WILLIAM TIBBETTS, Chippewa
August 20, 1975
Hibbing, Minnesota

Listening to Indians

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:

We are in northern Minnesota at Hibbing, Minnesota, in the office of the probation officer, Mr. William Tibbetts. Do people call you Bill?

William Tibbetts:

Right.

SM: You have an interesting background, and I would like to just briefly fill it in. Did you grow up in this area?

WT: Yes, I was born and raised on the Nett Lake Indian Reservation, until the age of 18 when I left for the Air Force.

SM: Did you go to high school up there?

WT: I completed the 11th grade, at Orr, Minnesota. Well, I went up through the 8th grade and the 9th, 10th year I went to Flandreau Indian school in South Dakota.

SM: And from there you went into the Service?

WT: No, I come back and finished my 11th year at Orr, and from there I joined the Service.

SM: Did you run into prejudice and discrimination at Orr?

WT: Well, that's the main reason I joined the Service.

SM: To get away from it?

WT: I was going to be an orthopedic surgeon, and I had an orthopedic surgeon from Northwestern University in Chicago going to put me through college, and I joined a carnival between my junior and senior
year to pay for my clothes for the senior year. I got back to
school three weeks late, and I asked my homeroom teacher for make-
up work, and his remark was, "We don't give make-up work to
Indians," and I got kind of mad and punched him in the mouth and
got expelled.

SM: Expelled from school then?

WT: Right. I was expelled. That was at Orr.

SM: You hadn't graduated yet?

WT: I hadn't graduated yet. I was three weeks into my senior year, and
I was real shook up, so a couple of nights later I packed the bag
and left home. I got to Duluth and enlisted in the Air Force, and
stayed 20 years and four months.

SM: Twenty years and four months in the Air Force.

WT: I don't think I'd have got off then, but my brother, who is the
reservation planner, called me up and said there was some openings
with a tribe up here, and they'd sure like a guy up here with
experience with the white community to work with the Indians.

SM: An opening with the tribe? Do you work for the tribe?

WT: I was hired by the tribe. I'm under a federal discretionary grant,
hired by the tribe and being paid by the county, and I have a three
county area that I work under--northern St. Louis, Lake and Cook
Counties.

SM: Do you end up with three bosses then?
WT: I have more than three bosses. I have a court here in Hibbing, one in Virginia, Grand Marais, Nett Lake and also Two Harbors. I work out of all these courts.

SM: Bill, before we leave the Service experience and come back to the court—when you were in the Air Force did you have any problems there, or was that a good experience?

WT: Well, when I first joined I was real skeptical. An Indian in Service, he's either called "Chief," "Cochise" or something like this, and it took me a year or so to get used to that type of talk. After I got where I could accept that, my life in the Air Force was a real beautiful experience for me.

SM: Good. A lot of us take some kidding as we go along, but people who are members of a conspicuous minority group especially. You look like an Indian. I suppose most everyone gets subjected to some of this kind of hazing in colleges and in the Air Force. It bothered you at first, probably because of your experience back there with the school?

WT: Well, I don't know if it'll be that. It's just comin' off the reservation and you're... it'd be like a black man now. At one time you couldn't call 'im "black". At one time you couldn't call an Indian a half-breed—I mean, they're ready to fight. This was one of the big obstacles I had to get over.

SM: The being sensitive about it?

WT: Being real sensitive about your... heritage.

SM: But you did overcome it?

WT: Oh, I overcome that.
SM: So you made an adjustment to the way life is?

WT: Right. And this is a lot of the problem up there right now. A lot of the kids can't adjust, and I think with my experience in the Service and supervising people, I think this will help the reservation and the Indian people in more than one way.

SM: When you came out of the Service, what was your rank?

WT: I retired as a Master Sergeant.

SM: It surprised me when you said that you were retired, because you don't look old enough to be retired from anything. You look like you're about 35, I'd guess.

WT: (laughter) Thank you.

SM: Anyway then, that explains and gives us a good picture of the kind of young man who went off the reservation with some problems already, encountered more, but overcame them and became a well-adjusted and reasonably happy young fellow in the Service.

WT: Oh yeah, I was real happy. I've been around the world twice now ... served in Europe; oh, I think it was about eight years in the Orient. I think in my total time in the Service I spent nearly 15 years overseas, and I got married in Morocco -- I have four children now.

SM: Is your wife a Moroccan?

WT: No, she's a Texan. And we had ... the wife had three children, then we adopted an Indian girl for the fourth -- she's four now.

