Listening to Indians

BERNADINE SWIFTARROW, Quechan
December 18, 1975
Tucson, Arizona

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

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

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

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Sam Myers:
Today I'm talking with a young lady from California whose name is Bernadine Swiftarrow. That's all one word, isn't it?

Bernadine Swiftarrow:
Yes.

SM: And Bernadine comes from the eastern edge of California. That would be across the Colorado River from Arizona, wouldn't it, Bernadine?

BS: Yes.

SM: And south of Blythe, a little north of Yuma, maybe? In that part of the state? Anyway, it's south of Blythe, we know that, and just north of the Mexican-American border?

BS: Um hm.

SM: And, let's see. The correct name for your tribe over there is Quechan. That's the correct name, but you're frequently called Yuman?

BS: Um hm. Yuma Tribe.

SM: Do the people kind of resent being called Yuma?

BS: No, it's just more like our popular name. Like being called Mohaves or something like that. I don't know, they just call us the Yuma Tribe.

SM: Even though Quechan is really the correct name. Well, you've taught us something already. I wanted to talk with you today, Bernadine,
because I haven't yet talked to anyone from your people, and so I appreciate your waiting for me at some inconvenience to yourself. I'm grateful, and the people who hear us will be too. Did you grow up over there in that territory?

BS: Yes, I did.

SM: Is there a town nearby that we can pinpoint it with?

BS: Just Yuma, Arizona.

SM: Yuma, Arizona, is the nearest town, but you're on the other side of the river?

BS: Yes.

SM: So then, did you go to school there too?

BS: Yes, I went to public school there.

SM: Do you like that better than the BIA school, do you think?

BS: Well, I never was exposed to any other school.

SM: So you don't really know how the others work?

BS: No, not really.

SM: I've heard both kinds of opinions. Some people who like the BIA schools, some who didn't like them. Some people didn't like the public schools because they felt, you know, that they were thrown in with people who weren't especially sympathetic or friendly. Has that happened to you?
BS: That's true. It's mostly been like that.

SM: Did you run into prejudice in school?

BS: I don't know. I think I was fortunate that I didn't. For some reason, maybe my family, or something like that. They've always stressed that, you know, speak up to whatever... if somebody's bothering you, you speak up and face it, so I didn't have that kind of problem. I wasn't, I guess... the term would be backward.

SM: You weren't bashful?

BS: No. I am more or less shy unless somebody's really bothering me, then I will speak out and say something.

SM: I've found this kind of thing happen elsewhere where a brother and a sister went to the same school, and the sister said she ran into prejudicial opinions, and the brother said when he came along five years later there wasn't any. It had changed in that brief time.

BS: From what I understand now it hasn't changed at all. It's still the same, but the public school I went to, they still have the same teachers there since I went there.

SM: Are they all non-Indians?

BS: Yes.

SM: How was the population of the students? Mostly non-Indian kids?

BS: No, I thought it was a third, but I think now it's about half.

SM: About half non-Indian and half Indian? So it's about fifty-fifty then. Was this in Yuma itself?
BS: No. This is just off the reservation in California.

SM: Did you go through grade school, high school there then?

BS: I went from kindergarten through the 12th grade.

SM: All the way?

BS: Yeah.

SM: One school. Some kids move around a lot, and I think it's nice to go to the same one, don't you?

BS: Yeah, it's pretty good. Well, most of the while the Indian students stay and most of the farmer students stay, but there was always a bunch of migrant workers that came.

SM: That came and went?

BS: Um hm.

SM: Migrant workers, would these be mostly people from Mexico?

BS: They're mostly white and Mexican.

SM: They are the people that usually make up the migrant working force?

BS: Um hm.

SM: Indians don't like to do that? They stay on the reservation?

BS: Well, I've never seen any Indians come down.
SM: I talked to a few who have done it, but not from your tribe.

BS: Oh, ours don't do that.

SM: Not at all?

BS: No.

SM: What do they do over there? Are they agriculturists?

BS: I don't know. I don't really know what they did before they initiated all these government programs like CAP and all these things. I don't really know what they did before them. I guess they used to work in Yuma, labor-type jobs.

SM: Well, did they farm, or raise sheep or cattle, or graze?

