Listening to Indians

ROSS SWIMMER, Cherokee
April 14, 1977
Tahlequah, 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 I have the good fortune to be able to talk with the Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation, Mr. Ross Swimmer. Ross, I'm anxious to ask you all kinds of questions about yourself, so we can get acquainted with you first. Have you always lived here in the area?

Ross Swimmer:

No I haven't Sam. I am an import into the Tahlequah area, which is the capital of the Cherokee Nation. I originally came from Oklahoma City, the central part of Oklahoma as opposed to Tahlequah, which borders on the Arkansas line.

SM: You are Cherokee, though?

RS: Yes, I am one-fourth degree Cherokee blood.

SM: Then did you go to school over there near Oklahoma City?

RS: I actually was reared around a small town called Yukon, which was west of Oklahoma City, and lived in the country; grew up and went to school at a rural school there in Yukon, and then later on moved to Oklahoma City proper, and attended school called Putnam City High School. From there the family moved toward the Norman area; I finished college at Norman, receiving a bachelor of arts degree and law degree in 1967 at the University of Oklahoma.

SM: You're a lawyer too?

RS: Yes.

SM: Did you take the Bar exam?

RS: Yes. I practiced law for five years in Oklahoma City for a law firm, concentrating primarily in the area of real property law, and
that's actually how I got involved with the tribe. To back up just a minute—on my father's side of the family is where the Indian blood comes from. He was one-half degree of blood, and my grandfather was full blood. Dad was a practicing lawyer in the Oklahoma City area, and had done quite a bit of work with the tribe prior to my entering law school, and most of it was with individual tribal members that had relocated or migrated to the Oklahoma City area, and got into trouble at one time or another. He would often represent them. I became acquainted with the tribal officials, and at that time in my life, after graduating from law school, W. W. Keeler was the principal chief, and during my visits to Tahlequah I had an occasion to stop at the tribal office and just talk with Mr. Keeler and the business manager of the tribe at that time. They indicated to me that the tribe had a few problems in the area of real property, especially with the housing authority, in clearing titles to certain property owned by individual Indians where they were trying to build houses. And I volunteered some assistance, and came over to Tahlequah every week for about six weeks to help out on some legal problems, and decided I liked it so well . . . and they invited me to stay, so I did.

SM: This was a while ago?

RS: This was about four years ago, and I took a job at that time as tribal attorney, and stayed with the tribe for about a year and a half as tribal attorney, and then became the general counsel of the tribe when Earl Boyd Pierce, who was then general counsel, retired. Subsequent to that I also became a banker in the city of Tahlequah, and there happened to be a vacancy at the First National Bank and the bank had recently sold, and I was one of the few professional people that were fairly new to the area but still had some outside interest, and everything seemed to fit, so the board of directors came to me and asked if I would serve as president of the bank, and I agreed to do so, so since that time I've been a banker. Then when
Bill Keeler retired as principal chief and decided not to run for the office again, I sought the office, and was elected about a year and a half ago.

SM: So you're not practicing law any more?

RS: No. I don't practice on an active basis now. I haven't for about two years. I still do some work as far as the bank is concerned, and I represent the bank on occasion in law suits, civil cases, and I do some property work for individuals, but very little of it.

SM: Mr. Keeler was a somewhat unusual person. Would you just mention a word or two about him to identify him a little?

RS: Well, Bill Keeler was a very unusual and exceptional person. As I said, I had the pleasure of meeting him about four and a half or five years ago, and immediately I was pleased with the attitude that he displayed towards the Indian people, and found out later that much of the Indian progress that we have seen in America in the last 20 years is attributable to Bill Keeler. He served on several presidential commissions during different administrations, working on Indian problems, identifying Indian problems and seeking solutions to those problems. He also was a leader in Oklahoma in helping to develop the Five Civilized Tribes organization, the inter-tribal council of the Five Civilized Tribes, and in strengthening the tribal governments of the other four tribes—the Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creeks and Seminoles. Through his efforts with the Cherokee Nation, Bill set a lot of examples that other tribes were able to follow. We were one of the first tribes to establish a housing authority in the state of Oklahoma.