SM: And you have four children. And now here in the courthouse at Hibbing,
which is a brand new, modern building, you are a probation officer?

WT: Now my official title is Indian Correction Agent. I handle nothing but Indians.

SM: And you got your job through the tribe, and work for the county. Like you said, it's kind of complicated.

WT: It's complicated because the tribe hired me; I answer to the tribe about my people. I have to take care of—for the county and the district courts—any probation people, that's the Indian people. There's only two Indian probation officers in the United States, and one is in Duluth—we're under the Des Moines Project, and there's one up here. The one in Duluth is strictly what we call an ROR man—release on recognizance—and a supervisor—lease agent. Very little probation does he have. Up here I take care of adults, juveniles, any Indian that gets in trouble up here. According to the grant, we're not supposed to take nothin' but the adults. I've looked up their juvenile program up here, and some of the white probation officers up here seem to be a little bit afraid to go on a reservation, so I told 'em, I says, "I'll take all the juveniles," so I get up there once a week, and I have a real good relationship with the people up there.

SM: You mentioned that some of the white officials hesitate to go on the reservations. In other words, the feeling from both sides is strong enough up here that this attitude prevails?

WT: Oh yes.

SM: It doesn't everywhere?

WT: No.
SM: Lots of reservations are perfectly happy places to be?

WT: Well, the Grand Portage Reservation now—they're in a little . . . well, not a hassle or anything . . . they're trying to get legalized gambling up there. They have no problems, whereas, you take the Nett Lake Reservation—my own feelings are Grand Portage could handle a casino, Nett Lake cannot, because they'd have people on the reservation trying to rip off their own thing, whereas at Grand Portage it's altogether different.

SM: They cooperate better?

WT: They cooperate better; they're working for a one-man goal, whereas up here we have too many people trying different things. I mean, they're pulling different ways.

SM: Among the Indian people?

WT: Among themselves.

SM: And there is the strong attitude between whites, or non-Indians and Indians?

WT: Right.

SM: I gathered that the other day talking to the young man who is in jail here.

WT: Mike?

SM: I appreciated your letting me see him. Well, then, the Nett Lake situation, the place where you were born and grew up, is unique in a sense, in that there is more tension right there than there is in many reservations?
WT: I'd say yes. The young people up there . . . there's no recreation for 'em to do, so they're goin' out and breakin' windows and things like this. When I grew up there we had no recreation, but we didn't do things like that. We went out and fought bees, or huntin' or worked with our fathers or things like this, but I don't know, I think it's just a different generation of kids. My 16-year-old son has his own mind. The schooling now is so much higher than when we went to school, that they have much more knowledge than we do, so I feel that you have to sit down with the kids and talk with them and get their viewpoints, and weigh 'em against your own, and then come to agreement between you.

SM: I talked to this young man, Mike, who is in jail here, and I think he would probably be called incorrigible by most non-Indian law enforcement people. Is that right?

WT: Yeah.

SM: But the only positive note in our half-hour's conversation was when he referred to you. You have reached him to the extent where he feels you're the only good guy he's ever run into.

WT: Well, that makes me feel good.

SM: He said you come down and sometimes help try to build up their spirits. So there is a ray of hope for him, and he needs it, I think.

WT: Well, in 1972 in the Air Force, I was in Langley Field, Virginia, and I tried to get the recruiting position up here, so at that time I knew I wanted to go into working with the Indians, and I couldn't arrange it, so I spent a year in Thailand, and come back, and when this job became available I retired as soon as possible.
SM: Then you took your retirement and got the job here?

WT: Well, I retired on the 1st of February of this year, and also went to work right here in this office the 1st of February this year.

SM: So you're kind of new on the job?

WT: Well, it's hard to get back. I didn't know myself whether I was going to be accepted by my people back on the reservation.

SM: Are you?

WT: I am. I can drive on there now, and anybody that's on probation to me follows me right up to my office, whereas when the other people used to drive on the reservation they'd head for the woods and hide. I can say I've collected more restitution off the reservation than they have in either Virginia or Hibbing offices in the last 12 years, in the short time of six months.

SM: Let's get a mental picture of the spatial situation here. We are sitting here in the largest county in the state of Minnesota. Isn't St. Louis County the biggest one?

WT: Yes sir.

SM: In fact, it's so big you have three county seats, which is unique, isn't it?

WT: Right. We have Duluth, the main county seat, and we have one in Virginia and also one in Hibbing, and I'm in the Hibbing office.