BS: No. We have lambs, but when they were allotted to us... the Indians used to grow things, but they couldn't sell 'em because the white market would not buy it. They wanted it cheaper, or something. It just was impossible for Indians to make a living on it, so in turn they leased the land to white farmers, and they just received lease money, but they still worked because the lease money only came once a year.

SM: Your family now has managed to send you kids to school, so they've been apparently a pretty prosperous family?

BS: No, I guess our family is just average. My mother has always been a housewife, and my father... in my young days he used to work all over as a laborer, but he finally, I don't know, he just got started working at Western Auto as a mechanic, all around, that type of thing, did machines, wash machines, put them together, all that sort of
thing, and he went on and on, now he's a janitor and maintenance man, bus driver, at an elementary school in Somerton, Arizona. He doesn't live with my mother anymore, because he couldn't get a good job on my mother's side. My father's a Cocopah Indian, but my last name, Swiftarrow, is Sioux, because my grandfather was.

SM: Now, let's see, your grandfather was Sioux, on your father's side, so that's where the name comes down, but your father is more Cocopah than Sioux, and your mother is . . . .

BS: She's full-blood Quechan.

SM: And so then you're more Quechan than anything?

BS: Yes, because we've been born and raised on my mother's reservation.

SM: Do the children take the mother's tribe?

BS: No, it just depends on where they grew up. It really depends on who you identify with.

SM: You can go either way if you want to?

BS: Um hm.

SM: Among the Hopis they always take the clan of the mother. But then, in your case, you could choose.

BS: Well, it would probably be stronger on my mother's side because my father, like I said, he's mixed too. You know, like he had no strong identity, so I think we just took my mother's.

SM: You got through high school there then, and it wasn't too bad an experience, was it?
BS: No, it was a really small school, about 200 in high school.

SM: After you went through high school then, did you go to college somewhere too?

BS: I went to college right afterwards because there was nothing else to do.

SM: Where was that?

BS: In Yuma, Arizona Western. I dropped out after a semester, and then I couldn't find a job, so my mother suggested I go into training at the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

SM: What kind of training?

BS: I went after secretarial training, and I went to Anaheim for one year.

SM: That's where Disneyland is, isn't it?

BS: Yeah. I lived right across, but I never went. And then I came home, I worked for the government, the Bureau of Reclamation.

SM: Out by your own home territory?

BS: Well, in Yuma. Then I decided to go back to college at Cal State, Long Beach, and I just recently graduated.

SM: So you have a degree now from Cal State?

BS: I have a BA in sociology.

SM: Do you have any plans to use that in any particular way, like social work or something?
BS: I wanted to get into social work, and I guess I am doing that. I just recently got the job of education coordinator for our tribal council, and that's a contract our tribe made with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, so the Bureau of Indian Affairs would not step into our... you know, would not have anything to do with boarding schools or higher education. If our students want to go to school, college or something, well they would either come to me or the high school counselor, and we would fill out the appropriate papers.

SM: And so the decisions would remain in your own hands rather than some BIA person in Washington?

BS: Well, to a point, because the Bureau... furnishes the funds. They finance them.

SM: So you've worked for the Bureau of Reclamation, and now for the BIA?

BS: No, it's the tribe.

SM: Oh, you are working for the tribe. The tribe employs you?

BS: Um hm.

SM: But you're sort of the tribe's representative to the BIA. Is that it?

BS: In a way, yes.

SM: So you've had quite a bit of experience to see how these things work, haven't you?

BS: Um hm, more or less.

SM: Is it getting any better than it used to be?
BS: I think so, because, you know, like I think they're trying to make it more personal since they hired me. They'd rather get it through me than through some BIA official.

SM: Some years ago they wouldn't have even thought of having someone like you there. A BIA official would have come in and said, "This is what it's going to be," right?

BS: Yes.

SM: And have the Indian people resented that?

BS: Very much. So now it's getting more personal-like.

SM: This is the thing that's summed up in this phrase, "self-determination" that's been used so much lately, I guess.

BS: Yes, very much.

SM: Is it going to work, do you think? Is it going to really come true?

BS: Our being on our own?

SM: No. Having self-determination without losing the reservation.

BS: I doubt it. I think Indian people are afraid to be so much on their own.

SM: They haven't had time to get ready for it?

BS: I don't think they trust . . . you know, like AIM. They would not trust the government or whatever. . . .
SM: They just don't quite believe it, do they?

