Listening to Indians

CHARLES STEWART, Sioux
October 24, 1975
Provo, Utah

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

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

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

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

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NO. 82

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Glen Rock, New Jersey
Microfilming Corporation of America
1978
Sam Myers:
Today I'm talking to a man from the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, Charlie Stewart. And Charlie, you're attending the university here, but before we get into that let's go back. You were born on the Pine Ridge Reservation?

Charles Stewart:
Right. Right on the reservation.

SM: Did you go to school there?

CS: I attended the Oglala community school for two years, went to a public school for half a year, and then attended the Holy Rosary Mission there, just outside of Pine Ridge.

SM: Where is the Oglala school?

CS: The Oglala school is just west of Pine Ridge, just within the city limits.

SM: For those of us who aren't too familiar with the geography there, is the town of Pine Ridge right on the reservation?

CS: Yes it is.

SM: Do you know its population?

CS: I have no idea.

SM: When I was there last summer it was a busy, bustling place, a beautiful new building there. Is that building the headquarters for the tribal council?
CS: There are several buildings there that are pretty old. Those are the headquarters for the tribal council. The new building there is called the Billy Mills Hall. That was built as a multi-purpose building.

SM: A community center sort of thing?

CS: Um hm.

SM: So then, after you finished school back there, did you go to school some more before you got here to BYU?

CS: Well, from Oglala community school I attended the boarding school there for just two years, and I spent half a year at Loneman day school, which is around eight or nine miles away from Pine Ridge, and I went for several years at the Holy Rosary Mission, a Catholic boarding school just four miles outside of town. From there I moved back to Rapid City during the summer, and then, after the summer was over and until my 12th grade, I attended school at Jerome, Idaho.

SM: You've been to a lot of different schools, haven't you?

CS: Yeah.

SM: Has it been a good experience, attending several different schools like that?

CS: Well, it was a good experience to go to the Holy Rosary Mission and Oglala community and Loneman day school, and it was a real profitable and a good experience to go to Jerome High School, yet it was difficult for me to really learn to get into a higher level of, you know, school work. It was difficult for me the first couple of years after I was able to fit in, or fit into the way the teachers taught, or the
different environment and different study methods; it soon became easy.

SM: You're getting to be a pretty good student now. What is your major now at the university?

CS: Political science.

SM: Do you plan to go into politics or to law?

CS: I plan to go into law.

SM: When you get a law degree, are you going to apply for admission to the Bar? You're going to practice, aren't you?

CS: Yes.

SM: I ask that because sometimes people get law degrees and never take the Bar exam, because they don't have any intention of practicing law. Mr. Robert Bennett, for example, the ex-commissioner of Indian affairs is a lawyer, but he never was admitted to the Bar because he never wanted to practice. He's teaching now at the University of New Mexico. Can you take law right here at BYU?

CS: Yes. In fact, BYU has dedicated a new law school just a couple of months ago.

SM: You're looking forward to getting in there?

CS: Um hm.

SM: How long have you been here now?

CS: Two years now.
SM: Would you be then a junior or senior?

CS: At the end of this semester I'll be a junior.

SM: How long do you have to go to law school after you get a degree?

CS: Three years.

SM: So it's a total of seven years in a college or university to get a law degree. Can I ask you some questions about Pine Ridge? Have you been back there at all since that take-over of '73, or talked to some of the folks that you knew?

CS: Well, my mother was there for a while at the time, and some friends who dropped in there too, but I dropped in this last summer, at least two times this summer, and even though I didn't get to talk to very many of the people there, I did talk to a few concerning some of the situations that happened there.

SM: Are things pretty tense there?

CS: Things were tense there when I was there. In fact, one time I was a visitor at Pine Ridge, and I stopped in for some gas as I was leaving town, and happened to drop in a little cafe there, a little Taco shop, and while I was getting my food a pick-up truck drove by with a girl on the back, shouting to her little brother, "You better get home. I'm gonna tell Mom on you." And that made you think for a while. You know, usually in a normal city or anywhere, you wouldn't have to worry about having your parents worry about you, and having the kids stay home, and like that.

SM: Apparently she was fearful for the little brother?
CS: Probably. Maybe something may happen or whatever.

SM: Do you know Dick Wilson, the tribal chairman there?

CS: I know about him.

SM: Is Dick Wilson's control over the council unusually strong? That's the way it sounds in the news.

CS: It seems that way. It seems that he has quite a bit of control. He's influential with them.

SM: Those who don't like him say he runs the place like a dictator. Is that really true?

CS: It may be an exaggeration. I think it may be an exaggeration, because from my point of view it seems like, as a leader for the people there, confronting many problems, that the Indian people come up with, and the problems that are there, and new problems daily with the American Indian Movement, and many other things like that BIA incident, it would seem to me that it's a matter of human weakness on his part, and then human weakness on the part of the people who have accused him of being quite demanding, as they say he is, rather than I think he's trying to solve a problem that takes the cooperation of the people also.