SM: Your own tribal housing authority?

RS: Our own tribal housing authority. In fact, we led the way in getting the state law changed to permit Indian tribes to have their own housing
authorities, and then we organized one of the first ones, and today we have about 2,000 units of housing under management, and another 700 that are in one phase of construction or another. Bill also was the leader with the Cherokees in developing innovative BIA programs like educational opportunities in the grade schools, high schools, and also with the Indian Health Service.

SM: What did he do for a living?

RS: O.K. I often take things for granted. Of course Bill Keeler served with Phillips Petroleum Company for a number of years; I would guess about 30 years. He started from the bottom and worked his way to the top, and his last job was chairman of the board of Phillips Petroleum, which is about the sixth largest oil company in America, located in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, which is within the jurisdictional boundaries of the Cherokee Nation.

SM: That's a great success story. All Indian people aren't the stereotyped image some people think. And you're another success story.

RS: I hope so some day. Bill Keeler was a very special person, and, as you said, unusual. He had a deep belief in the psychic and the ability of an individual, and especially an Indian individual, in being able to use his mind to a much greater degree than what we use our minds for today. He still believes in this, and believes that there is a mind-control ability of individuals, and I think that this is part of the reason for his success. It was almost to the degree that he could read a person's mind; he can certainly anticipate what one is thinking, and I think that he just has such an overwhelming faith in people, and especially in Indian people, that he is able to program them to a certain extent to do more than they might think they're capable of doing themselves. And he has even recently, since retirement from Phillips, used this sort of sixth sense to be successful in other oil ventures.
He is out in the state of Tennessee now, drilling for oil where no one ever believed that oil would be found, and hasn't been in the past, and he has discovered some oil and gas both in the state of Tennessee, and I think will be again very successful as he was in Phillips. He has an unusual ability that I have seen demonstrated, and wished that I had the ability; I think everyone does to a certain extent, but Bill really believed in it and was able to use it to his advantage and that of the Cherokee people.

SM: I suspect that he's the kind of person who had the ability to run this gigantic business firm and still be interested in the individual person's problems.

RS: Absolutely.

SM: And I suspect also that he thinks you're a worthy successor for him.

RS: Well, I hope so. When I chose to seek the office as principal chief, I talked to Bill about it first, and I told him that the only way that I would seek the office was if he would support me, but more importantly, that I believed in what Bill had started out to do for the Cherokees; I believed in his ideas and his goals, and I could see that if someone did not pick up the ball and run with it at this point in time that the Cherokees could very easily slip backwards several years and not progress like they should, and certainly that's not to say that someone else couldn't do the job. I felt like since I had the background with the tribe, and the administrative ability that I'd been trained for, that I could offer something that perhaps someone else could not, and that's one of the primary reasons why I did run, and it was with Bill's blessing and much support.

SM: I have heard nothing but respectful references to the chief of the Cherokees all day today.
RS: Good. That's encouraging.

SM: Another thing. How does one become principal chief? Is there a little description of the tribal structure necessary to make that clear?