SM: But does your responsibility extend over this whole county?
WT: All except Duluth. We have one man that takes care of the Duluth city itself.

SM: So what towns and what areas do you go to now to take care of problems?

WT: O.K. I have people in Eveleth, Virginia, Chisholm, Hibbing, Cook, Nett Lake, up on the east boundaries of Grand Portage, which is the furthest east reservation we have that is in, I think, Lake County.

SM: That's right on the shore of Lake Superior, isn't it?

WT: Lake Superior. Grand Marais, which is the county seat there, I take care of the Indians in that area.

SM: That's a different county?

WT: That's in Lake County.

SM: So you spread over into another county too.

WT: I have a three-county area, three counties that I cover, that I was hired to cover.

SM: So you're not only in the biggest county, but you also have two other counties.

WT: I think they described it in the resume, applying for the job, that the area I cover is bigger than, oh, about four states.

SM: Yes, it would be bigger than many of our states. That's unique when probation officers in some cities feel that they have to do too much running, they could take a look at your situation—an area larger than many states.
WT: It was hard for you to catch me. I was just about ready to leave for Duluth—I have a staffing down there. I have a young 12-year-old boy I put in the group home down there, and, in fact, the day before yesterday I went up to Little Fork, which is in Koochiching County, to pick the young fellow up, and it was all a mistake, it was all a lack of communications between the sheriff's department, the home, his parents—he was out on pass. So I went on a wild goose chase, about 250 miles.

SM: And were you about to take off for Duluth this morning?

WT: Right. I gotta be down there at noon.

SM: And how long will it take you?

WT: It will take me about an hour and a half to get there.

SM: So we have a definite time limit here. It's 9:30 now. Well, I appreciate your taking the time, Bill. I know that you were unable to get back yesterday from that other trip, and getting down to Duluth then—I think this is probably one of the keys to your success so far, your extending yourself to give others time in the hope of fostering greater understanding, and then you're going to have to race a little bit to get down there to help take care of this boy who's in trouble through misunderstandings.

WT: I think they'll wait for me.

SM: Well, good, so we have an idea now of the scope, the geography you cover. And your probationary officer's job—what does that really involve?

WT: Well, it involves any Indian that gets in trouble. Prior to this,
prior to my job here, a misdemeanor . . . or they pick up an Indian boy, they throw him in jail. This kid come off the reservation—he has no way of knowin' anything about a bondsman or anything like this. So he's gonna sit in jail until trial. My job is to go in there, I interview him, if I feel that he can get out on his own recognizance, he'll be back here to appear in court, they'll let him out. If they don't think that'll work, I take him under a supervisory release program—I write out certain restrictions on him—I give him . . . "You be in at 10:00 o'clock at night, you will refrain from use of alcoholic beverages," things like this. If he signs this, then I'll get him out on a surety bond, and he then is under my supervision until trial. O.K., he goes to trial. If he pleads guilty and the courts say they want a pre-sentence investigation, it's my job to do this investigation for the courts, recommend what should we do with this young fellow—should we incarcerate him down at Stillwater, or should we put him on probation for some years, or whatever it might be. I have a real good working relationship with all the judges in the area. They usually take my recommendation, and I sit down with the Indian lad, or whoever it might be, and explain exactly what's going to happen to him, why it's happening, and he then knows what to expect.

SM: It was one of the judges that recommended that I talk to you, by the way.

WT: Judge Murray?

SM: Yes.

WT: I have a young fellow now, oh I guess the kid's 18 years old. I have him in the Northeast Regional Correctional Center for a year. I expect to get him out within two months. Since he's been down there he'd completed his G.E.D.; he's into welding; he's learning
somethin' to do, things like this. I can get him out within three months. I've got another program under the steelworkers—I met with them people yesterday. They're startin' a kind of a program strictly for Indians from 18 to 30, and people 30 and over. Now the people 18 to 30, they required a high school education. They'll be on the job for three years, it's a three-year program, and they're required six hours a week schooling under the steelworker's program. And I took six young gents down there yesterday, I've got them enrolled now. The old relocation program, as it used to be, they used to take the families and take 'em out of state, and move 'em to a different place, where the Indian was off a reservation, where they really didn't know how to live in the white community—nobody told 'em—they just sent 'em there, "You're goin' to school here, here's money for your expenses," and so on. Sure, they finished school, but they come right back to the reservation. The program I'm workin' on now... I can't think of what they call it... I got papers all over here on it. It's not like intern, it's under the journeyman.

