes, plus our nursing program. It's a terminal course, it's two years, one summer, and when they graduate from here they can take their R.N. exam, and if they pass, then they're a registered nurse. We have a new building coming up out here.

SM: A brand new one going up on the southwest corner of the campus there. That's for the nursing program. Now you also said you have remedial courses for people who may have had a little trouble, or didn't get prepared quite well enough from high school?

RS: Yes, it's the Title III program, government funded. And we have reading labs; we have classes on comprehension, speech and hearing; and everything to teach them how to hear. A lot of them talk in Indian, and English is a second language, so when they go to college they don't always understand what they're reading or how it goes on. When you talk in Indian, sometimes your sentences are backwards, so that when they have to do their work they have to translate it into English and then put it in the correct form. So it's a little hard, so then this program helps them. The teachers are schooled to be able to teach them. You have to know how to teach them—not because they're dumb or that the teachers that they had were dumb—it's just that they were not schooled in how to get the student to realize how it should be done.

SM: I imagine that it would be a terrific problem.

RS: And once they get together and the teacher knows how to go about instructing the student to get it, they have no problem.
SM: It begins to straighten out. I can imagine the problem of a youngster who grew up speaking one of the Indian languages, coming to school and never getting quite squared away with the English language that the schools use. Do you teach any Indian languages here?

RS: We had a Creek grant to teach Creek, and they taught Creek for one year, and they're applying for it again, and we have all the equipment, and they have the tapes and the machinery and all, so we just need to have the funding.

SM: What's the tuition?

RS: It's $32.50 per credit hour, I believe that's what it is.

SM: That's for non-residents?

RS: I don't know about that.

SM: Well, most of your students are non-residents of the area, aren't they?

RS: Yes, uh huh, I think it's the same for everybody.

SM: Resident or non-resident, same price.

RS: I believe so.

SM: And then you have quite a few grants, and so on. I talked to one student who has no funds, and whose parents do not help her, but she got enough grants, and works in addition on campus, to make it. So, in other words, you have a very effective financial aids office.

RS: Right. Like I say, a lot of the students would not be able to go
to college without this.

SM: That's good. I imagine a lot of them appreciate it when they realize the opportunities.

RS: Right.

SM: In athletics, is the school active also?

RS: We have a basketball team, a baseball team and some track.

SM: Football?

RS: No football.

SM: Track, baseball and basketball. So that if young fellows are interested in that, they can participate in those sports.

RS: We have pretty good teams.

SM: Do you have girls' teams too.

RS: Intra-mural only right now. They have plans for a girls' basketball team, but right now it's just intra-murals. We have a lot of intra-murals going on.

SM: Are girls' teams popular in Oklahoma, basketball teams for example?

RS: Yes, they are. Basketball and softball. Very popular.

SM: There are lots of softball teams in St. Louis the girls play in. Maybe there are basketball teams too. It used to be quite popular in some places. North Dakota used to have rather outstanding girls' basketball programs, and some other states. You're just about at the
end of your working day, aren't you?

RS: Right. I end my working day and I go home and I work again for six hours or eight hours.

SM: Because you have a family over there. And you just live a little north of the museum?

RS: Right, which is an advantage sometimes, and a disadvantage sometimes.

SM: You're too easily obtained when someone needs help?

RS: Right.

SM: Well, anyway it's been an interesting day here at your school. Very nice people. And I'm glad I met you and that we had a chance to get at least these few words down, because it tells another aspect of the college that no one else has mentioned. Roseanna, can you think of anything you want to add before I say thanks for the last time?

RS: Well, I'd like for everyone to come to Bacone if they have any questions about Bacone that this has given anybody any interest, or if they're curious about it, we'd like them to come visit Bacone and stay a couple days and mingle with the students.

SM: If they stay a couple days, do you have facilities?

RS: No, but we do have a Ramada Inn right across the road. It's quite a place.

SM: You recommend it?

RS: Oh yes.
SM: Well, that's nice . . . that someone who is here and works here feels as sincerely and enthusiastic about it as you do. So I thank you again.