BS: No. They never believe anything.

SM: Is that because they have been hurt in the past?

BS: Yes. Well, everywhere you go. It's just all around. There's no sense of trust anywhere in America, I think.

SM: Now you're speaking of all of us—white, Indian and everyone. Is that what you mean?

BS: With Indians there seems to be a trust. If an Indian said something to me I would know he's telling me the truth unless he was kidding me or something like that. If an Anglo person came up to me and said something, I would not know what he was getting after, what he wanted, what he was saying, anything like that.

SM: You never know quite when to trust them or not?

BS: No.

SM: And some of them are pretty good people, I suppose?

BS: I guess, I don't know. I would say some.

SM: I imagine there are good and bad white people as there are good and bad Indians.

BS: It's just that I can see that there's bad Indians more. I mean, I know who they are, and I also can tell where the good Indians are too, but there's usually a second sense about that, trusting the Indians.
SM: I think that happens all right. Some of my black students back in St. Louis have surprised me with their observations, and then I've heard Indians also say the same thing—that they just kind of sense when people are trying to fool them, or whether they're being truthful or honest, dependable. I've found, though, that Indian people can be most friendly and generous and gracious.

BS: Generally that's their nature. I mean it was . . . well, look at history. That's what it was until they were messed over.

SM: Well, then, you're going to take this job?

BS: I have taken it.

SM: You're working at it. You came over here today to help your sister?

BS: Well, I came down to visit the campus, because that's part of my job to see where our students go.

SM: Oh, you're working then today?

BS: Yes. So she had to come back, I just put it together.

SM: Because your sister's been going to school here?

BS: Yes.

SM: And so you came over and in the process you can size up the campus and so forth?

BS: And give recommendations to kids that come up to me and ask me.

SM: In a sense I've been doing the same thing, not only here but every place else, so that when my students ask me, "Where should I go on
to school" I can give them my opinion at least, or tell them where to write or get in touch with someone.

BS: Well, most of the Indian kids like to know, well, like if they have trouble in the school, when they need help, will there be people there to help them.

SM: Do they find that here?

BS: Seems to be.

SM: Now the lady whose office we're using seems to be very concerned about Indian people, doesn't she?

BS: Very much so.

SM: And another man over in another office is friendly and helpful, and he's lived out here with the Papagos for 20 years, next-door neighbors. He said you couldn't find any nicer neighbors. He said he has taken on many of their attitudes, and has seen many of the errors in our own ways, you know, by comparison, because, let's face it, we all have values that are good and bad.

BS: Yes, I can see that. Both ways.

SM: So then, your sister isn't going to go here anymore?

BS: No.

SM: Well, she'll finish the semester out, won't she?

BS: Um hm. Next fall she's going to San Diego State.
SM: San Diego State. That's closer to your home?

BS: Yes.

SM: I've heard the climate there is about as ideal as anywhere in the world. Is that true?

BS: San Diego?

SM: Yes.

BS: Oh, I don't know.

SM: Would you like it better than Yuma?

BS: Yeah, I suppose I would. I like Long Beach better.

SM: That's just south of Los Angeles, isn't it?

BS: Well, it's up north.

SM: Well, you went to school there, and so you spent four years there?

BS: Four years.

SM: You get pretty used to a place in four years, don't you?

BS: I liked it.

SM: Well, San Diego should be very similar, I imagine, don't you?

BS: I think so.

SM: You haven't lived there, though?
BS: No. I just go through it now and then.

SM: Why wouldn't she go to Long Beach then?

BS: I don't know. I really don't know.

SM: She doesn't want to follow in her big sister's footsteps?

BS: No. I have a brother that is, though. He's going to Long Beach, Cal State, Long Beach.

SM: I suppose like you and me and everybody else, we want to do things our own way, go our own place.

BS: We have our own ideas what's what.

SM: Sure. There are a lot of colleges in California, aren't there?

BS: Yes. Very much. I used to do recruiting while I was at Long Beach, which is a big business, because the more new students you get in the schools the more funds come in. Like I went to Cal State, Long Beach, there was UCLA, Stanford and Cal State, Long Beach and Fullerton, and then Southern California, they were all together, and you have to get a number of Indian students in to get, you know, boost your departments, and this and that, so it was kinda like a big business.