RS: You need a little bit of history on that. When the Cherokees were removed over the Trail of Tears and ultimately located in eastern Oklahoma and the capital, which is where we are now, Tahlequah, they reestablished a constitution that was based on the American Constitution. This happened in 1839. The Cherokees had begun a migration to this area in the late 1700's, and there were 4,000 or 5,000 living here at the time of the removal. The removal, of course, happened around 1836 when the decree went out that all Cherokees were to be moved away from the southeastern United States to Indian Territory. And when the main body of Cherokees, about 12,000, arrived here, there was quite a bit of discussion as to who was going to lead the Cherokees, because western Cherokees in Indian Territory already had a governmental organization. Of course, John Ross brought the eastern Cherokees over. And with the advent of the constitution of 1839, most of the political differences were resolved, although there were still a lot of personal hostilities. This particular government continued until statehood, even through the Civil War, and then at statehood of Oklahoma in 1907, the Congress passed an act which all but terminated the Five Tribes, including the Cherokees, although in the final provision of that act, at the very strong request of one of our Congressmen, W. W. Hastings, who was an Indian, a Cherokee Indian in Congress at the time, the Congress wrote into the act in the last phrase, that the tribal governments of the Five Tribes shall continue in existence until such other law is passed, and to this date there has never been a law passed. But one of the provisions in the 1906 act, which was immediately before statehood, was that the councils of the Five Tribes would no longer exist, and that the principal officers of those tribes, being the principal chiefs of four of
the tribes and the governor of the Chickasaw Tribe, would be appointed by the President of the United States. This system went on until 1971. In 1949 W. W. Keeler was appointed by President Truman, and he served through successive appointments of Presidents up until 1971. Through again his leadership and work, the Five Tribes were permitted in 1971 to select their principal officers by popular vote. And there was a move in '71 to get Cherokees registered to vote. They registered about 12,000 Cherokees, and had an election in 1971, and overwhelmingly elected Mr. Keeler again. I think it was about an 83% vote in his favor. The second election under this new law, or the amendment to the 1906 act, was my election in 1975, and we had by that time registered about 20,000 Cherokees, and out of a field of 10 candidates, I was elected.

SM: That's a good clear picture. Now the term, principal chief, infers that there are other chiefs?

RS: It infers that, but it's not true. For some reason, instead of just calling the principal officers of the tribes chiefs, each of the tribes refers to its governing officer as the principal chief, and, of course, this could date back a couple of hundred years to the time when they had a war chief and a peace chief. And they did, in fact, have several chiefs designated, and perhaps at that time there was just one leader overall and then sub-chiefs, but under the law as it was until this last year, the principal chief of each of the tribes—and the Chickasaws call theirs a governor—but the principal chiefs and the governor of the Five Tribes were the sole authority for these five tribes. There was no other authority, and any business that was transacted by any of the tribes was done only with the authorization of the principal chief. It was a total autocracy or monarchy. We had no legislative body, no governing body except myself, and prior to that, Bill Keeler. Now this was because of the termination of the councils, and in effect, the termination of the Constitution of 1839,
in 1906 by the act of Congress. As a practical matter, neither Bill Keeler nor myself believed in this form of government. We wanted to have more of a democracy for our tribe in particular, and so we took the lead, primarily Bill did, about eight years ago, and he began with appointing a committee to work on a constitution, or a revised constitution for the tribe to update the 1839 constitution, and get the government to recognize it as the official governing document for the tribe, as opposed to recognizing only the principal chief. Following my election in 1975, I pushed again for the constitution, finally got a draft that was acceptable to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, in the Department of the Interior. We put this to a referendum of the people, and it was passed by a vote of nearly ten to one. And one of the articles of the constitution provide that there shall be a council of 15 people to act as a legislature, and another provision is that there shall be a tribunal to hear appeals regarding constitutional questions or laws for interpretation. With the new constitution, which also was recognized by the Department of Interior, and signed by the Secretary and myself, the constitution became the law of the Cherokee Nation, and now we have a three-phase government, a separation of powers, in effect. What happened by my putting the constitution to a vote of the people, and them voting it, I more or less reduced the power of the principal chief's office. The interesting thing about it is that only I, as principal chief, had the authority to bring the constitution to a vote of the people. If the people had had a chief who said, "No, we don't need a constitution," and had simply refused to bring it to a vote, there is no authority within the tribe, no power of the people, that could have brought this constitution to a vote, and by so doing, it diluted my authority greatly, but, in my opinion, it increased the ability of the tribe to negotiate with third parties, particularly the federal government, because I think that, although I feel comfortable in the job, I do not have, and probably never will have, the kind of . . . oh, I don't want to say power, but maybe authority, that Bill Keeler had. Because
of his influence with a large oil company, and the political friends
that he had, he could do things for the tribe as an individual that
most other people cannot do. With the government of the Cherokees as
it is today, I am able to do many of those things, and to exert
influence, but it's because I have a 15-member council backing me on
these things, and that we have the court system to hear tribal
grievances, as well as myself, and I feel much more comfortable having
the knowledge that it's not just a one-man decision. And then, if it's
something of importance to the Cherokee people, there are going to be
many people deciding the question, and not just myself.