SM: Apprentice?

WT: The apprentice program for steelworkers. Young fellows come off the reservation, or in the area here, 18 years of age, they required a high school diploma, or a G.E.D., they're put on the job, they go to school six hours a week, and at the end of three years they have their journeyman card, or their book what they call it, they can go anywhere in the United States. And this is in the area. They can live at home and work, their school is right here. They're settin' up school right here in Virginia, and I think they're gonna have real good success with this.

SM: This new refinement of the relocation program is making it more acceptable, isn't it?
WT: Right. They take a man that really don't know how to live in a city, they're gonna put him in a city, this guy's gonna come back to the reservation.

SM: When something goes wrong, or he gets defeated, despairs, then he just takes off for home?

WT: They took one fellow off the reservation, sent him to Minneapolis, and they housed him right in the middle of a black community. He stayed there one week. I don't think he had any problems with his neighbors or anything like that, but he just couldn't cope with it, so he left and went right back home.

SM: In Minneapolis, have you had any contact with the situation down there?

WT: N...n...o.

SM: I heard that Minneapolis is the one city in the United States that has a recognizable Indian ghetto.

WT: They have ... I've been down there. I know people down there that work out of the community corrections, and as far as my scope comin' home here--I call home northern Minnesota--and gettin' back with my people, I've still got a lot to learn about 'em--their ways of life today as to when I left it.

SM: You have actually spent as much of your life away as you have here, haven't you? About half and half. I think your tribal officials, whoever, were wise to look for someone like you who has had this background, because you did have the experience of growing up there like the people you're working with--you even got into a little trouble, and got expelled from school, and then you went into the non-Indian world and made a success of that after adjusting to it,
so having come back, you can see the best and the worst of both worlds, and how one can cope if he discovers how to do it. Right?

WT: Right.

SM: And that's a big part of your problem--helping in this adjusting process?

WT: Right. This is my main concern right now--showin' these people that they don't have to live on the reservation if they don't want to. A lot of them do--you find that the Indian movement today tends to . . . an Indian will not marry a white man, very seldom now. When I got married, that was the thing to do, but now they're tryin' to unify themselves.

SM: Do you mean it used to be the tendency to play down your Indian-ness, and now it's the tendency to play up and hang on to your Indian-ness?

WT: Right. Right.

SM: And that's only 20 years.

WT: That's just 20 years. The tribal motto, Self Determination, I think is fabulous, and the young kids today, though, like I say, they have their own ideas. An Indian--I don't know if I should say this or not--but an Indian basically is a lazy person, and to get them to see what they can do with their life is hard. I think right now an Indian has the world open to him, as far as schooling goes, their job opportunities, things like this, if he'll get off his dead butt and get out there and work a little bit.

SM: By lazy though, I think, that speaking in the kindliest manner you mean that culturally there has not been the drive to go out and excel
at something, and climb a ladder of success. Is that what you mean?

WT: Uh, no . . . I think it's this. My feeling, or the feeling that I get from the people, is that the white man's come in and taken our land, why should we work? Let them take care of us. They put us on this reservation.

SM: O.K., that's another aspect of this whole thing. But way back, the culture was a different kind of point of view.

WT: Right. Like Nett Lake now. We have quite a few of the women that are leaders up there. If they went back to where the man was the leader and the woman did what she was supposed to do, I don't think they'd have the problem up there that they have. Well, sure, women's lib and all that today is on the upswing, but some of these people, they don't . . . well, our judges up there for instance. We went under the retrocession act on Nett Lake on the 28th of January, so we have our own court system.

SM: The retrocession act? What does that mean?

WT: O.K., that means that we receded from the state. We're a state within a state.

SM: The Nett Lake Reservation is a . . .

WT: It's just like Red Lake. It's a closed reservation.

SM: Now that's new, because for a long time there were only a couple—Red Lake and I think the Navajo.

WT: Right. And I feel that within three years any reservation in the state of Minnesota is gonna be under the retrocession act.
SM: They'll have their own law?

WT: They'll have their own law, they'll have their own court system, any felony charges, like that, we'll have to take out to Duluth or Federal Court.

SM: At the risk of digressing a moment, Peter McDonald of the Navajos made a speech in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, not long ago--it was in May--and he spoke about the need for an Indian nation. Now was he talking about this retrocession?