SM: So you were helping to recruit, and if you liked it, and obviously you did, then you could do it honestly too. Now you're both residents here so you won't have to worry about non-resident tuition at San Diego State or Long Beach State. Is there tuition that the California residents have to pay when they go to one of those colleges?
BS: Very much.

SM: Well, in years past wasn't it true that there wasn't any tuition? Someone told me that California colleges did not have tuition, but they had other auxiliary charges or fees.

BS: I think there isn't any tuition. There's fees you have to pay. I think they average $5.00, something like that.

SM: Five dollars an hour?

BS: No, just $5.00 for cards and this and that, and the classes are $30.00 a unit, so it goes up to about $90.00 or something like that.

SM: Ninety or so?

BS: You end up paying it anyway.

SM: They just call it by a different name, I guess.

BS: I think so.

SM: It used to be that we understood there wasn't any tuition, and California was the lowest priced.

BS: That's what I understood too.

SM: You understood that too, but then you had to pay, even if they did call it something else. Now I guess in this last year or two they changed it to actually have some charges they call tuition, plus the fees, so it's getting more expensive to go to school over there?

BS: Yeah.

SM: Can you get a grant from the BIA to help?
BS: Um hm. They usually come up with half of it. You apply, I think, through the government, BEOG, I can't think of the name of it.

SM: You're going to have to become an expert in this, aren't you?

BS: I know what they are. The BEOG, I don't know, some sort of grant that mostly all students file for anyway, and it's a supplement. I think it comes through the state--I'm not sure. I haven't really read all the books.

SM: Well, as you get into your new job more there, I suppose, and check out more of these schools like this one now, I imagine you'll get to nail each one of these things down so you can answer people's questions and tell the kids what they're going to run into.

BS: But generally that's the form you fill out, BEOG, and if you're an Indian student and you're going to go to college, then you'd fill out a form. It just says the degree of your Indian blood, this has to go to the tribal roll, and they have to verify that yes, you are an Indian enrolled in this tribe--our main office is in Phoenix, BIA office--and they send it in there and they send it back; it's sent to the college and the BEOG, they match funds to the college.

SM: And that takes care of the expenses. I talked to one student who said he got a $1,500 a semester grant from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Is there any fixed amount like that, or does it vary?

BS: No, it varies depending on your needs.

SM: In other words, if you had no funds at all, then you could get more?

BS: Yeah, if for some reason you didn't qualify and couldn't get BEOG, you probably could get a full BIA grant.
SM: Well, that's a different thing, BEOG, than BIA grant?

BS: BIA usually matches, and like my brother, he gets VA checks, he also gets a little supplement from the BIA because the VA checks they aren't that much.

SM: He was in the Service?

BS: Um hm. Four years.

SM: Was he in Vietnam?

BS: No, he was in the Navy. He was all over when he got in.

SM: Well, so next fall your sister will be over at San Diego. And is your brother going to college now?

BS: He is.

SM: So you're going to have them scattered out a little bit, aren't you?

BS: I think so.

SM: You're going to be working back near Yuma there?

BS: Um hm.

SM: You have a tribal headquarters across the river in California, that's where the headquarters are, that's where you'll be working? So if I wanted to come over there to see you to get advice on where to go to school, I would go from here through Yuma and across the river, and then . . . ?

BS: Well, actually, depending where you're at.
SM: Well, say I come across from Yuma now.

BS: Well, just right across.

SM: Just across the river, and there you are. Your office.

BS: Well, our office is on the hill, because it used to be, well the cavalry was there and they used to have buildings there.

SM: Is it an old fort there?

BS: Um hm. It's called Fort Yuma.

SM: Oh, now I know where it is.

BS: Over on the hill, our tribal offices are.

SM: Where old Fort Yuma used to be.

BS: Opposite Prison Hill.

SM: Somebody said the Mexicans one time, they didn't like Yuma, so they sneaked up at night and moved the border.

BS: My great aunt was over 80 and my grandfather--he recently passed away--they were arguing, and it was playful arguing, my grandfather was in his 70's, and they were doing something, and my aunt always calls him her little brother, and we were all there, and they were arguing about something and she said, "You'd better be careful before I tell the officials you were born in Mexico," because there was no border, and he didn't say anything. But it was funny, because she used to say, "my little brother."
SM: He was in his 70's?