SM: And then you feel that the governmental officials respond more readily,
more positively to this new government of the tribe, with those other
people involved in it?

RS: I think that will be one of the results.

SM: It will be harder to say no.

RS: That's probably right.

SM: The Cherokee Nation, and the capital of the Cherokee people here at
Tahlequah, these are terms that we hear, but is there a reservation
as such?

RS: There has never been a reservation. The Cherokee people have never
lived on a reservation, except those people who remained in North
Carolina following the removal. After a few years, they came out of
the hills and were recognized by the government, and given a 53,000
acre reservation in North Carolina, but the Cherokees, as a tribe,
have always owned their land. They originally owned their land by
power, right of might, prior to the revolution. Following the rev-
olution, of course, they dealt with the newly-created United States
of America, and owned their land by treaty rights, and by right of occupancy. Following the removal, or in exchange for their land in the eastern part of the United States, the Cherokees were given a fee title patent to the land in Indian Territory, which at that time consisted of all of the northeastern part of Oklahoma, and a strip approximately 100 miles wide across the northern boundary of Oklahoma between Kansas and Oklahoma, which was to be the outlet of the Cherokees around the wild tribes of the West, so that they could get out of Indian Territory and out to California if they wanted to go that way. That was why it was called the Outlet Land. Now a fee simple title is a legal term, and a patent is a legal term, to designate the highest title recognized in the United States. For instance, a person who bought a home today normally will receive a warranty deed to a piece of property, or some form of deed, and that deed will recite that he is being given a fee simple title, and that there are no other claims, and no one else can have any ownership in that piece of property. This is the kind of title that the Cherokees were given, and if a person were to read an abstract of a piece of land in the Cherokee Nation, they would see that the first instrument in that abstract is a patent from the United States government to the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma. The next instrument in there is a deed from the Cherokee Nation to a particular individual or individuals. This is distinguished from a reservation title, where the tribes living on reservations today are living there only through more or less a use permit. They do not own that land, and any time the federal government says, "Move," they can be moved, and they can be relocated on another reservation. It is, in fact, a reserve of land for a temporary use. In our case we are protected with our title by the Fifth Amendment of the Constitution which says that no property belonging to an individual can be taken without proper compensation and due process of law. A patent is protected that way, whereas a reservation is not protected. But it has led to present-day problems, especially as far as recognition among Indians, because it is generally
considered that since Oklahoma Indians, or at least the Five Tribes, never had a reservation, that in fact they're not even Indian. For a while, during the 1960's, most of the federal programs were geared toward helping reservation Indians, and the Oklahoma Indians were totally ignored, although we have more Indians in Oklahoma than any other state in the Union, but we have fewer reservations. In fact, there are only about four actual reservations carved out of territory in Oklahoma. All the rest of the land was owned in fee simple with a patent from the government to the particular Indian tribe, like the Cherokees.

SM: Have all the reservations been terminated now?

RS: Yes. There are no reservations in Oklahoma now.

SM: That's a startling fact that surprises many people. With the greatest population of Indian people, no reservations.

RS: That's right.

SM: The Osage have some mineral rights to some land on the north edge, don't they?

RS: Yes.

SM: That's the nearest thing there is to a reservation?