SM: In other words, the people aren't cooperating? They have divided into factions. Is that true?

CS: I think they've separated themselves from each other, or there may be two factions, and they've separated themselves without solving their problem, maybe fighting with each other.
SM: Another comment often made refers to "Wilson and his goon squad." In fact, that's appeared in the newspapers. Is that really true, or is that simply the opposition making what he's doing—keeping law and order, if that's what he's doing—making it look bad?

CS: From my point of view, he has people backing him, and it may be that the people that are in opposition call these people "goons," and the "goon squad." But I think his "goons" are the people, you know, who are supporting him, just as any other tribal leader or any leader has his people working for him.

SM: In other words it's not too different from a big city political boss who has a group of his party henchmen and supporters working with him?

CS: Right. It's similar, but there may be some differences. Similar in that these people also can receive benefits from him as their boss, or receive any other type of outlay for what they've done for his benefit, and in their doing so, they're doing something for him. Whatever his feelings and ideas were for the benefit of the people, it may have been an opposite effect for them, and may have caused them to place that term upon them.

SM: On the other side we have the American Indian Movement, or AIM, headed by Dennis Banks, a Chippewa from Minnesota, and Russell Means, a Sioux from South Dakota. Russell Means has been the figure most in the news lately, because he is from the same area, isn't he?

CS: Right. That's right.

SM: And the American Indian Movement, weren't they the group that spearheaded that take-over of '73?
CS: Um hm.

SM: One Sioux man who said that he was involved in that said, "We had to do it then, but then I deplored the violence that came along and so I dropped out." Well, then Russell Means went back and ran against Dick Wilson for the chairmanship, didn't he?

CS: That's right.

SM: Russell Means claimed that he had really won the victory but that there were some shenanigans that kept him from getting the majority of the votes. Have you heard anything about that?

CS: No, I haven't. I know that there was a re-vote, because of Russell Means with his followers stating that the first vote was illegal.

SM: So they had a recount or re-vote?

CS: Right. A re-vote.

SM: Yes, you're a political science major. I thought maybe you meant a recount, but you meant a re-vote as you said.

CS: A re-vote.

SM: But he still lost.

CS: Yeah.

SM: He claimed that he would have won if the thing hadn't been rigged and tampered with, according to the papers. Most of the money that comes from the BIA and so on would then go through the hands of the council, wouldn't it, or the chairman and his people?
CS: Um hm. That's right.

SM: Kind of a tempting prize, I suppose, for any politician to have control of the funds.

CS: Right.

SM: How idealistic is this attempt to gain control--so that we would get some good results for the people living there--or is it a simple attempt to get control of the power and the funds... or is that putting you on the spot?

CS: That's not putting me on the spot. I know of one experience of one tribe, and maybe a few thoughts of my own could supplement a possible solution. But in Warm Springs, Oregon, the tribe has received benefits for some land that they had sold. From the money that they gained, which was in some millions, the council had a vote what they should do with it, and it was brought out that they should invest it in a hotel or a resort, and some cottages, and some other things, and then also an industry for timber, a sawmill. Well, they invested in the sawmill after they had invested in their cottages and their resort, and with the mill they're making money that would make up for what they've invested. If the council would, you know, invest in an industry on the reservation that would support its people so that they'd be able to have jobs, they'd be able to get away from the welfare system which has caused so much moral deterioration within the people, and get them to have self-reliance rather than depend upon the government, and, of course, there would have to be good leadership, there would have to be someone there with good moral integrity to be able to go ahead with a good, healthful, healthy project for the people.

SM: Did it turn out that way in the Oregon case?
CS: Yes. It's turning out well now.

SM: But in the Pine Ridge case it hasn't turned out yet, it hasn't been solved, has it?

CS: Right. The only thing I know of there is their moccasin factory, making moccasins and dolls, and that's been in there several years now.

SM: Is that in the town of Pine Ridge?

CS: Right on the eastern limits of the town.

SM: Is that owned and run by the people themselves?

CS: Um hm.

SM: If they own it and are running it, those are genuinely Indian-made moccasins.

CS: That's right.

SM: The Sioux people do outstanding beadwork.

CS: Yeah.

SM: They make these moccasins. Do they have any other work of that nature? Do they make jewelry?

CS: There are some private individuals that do jewelry and sell it to private. . . .

SM: And then some make chokers and things like that, belts, headbands, that sort of thing?
CS: They make the Indian outfits for the ladies and the men.

SM: Well, what do you suppose is the solution of the situation there in Pine Ridge? Are the people having a hard time making a living?