WT: I don't know if he was talkin' about the retrocession act, but you're gonna find the trend of our tribal government--we have a main office in Cass Lake as the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, then we go down to the reservation, we have our Reservation Business Committee who run the reservation. O.K., I'm lookin' at a structure there where we run our reservation and each reservation has members on the tribal executive committee. O.K., we take our problems from there, we go to the tribe, which includes the six reservations in Minnesota. We take them our problems and then they hash them around. O.K., we try to solve our own problems before it gets to the Bureau of Indian Affairs so we have nothin' to do with them people. I'm not sayin' they're bad or anything like that, but we're tryin' to govern ourselves.

SM: If you can do that, then you don't need these other agencies. You do get funds from BIA, and so on, don't you?

WT: Right. We do get funds from there. Our education fund--I'm hopin' right now for the six gentlemen I put in this school yesterday that I can get their tools funded--things like this where it's not gonna put a big hardship on them or their families until they start gettin' their paycheck.
SM: That's interesting, because I wasn't aware that the Nett Lake Reservation was becoming a closed reservation, or was engaged in retrocession--ceding back to the tribal government.

WT: Right. Now this is--their going back to the retrocession--somebody walked in there in December and started talkin' retrocession, so instead of planning for it they voted it in, and the next thing you know, we're in retrocession up there.

SM: A little prematurely maybe?

WT: I think so. I think if they'd waited a year and planned it out, I think they'd been a lot further off. We have three lay judges up there--we have a chief judge and two associate judges--I'm a probation officer out of their courts. I've sat in their courts and I've never understood one word they said. Sure the defendant or the person that's being tried, he stands up in front of the judge and Bam!, $180.00 fine. Are you guilty or not guilty? They go by federal statutes.

SM: By not understanding, you didn't mean the language?

WT: No. I meant the way they approached the problem.

SM: Do you speak Chippewa?

WT: I speak some, yes.

SM: I suppose you can understand them?

WT: Well, they speak in English up there, and I understand English, but it's hard . . . being working out of so many courts. See, I have so many different judges under me, they all want things done one way and another way. Up there the judges come to me and ask me.
SM: The law, then, is administered on that reservation by Indians for Indians?

WT: Right.

SM: And if a non-Indian comes on the reservation, he is subject to that law, is he?

WT: No, they're tryin' to change that now.

SM: Oh, he would be an exception to this?

WT: That's it. We're tryin' to get that where we have jurisdiction over the reservation, no matter who commits a crime there. But we don't. We do not have the jurisdiction over the white man. If he comes on the reservation, then he is tried in a white court.

SM: In other words, if say a white ruffian, or renegade, comes on the reservation and really causes some trouble, then he can be tried by somebody who might be prejudiced against Indians, in a white court?

WT: Right.

SM: Which is a little less than fair, isn't it?

WT: I think so. That's like the Indians—we get picked up off the reservation, we still have to go to the white court.

SM: You can't go back to the reservation court?

WT: Right. As long as all their jurisdiction includes is that boundary.

SM: Well, when that's changed that should help too.
WT: Well, I think so.

SM: That then would put you in a position of having more authority. This would help greatly in handling the problems if this change goes through, where non-Indians as well as Indians are subject to the tribal law on the reservation.

WT: Right. I feel that what's fair for the white man should be fair for the Indians. If we're picked up off the reservation we cannot get tried on the reservation by our own people—we have to go to the white people—so if a white man comes on our reservation and gets picked up, why shouldn't he be tried by the Indian courts instead of be taken off to the white courts?

SM: Does that same situation hold true on the Red Lake Reservation, and other closed reservations?

WT: I don't know. I've never been on the Red Lake Reservation.

SM: They have separate laws. For example, they make their own fishing and hunting laws.

WT: Well, we have that ourselves.

SM: You do that too?

WT: Right. I've been with the judges up there, and I've tried to have them set up an ordinance, adopt ordinances for the reservation.

SM: If they adopted an ordinance stating that non-Indian people on this territory are subject to these laws, that would make a test case out of it, wouldn't it?

WT: It sure would.
SM: And if it went to the Supreme Court and was upheld, you'd have it made. You'd have legislation through the courts.

WT: Accordin' to our treaties—just like this test case that they're doin' up at Grand Portage right now on the lottery bit—I think we're gonna, accordin' to the Treaty of 1874, I think it is—we govern our own reservation. So why can't, if they want, have their legalized gambling there. They have a test case goin' on right now.