RS: Well, yes it is, although the Cherokee Tribe today, for instance, owns about 45,000 acres of land. The tribe owns it. Although it's not a reservation, we actually own the land. Now at statehood, in the 1906 law, what happened was that Congress told the Cherokees that their title to any unalotted land--let me back up a minute here. As
part of the privilege for the Five Tribes to become citizens of the United States, and partially in retribution for the participation by tribes with the Confederacy in the Civil War, the United States government passed what we call the Dawes Act. The Dawes Act commissioned a group of people to come in and enroll all of the Cherokees, and to allot each Cherokee person a certain amount of the land within the boundary of the tribe, tribally owned land. Instead of owning the land as a tribe, they then owned it individually, and each Indian person was given 160 acres or the equivalent in value, and then whatever was left was surplus. Now there were some larger tracts of land that were not allotted because at that time there were only 41,889 Cherokees that were enrolled and that received land, so the extra land that was left over, the title to that land was then transferred from a fee title to a title called "United States of America in trust for the Cherokee Nation." Now all of the land that we buy today we have that option of putting in trust and having the title read, "In trust for the Cherokee Nation," or of owning that land outright. Now the land where the tribal complex is located, where our business office is and we have a motel and restaurant, some industrial manufacturing space here in Tahlequah, that is owned with a patent from the government, and it's taxable land. Now most of the 45,000 acres that we own is not taxable, and it is held in trust for us by the United States government. It cannot be sold without an act of Congress, so it's fairly well protected. You mentioned the reorganization act of 1934. This act applied to reservation Indians. Two years later there was an act passed known as the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act of 1936, not to be confused with the current term welfare however. It was more an act to benefit Oklahoma Indians in line with the reorganization act. It was passed primarily to permit the Indian tribes of Oklahoma to participate in revolving credit programs of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. It also provided the opportunity for tribes in Oklahoma to reorganize and to reestablish their own government. It was always feared by the attorneys for the Five Tribes that such a reorganization might result in a termination in that, if there was
really no termination of the tribes, there was really no need to
reorganize, and this has been demonstrated recently by the Creek case.
A lower court decision in Washington just recently made a finding that
the Creek constitution of the 1850's was still in force and effect,
and the Congress had no right in 1906 to throw out their constitution,
and that they, in fact, are still governed by that constitution, and
has ordered them to reorganize along the lines of the constitution,
and to develop an administration to study updating the old constitu-
tion. As I mentioned earlier, we had already, before that decision
came out, we had already passed a new constitution, so that we came
within the guidelines of that judge's decision anyway, and it's not
going to affect the Cherokees. But as far as reorganization, we have
not really participated, although there is a revolving credit organ-
ization in the Cherokee Nation, known as the Adair County Credit
Association, which does not function under the tribe, but rather as
a separate organization that was set up to relend money from the
federal government.

SM: Going back to some earlier years, isn't it true that the Cherokee
Nation lost some land in the Cherokee Outlet and the Cherokee Strip?