BS: Um hm.

SM: Well, he was born around 1900 probably. Well, the border had been drawn, of course, by then.

BS: It was very sketchy at that time. People were coming in and out without anybody knowing.

SM: I think they still are.

BS: I know that.

SM: In fact, what did I hear, 600,000 a year? Maybe that's wrong, I don't know. Do you see lots of people from Mexico over in your neighborhood? You are aware that lots of them are not citizens?

BS: I'm not really sure if they are citizens. Like I was in L.A. and I knew all of them who were illegal, but you can't get anybody to do anything about it. The police won't do nothing, nobody will handle it except the Immigration, and usually there's leaks anyway, so the people usually move before the Immigration comes down.

SM: And some of them get to be really heartbreaking experiences too, but if you lose your job to one of the people that come over, you aren't so sympathetic maybe.

BS: I guess. I don't know.

SM: Well, we want to talk about you and your people over there. You have some brothers and sisters at home yet?

BS: Yes, I have a brother that's a junior in high school, and a sister
that's in third grade.

SM: Is your mother still there?

BS: Yes.

SM: How is she? In good health?

BS: Yes.

SM: And the brother and sister are going to the public school too?

BS: Yeah.

SM: Are they getting along O.K.?

BS: Um hm.

SM: Do you think they're having as good an experience as you did? Has it changed any?

BS: Well, I don't know, that school has its problems, but ... I don't know, if you are interested in an education, and you're willing to learn, and this and that, I've known the teachers to go out of their way to help you, and I think our family's been fortunate that they did go out of their way. Like, for instance, my brother. I think it was geometry, and geometry's offered every other year or so, and he had missed it, and he was graduating, so the teacher went out on her free period to teach him.

SM: That was pretty decent of her.

BS: Yes. So we've been lucky.
SM: Well, they recognize people that want to learn, and they're willing to help?

BS: Yes.

SM: That's not too bad a recommendation.

BS: Well, having the job that I do, I send most of the kids to boarding schools, and they just hate that public school, and I don't understand. I mean, I try.

SM: You mean the kids that you send to boarding school?

BS: They go to boarding school because they can't relate to the public school at all, and they just can't stand it. They say something's wrong with it.

SM: Well, I guess you can find somebody who will say something's wrong with every place.

BS: I think the majority of Indians on the reservation don't like the public school.

SM: They feel a little bit more comfortable at the boarding school because all the other kids are Indians too?

BS: I think so.

SM: A man who heads up one of these schools said some of them are trying to get themselves changed over to four-year schools, but he isn't sure that that's a good idea. He's Indian too, but he said sooner or later the youngsters have to get used to living in the world, and when should they start? Should they go all the way to a master's
degree in a BIA school where all the other students are Indian, or should they go out to some university like you did, where all the people are mixed in? What would you think?

BS: Well, my point of view is that we should get rid of the BIA schools, the boarding schools. Eliminate them.

SM: Let the public schools do it?

BS: Um hm. But, of course, on some reservations they are isolated.

SM: Physically, and it would be too awkward?

BS: Like on ours, I think we'd do better to get rid of them, because, well I have to admit that the kids that we do send to boarding schools are problem children, you know, and they are family problems or such, and I'd rather divert our monies--actually we don't have the money because it's the Bureau of Indian Affairs'--but if there was funds or something, divert it to a social service, and help people there, instead of isolating. . . .

SM: You've got something to work on, haven't you? There's a lot to do, isn't there?

BS: Very much.

SM: Do you think we're making any progress, Bernadine?

BS: I think so.

SM: You're going to be part of the people making the progress, aren't you?
BS: I think so.

SM: You're going to be in a key job now, and you've got a bachelor's degree in social service, is that right, social science?

BS: Right.

SM: With a lot of preparation and training, and you're going to be out there really seeing if you can make things better, aren't you?

BS: I'm trying.

SM: And you know, you are one of many I've talked to. You've gone back to work with your own people at home, and any number of youngsters are doing that.

BS: I've noticed that.

SM: It can't help but change things, can it?

BS: I hope so.

SM: For the better. In fact, they even come back with a keener awareness of their own Indian-ness.

BS: That's true.

SM: We've come to the end of our tape, Bernadine. Thank you very much.