SM: This Grand Portage thing is interesting. For example, Grand Portage is right up there on the shore of Lake Superior where first the French and then the English fur traders used to. . . .

WT: Right. This is the furtherest Indian point in, I mean, eastern point in the state of Minnesota. It's right on what you call the heel or the point.

SM: My students are interested—that's a very colorful spot.

WT: It's beautiful up there.

SM: Very historical. And have they reconstructed the old fort?

WT: I don't think so.

SM: They were working at it 20 years ago.

WT: They're thinking about it.

SM: But it's interesting about this gambling thing now. Do you mean that they're trying to test the law to see if they have the authority to go ahead with gambling in the same sense that the state of Nevada has gambling?
WT: Right. They plan on puttin' in their slot machines, roulette wheels, crap tables and blackjack.

SM: If they get approval they will have a source of income the same as Las Vegas has, potentially at least.

WT: That's right. I look at it this way--if they do get it legalized up there, you're gonna have cruisers from Detroit, Chicago, all the Great Lakes comin' in to that one place. It's a lot closer than goin' up to Las Vegas.

SM: Of course if they succeed, I suppose all the other Indian reservations in the country who would not be adverse to gambling would want to do the same thing.

WT: That's a possibility.

SM: Well, the possibilities are tremendous in this, aren't they?

WT: Like I said before--one reservation might be able to handle somethin' like that, where another will not. I'd hate to see it get up to Nett Lake, I really would.

SM: That would just be the cause of all kinds of trouble, wouldn't it?

WT: It would.

SM: Or like right now, I imagine, that at Pine Ridge it probably would be troublesome, because you have two militant factions contesting for it, if that's fair to state.

WT: That's true. You have your AIM people up there right now, and the tribal government and their office.
SM: Do you by any chance know this man, Wilson, who is the president of the tribal council for the Pine Ridge Reservation?

WT: No, I don't.

SM: I'm going out there later and hope to meet him as well as his opposition. I guess the opposition sometimes gets to be more than just argumentative.

WT: Oh yes. Take the Leecy brothers now. They're both members of the AIM movement.

SM: Yes. I asked Mike about it, but he didn't want to describe it for fear of saying something that he said might hurt the movement, because he said he didn't know that much about it.

WT: Well, see, now Mike told me when I was down there, his brother Ike bought out--what I call buying out--of the jail.

SM: Raised the bail?

WT: No, he wasn't on bail. He was on six months straight time. Now the Indian court said, "If you can pay $2.00 a day for each unserved day, then when you pay that your sentence is completed."

SM: Mike said, "He raised the bail, and I'm trying to raise mine."

WT: O.K., it's not bail.

SM: But that's different?

WT: He's buying his time, is what he's doing.

SM: Is that permissible under any law?
WT: I don't know if it is under any law or not. I know in the Indian law this is the stipulation they put on it. Now instead of for the tribal government payin' $5.00 a day for this man to stay in jail--because we have to contract out in the jail here, we can't use the state, county, all we can use is federal facilities under this renegotiation. Now the Red Lake jail, which is a federal jail up there, was full, so they contracted to the St. Louis County here to house these two gentlemen for six months at $5.00 a day. Now it's better for the Indians to have this kid pay out his $2.00 a day and get out of there where they're not payin' $5.00 a day.

SM: It saves them $5.00 a day, plus they take in $2.00.

WT: They take in $2.00 a day. $7.00 a day they're makin'.

SM: If you multiply that by a few dozen prisoners, you've got quite a sum.

WT: Right.

SM: The tribe has to raise this money?

WT: It's comin' out of the BIA I believe, because the BIA is contracted to run their courts system.

SM: Do you have much AIM activity in this part of the country?

WT: Well, I think their headquarters of AIM is right here in Minnesota.

SM: Would it be on the White Earth Reservation?

WT: Mahnomen.

SM: The people over there said AIM started there and is there, but I didn't know if they were speaking literally or figuratively.
WT: Oh yeah, they have a big camp right there, and so I think their main headquarters is in Minneapolis or St. Paul.

SM: Yes, that's where they operate out of mostly now. Since you are the kind of person that I can ask both sides' questions from, you know, without . . . like your teacher, getting a punch in the nose, somebody said AIM is an organization that started in the Minnesota penitentiary. Is that fair?

WT: Yes, I think Clyde Bellecourt was in Stillwater when it started.

SM: So that statement is fair, but that it's necessarily bad or good is another question.