RS: As a matter of fact, that is true, and it's also the reason why
we're here today. It worked both ways. In 1889 the United States
came to the Cherokees and said, "There is such a demand upon Congress
to open Indian Territory for settlement from individual settlers as
well as the railroads, that we feel that it is important that we
acquire the land that you know as the Outlet Land, and that strip of
land south of Kansas." So they came to the Cherokees, and commissioned
a group to meet with the chief, and they set down and started negoti-
tations, and they agreed that the United States would buy the prop-
erty at a price of approximately $1.12 an acre. What in essence
happened, however, was that the United States came to the Cherokees
and said, "We are going to buy the land, here is what we're going to
pay for it. Don't argue with us, just sign the deed." And they did so and, of course, this was the land that was opened for the run of 1889 and 1893, and it was the land that was first settled, and where we get the name "Sooners" and what have you in Oklahoma. So, following that time, the Cherokees believed for many, many years that they were not paid enough for that land, and of course we've gone through the Dawes Act and through statehood, and since statehood the Cherokees pretty much went downhill. At statehood they lost their school system; they lost their court system; they did not have any laws, they were then under the state law of Oklahoma and they had no law enforcement on tribal lands, and for a while they were not even allowed to testify in the courts that were set up in the state of Oklahoma immediately after statehood. They had no way to redress grievances, and much of their property was lost immediately after it was allotted to them because of fraudulent land deals, because of corrupt judges and real estate agents that took advantage of the Cherokees who had just had allotments made to them. In fact, history tells us that there were many guardians appointed for minors who had received land in the allotment. Sometimes these guardians would have two or three hundred wards with many thousands of acres, and what they would do, they would simply apply to the court and tell the judge, "Well, the best thing that we could do for this minor, or these minors, is to sell their land and put the money in the bank and let it draw some interest so they can live on an annuity." Well, of course the judge would go along with it, and they'd put the land up and sell it at public sale, and the minor might not even know about it, and then the money, of course, was dissipated in a short time thereafter, and when the minor became of age, he had no way to go back and redress this particular thing. So for the next 50 or 60 years after statehood, the Cherokees were pretty muddled. They just lived in a state of flux, not really knowing what was happening, or what could happen, or what their rights were, and of course, they had no power or authority to bring suits against the federal government for possible wrongdoing,
until the Indian Claims Commission Act of about 1945. So they went for nearly 40 years without having any rights whatsoever. In 1950 there was a move begun by Bill Keeler and some tribal attorneys that were selected, one in particular, Earl Boyd Pierce, to bring some suits on behalf of the Cherokee Nation against the United States government, alleging that the government had treated the Cherokees unfairly in these land deals of the late 1800's. I think the first four or five suits that were brought were all lost, and for one reason or another were thrown out of court. Finally, one was brought regarding the Outlet Land sale, and through evidence that they had been able to secure about land values at the time, it was determined that the Cherokees had been cheated about 30¢ or 40¢ an acre for the land that the government bought. In other words, land sales of the time indicated that this land was worth around $1.50 to $1.60 an acre instead of the $1.12 they were paid. Earl Boyd filed the suit in the early '50's, and in 1961, nearly 10 years after it was filed, the Cherokees were successful, and the court awarded them a judgement of $14,000,000. This money was then distributed per capita to each Cherokee who was on the roll of 1906, or the descendants of those Cherokees, if they were dead. All but $2,000,000 was distributed per capita, and the distribution was actually made in about 1964 or 1965. The $2,000,000 was the residual amount of money that was left after all the claims were made, and all the people were found that could be, and the $2,000,000 was put in a trust fund, and from this $2,000,000 we began a redevelopment of a tribal government, well, of the tribe itself, and finding out the needs of the people, building buildings, putting up an office complex, and buying some land. The interesting thing was that out of this $14,000,000, the government deducted the cost that they had incurred partially in the Trail of Tears removal, and some actions around statehood, and I don't know what all, but they offset about almost three quarters of a million dollars, alleging that these were expenses incurred by the government on behalf of the Cherokees, and now that the Cherokees had won their case and said
the government owed it, they were going to set off these amounts that had been incurred by the government nearly a hundred years earlier. But in any event we did receive $14,000,000 and we had the $2,000,000 left, and today that $2,000,000 has been built or turned into about a $12,000,000 estate for the Cherokees, including this 45,000 acres of land, approximately 200,000 square feet of industrial manufacturing space located in two counties, a motel complex worth approximately $1,200,000, office buildings, and much other property and equipment.

SM: Were there any Cherokee people who didn't participate in this disbursement of funds then, upon completion of the case?