CS: There is probably a solution to every problem, and that's probably built up to a big problem there on the reservation, but the people are living in an economic situation where if they went out and found a job probably their welfare benefits would be much greater than what they'd receive, and it's been years and years and years that they've been receiving benefits from the federal government and from the state government.

SM: The problem really goes way back to the reservation, which is not a very productive piece of land there, right?

CS: Right. But I think the people, like many other cases in the United States history, could make it on their own. I mean, like a farmer can make it.

SM: Up at Pine Ridge you mean a farmer can make it?

CS: Well, a farmer made it in the West, but you know, at that time prices weren't high, and there wasn't much competition, so he would be able to stabilize that good farm. But, in my opinion, I feel a farmer can make it, providing that he is stabilized with a good job, that he can be able to provide for his needs, you know, implements and materials, grain to grow, and so forth.

SM: Is the farming economy mostly grazing, or is there quite a bit of crop growing too in that area?

CS: Mostly grazing.
SM: So it takes a lot of land to raise cattle rather than to intensively farm a rich piece of land.

CS: Yeah, it takes quite a bit of grazing.

SM: Would you predict any more trouble there, or would you think maybe it'll settle down and the people will be able to get on with trying to make better lives for themselves.

CS: Well, the feeling among people is that the majority of the people want something that's good, and they'd rather not get into trouble doing it. That's a general feeling among all American people, and I think that the people there would do something that was good, without violence. I mean, that's something that they don't want.

SM: Is AIM unpopular there then?

CS: Yes, they're unpopular there.

SM: They have built or somehow acquired a reputation for violence. Is that true?

CS: Yes they have.

SM: Some people support AIM and say that that is largely a distortion of the press, the violent thing, and that they are engaged in many projects which are good, like the rehabilitation of alcoholics and drug users, and so on. Still, generally speaking they're rather unpopular in the Pine Ridge area?

CS: Um hm.

SM: And then Wilson is not breaking any records in popularity either, is he?
CS: No, he isn't.

SM: So the people are left sort of without a popular leader that they'd really like to support. Maybe that helps account for the divisiveness, the splits into factions. If they could have one strong and popular leader it would probably do a great deal of good for the whole cause there.

CS: I think it would.

SM: When is the next election at Pine Ridge, do you know?

CS: I'm not really sure. I think it's every two years.

SM: So then Wilson is going to have to run again, and his opposition, if any, will be there again.

CS: Yeah.

SM: Whatever happened to Russell Means? Was he arrested again lately?

CS: I think he's going through the courts now on a shooting case. I think it was in North Dakota or somewhere he was shot.

SM: Somebody shot him?

CS: Right. And then, in the meantime, I think he was still going through the cases of the '73 incident, going through those still.

SM: There were many, many charges, weren't there? Have you any idea now about how those cases unfolded?

CS: Well, not exactly. I haven't been keeping up that much upon how it's unfolded, but my opinion now is that there's not that many cases
against him as there were.

SM: Some of them have been dropped or eliminated or settled one way or another? Do you plan to be back in Pine Ridge again soon, Charlie?

CS: Well probably just for a visit.

SM: Next summer maybe?

CS: Probably.

SM: Do you anticipate any lessening of the tension there by summer?

CS: I really don't know. It's in my own feelings that's what I'd hope for.

SM: Well, your mother still lives there, doesn't she?

CS: No, she's moved down here. She's living here now.

SM: Are there other family, relatives and friends back there?

CS: Um hm.

SM: Well, so maybe you won't get back as often. I hope things do settle down, because the people have been through a lot of strain and struggle there.

SM: I hope to live there after my education's done.

SM: Are you going to practice law there?

CS: Hope to.
SM: Are there any lawyers in Pine Ridge now?

CS: I don't know.

SM: And you don't know of any lawyers who are Indians either?

CS: No. Well, Ramon Roubideaux is.

SM: He's been in the news. Is he from Pine Ridge?

CS: It seems to me that he is.

SM: You know, I find more and more across the country young Indian people going into law because they see this as a way to help solve their problems and to get a fair shake without going into these other kind of violent tactics that have only, in the opinion of some, caused more trouble.

CS: Um hm.

SM: And that's sort of in the back of your mind too, isn't it?

CS: Right. I feel that there is a basic ignorance among all of the people, including myself, and if we knew some legal tactic, then it would be possible to do things to benefit the people without violence.

SM: Charlie, is there anything you can add in the moment we have left here?

CS: I think as a whole, and then all the situation that the Indian people at Pine Ridge are involved in, I think that it is only necessary to think about the optimistic side, and let the pessimistic side, let it go, because I think problems are going to be solved; the people
do want a good change.

SM: And even some of the great critics say that there is a greater chance here to get one's rights than most places. Well, Charlie, I thank you very much for your time today.