WT: Well, they had a good purpose when they started, and if they'd a followed that purpose I think AIM woulda been fabulous for the Indians.

SM: Some people think it is yet.

WT: Well sure. They have some believers. I think now they're goin' about it the wrong way. Their main job or their main purpose was to bring attention to a problem, then get up and leave when they brought attention, and let the other Indians come in and negotiate. They took it upon themselves to go in there with guns, become radical about it, and try to negotiate themselves. And this is the downfall of AIM, and I think within two to three years you won't see AIM.

SM: Because it has taken a turn too far to the radical militant, even shooting kind of attitude?

WT: Right. This is the way I feel. Somethin' like the Panther organization, I assume.
SM: If it gets too far out it destroys itself?

WT: It destroys itself.

SM: Several Indian people that I've talked to, I think, have been hinting at this without spelling it out as precisely as you did. One man said he was a member of AIM; he was at Wounded Knee; he thought they had to do that, but he dropped out since because they have become too militant and he doesn't like the violence. Another one said, over here on the White Earth Reservation, he was a member of AIM and he believes in many of the things they stand for, and yet he doesn't like the violence.

WT: Right. I think they went a little bit too far there, and...

SM: But now, some of them at the same time are still supporting AIM for those good purposes they have in their program.

WT: Right. The American Lutheran Association grants them money each year.

SM: I think the National Council of Churches did. I don't know if they still do.

WT: I don't know if they do or not, but I know they have backing.

SM: Do you know anything about this ranch over by Mahnomen?

WT: No, I don't.

SM: It's an area over there owned by the Chippewa Tribe of that part of the country, and AIM has something set up there as a drug and alcoholic rehabilitation center, I believe.

WT: This is another thing. I can't see 'em settin' up somethin' to help
the drug abusers, when their teachers are probably drug abusers themselves.

SM: Well, they're not as active in this part of the country, in this part of Minnesota?

WT: Well, I think that the way the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe is operating now, I think we're kinda holding them down. On this Stillwater incident, we had an ad hoc committee out of the tribe to go in there and see why the Indians were all in lockup and not gettin' a chance to progress into the minimum security. We found that out of 63 inmates, Indian inmates, we had 45 in lockup. What I mean by lockup, they stayed in their cell.

SM: Out of 63, 45 were Indians, locked up? The rest had some freedom of movement?

WT: Some freedom of movement.

SM: That's a staggering statistic.

WT: It is. Well, you take in Minnesota alone. Out of the state of Minnesota, the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe makes up approximately 1% of the population. Yet we have as high as from 6% to 25% in the penal system.

SM: Yes, this kind of figure I found in Phoenix also.

WT: Right. Now why is that? I don't know. This is the project I'm on—we're under a pilot project right now where we're lettin' the Indians take care of the Indians and see what we can do.

SM: Can a young Indian man or woman apply to the BIA for a grant to go to college?
WT: O.K., that comes under education. I have, in fact, Mike's brother right now, workin' to get him to go to Haskell Indian School in Lawrence, Kansas. I have to talk to Judge Murray, see if I can get his case continued until he comes back. Now his younger brother—he's got a younger brother that's on supervised release to me—he's out on $1,000 bail right now on four different charges. I talked to the judges, and this is the way I'm gettin' along with the judges, they've all went along with me. "Will he be back in May to go to court?" I said, "Yes, he will." They released him, they set his trial late in May so he can go ahead and go to school.

SM: They have done this?

WT: He's leavin' Friday.

SM: Well, people are trying to help.

WT: Oh yes, some of 'em are.

SM: Would you say that you would be popular with the AIM leaders, you as a person?

WT: (chuckle) Not really. I know Clyde, I've met Clyde. I've met Ralph Ware.

SM: Bellecourt?

WT: Bellecourt, right.

SM: Dennis Banks?

WT: I've met him, oh, it's been a couple years ago.
SM: Russell Means?

WT: And I've met him.

SM: You've met them all.

WT: Right, I've met them all, but . . .

SM: Do you feel that they would think you are too gentle with the whole problem?

WT: No, I don't think that. I think they'd call me . . . well, what is an Uncle Tom to the blacks, the same is an apple to an Indian.

SM: A red apple?

WT: Right. Red on the outside, white on the inside. I've been called that at Nett Lake. Three days later the young fellow come back and apologized. He said, "I didn't know what you were doin'."

SM: Well, this young man downstairs thinks very highly of you, and he said so. So I would say that you have acceptance there on the reservation, and you feel it, I'm sure when you go there.