RS: No, not any Cherokees that were on the roll. If they were not on the roll they did not participate. Of course, this is a continuing problem, and it's one that we will always have with us. The membership of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma is made up of all of those Cherokees who were on the Dawes Commission roll, or their descendants—anyone who can prove through birth records or what have you, back to an ancestry on the rolls is eligible for membership in the tribe. However, in the early 1900's, the Cherokee people were just as skeptical of the federal government as they are today. In 1902 the Dawes Commission opened the rolls. By 1904 they had enrolled fewer than 10,000 Cherokees, because the Cherokees didn't want to sign anything. They were afraid that if they signed at this time, the same thing would happen when they were removed to Indian Territory—they were going to give up their land and be shipped off somewhere else. Well, through a massive educational move by the government, the word finally began to filter out that by signing it it was going to be the only way that the Cherokees could receive their allotment and be enrolled as Cherokees, and so in the last two years they enrolled most of the 41,889 Cherokees, and many did not get enrolled. Some living in Arkansas, some in Texas, some even in Indian Territory that did not get enrolled or did not want to get enrolled, and of course, today their descendants are in a difficult situation because they are not technically
members of the tribe. They are classified by the Bureau of Indian Affairs as "other" Indians, and they have to be at least one-half degree of blood or more to participate in Indian programs, like Indian Health Service or Bureau of Indian Affairs educational funds and this sort of thing.

SM: If they are classified as "others" they have to be half blood?

RS: Yes.

SM: But if they're classified as people on the roll, quarter blood is sufficient?

RS: One-quarter degree is sufficient.

SM: Is there any way that these people not on the rolls can now get on the rolls?

RS: No. It would be almost impossible to open the Dawes Commission rolls. It would take an act of Congress to do so, but more importantly, the proof that is necessary to establish their heritage as an Indian would be most difficult to find, because there are so many people, and their ancestors, of course, are all gone now, and it would be impractical. Even at the time of the Dawes roll there were many, many mistakes that were made, and if we come in now 70 years later and try to improve on the rolls, you would probably do more damage to it than we would do as far as improvement.

SM: That motel complex you mentioned. That's the one called Tsa-La-Gi, on the west side of Tahlequah?

RS: Yes. Southwest of Tahlequah.

SM: It's a beautiful place. The tribe owns that and operates it?
RS: Yes. It is a tribal venture entirely.

SM: One last question that that name brings up about the now famous play, Tsa-La-Gi out here. That's southeast of town?

RS: Yes.

SM: That's to open up again this June?

RS: Yes. It runs from the end of June until the end of August. The Tsa-La-Gi theater was built through the efforts of the Cherokee National Historical Society, which is a separate non-profit historical society that operates much like a state historical society does with the state. It is in effect the Cherokee Nation's historical society. It has received about $2,000,000 in grants from the Economic Development Administration to build the complex which now consists of a 2,000 seat amphitheater, the only air-cooled one that is outside.

SM: Do you mean it is outside but still air-cooled?

RS: Air cooled. It has a unique design that it's built into more or less the side of a hill, but the seating is almost straight up and down, and the cool air blows out and, of course, cool air settles, so it settles over the audience and keeps them air conditioned when it gets hot.

SM: Even though they're outdoors.

RS: And the museum, of course, which has recently been constructed, a very nice structure, built again with EDA's help, and an ancient Cherokee village built around the 1600, 1700's period, showing how Cherokees lived at that time, which, of course, would be in the
Carolinas and Georgia, and some of their habits, and an explanation of the clans, and an explanation of the council house and this sort of thing for tourists to visit, but also for scholars to come in. It's all built and reproduced accurately so that it will be of benefit for anyone to visit it. It's not simply a bunch of Indians and tepees, it's very authentic.

SM: And the whole complex, the museum, the theatre, the plays, all very interesting. I've heard excellent comments about it too. I talked to Betty Smith out there.

RS: Good. Betty is a wonderful person. She's a full-blood Cherokee, has a large family, and just does a tremendous job. She lives in a community called Lost City, which is almost 100% Indian community, about 20 miles northwest of Tahlequah. It is lost. The theater is open, as we said, in June. The village opens in May, and the museum is open year round, so we would welcome visitors any time of the year.

SM: And well worth the effort to come. Ross, I want to thank you very much. I think you've given us a great deal of information in these few minutes.

RS: I appreciate it, Sam, and I appreciate talking to you.

SM: I appreciate it very much, and I hope you have continued success as the principal chief, and that the whole tribe prospers.

RS: Thank you.