WT: Oh yeah, like I say, when I go on the reservation, I get along with everybody.

SM: And you're getting along with the people here in the courthouse, but it isn't really like walking a tightrope. It isn't that difficult in a sense, because you find reasonable people on both sides?

WT: Oh yes. I stated this to Mike. I said, "You have good and bad in every race," I says. "You take a handful of Indians on a reservation,
kids that go out and get in trouble," I says, "they go off the reservation, and bam! they're in trouble, it reflects back on the people on the reservation." It's the same way in Service. Anything happen with a G.I. down town, that whole base was to blame. It wasn't just that one--they didn't single out just that one man.

SM: The classic case--the Brownsville Affair--the one that Theodore Roosevelt got involved in. Well, anyway, I think the people, the Indian people, and the non-Indian people both, are fortunate to have you here in this job, Bill, if I may say so.

WT: Thank you.

SM: And I have had three or four days experience around here talking to people all the way from the judges to the prisoners, and the impression comes through the same from all of them.

WT: That makes me feel good--makes me feel like I'm doin' my job.

SM: I think also putting this on tape where you are expressing your opinion should help all of us, the majority and minority groups whatever they may be, and particularly indicate that there is hope. And this one young man that we were talking about--he has hardly any hope, he says, according to the way he speaks. But maybe there's a spark of it left someplace.

WT: Well, I told my wife, I said, "If I can help 'em, straighten their lives out in any way, I mean if I can just . . . one guy, I've done a decent job, I'll feel happy."

SM: I don't think you should get discouraged if you can't straighten out the lives of some of the people.

WT: Oh, I don't. I know I'll never be able to straighten some of them.
SM: Some of them are not going to come around to any compromise point of view, no matter what.

WT: I have a nephew up there now--in fact he's movin' in with me tomorrow, because he has no father. His father left home--he's 13, he's out smokin' pot, drinkin', sniffin' glue, and his mother come up to me, my sister come up to me, and asked me, "Can you take him?" So startin' tomorrow I'm gonna have another one in my family.

SM: You'll have five kids?

WT: I'll have five children.

SM: Do you think now with all this activity going on, do you think it's still possible for the Indian people to preserve and continue their culture the way some of them want to?

WT: Yes, I do. There are programs on Nett Lake--I deal mostly with Nett Lake. They're hiring young kids to come in and do beadwork for the tribe, where they can go and sell their beadwork, their barkwork, things like this. They've got teachers up there--the older Indians that are teachin' the younger ones, you know.

SM: It's becoming a positive, progressive program to teach the old things, the old culture?

WT: They have classes in Chippewa.

SM: In the language?

WT: Right.

SM: How about the religion?
WT: You'll find today that a lot of the Indians are goin' back to their old religion.

SM: The old religion and the cultural habits and attitudes and the dances, for example?

WT: Yeah. We have a lot of powwows up through here during the summer.

SM: Powwows used to be just for the sake of some commercial chamber of commerce, but it isn't this way anymore, is it?

WT: No. You're finding that the reservations themselves are puttin' on their own powwow.

SM: For their own sake, not for the sake of some viewers that are paying, or tourists?

WT: That's right. Durin' our riceing season up there now, the wild rice season, we have powwows almost every other night, and this is to gather the Indians together so that the rice committee can tell 'em where you're gonna go riceing tomorrow, how long you're gonna rice.

SM: Wild rice is fantastically expensive in the cities, even right here, as far as that goes. I cam remember when it was 30¢ a pound. Now I saw 11 ounces in a store for $7.50 the other day.

WT: And this is all what I call commercial rice, rice that is processed by the plants, the rice plants. The old Indian way of parchin' rice, jigging it out by your feet and fanning it in a basket, there's no taste that can compare to that.

SM: Well, now, it used to be that Indians only could gather wild rice.
WT: O.K., there's only one lake in Minnesota where that applies right now, and that's on Nett Lake. It's governed by the Indians; you cannot have a motor on that lake, a flat-bottomed boat; an airplane cannot land on that lake. To get on that lake an Indian takes a canoe.

SM: No one except Indians can harvest rice at Nett Lake, or fish or whatever?

WT: Right. They have to be a band member of the Bois Forte Indian band. And if they are not, then they are voted in by the tribe. Myself, I'm enrolled on Leech Lake. When I go up there riceing, like I say, I was born and raised on Nett--my mother was there--at one time they used to enroll everybody under their mother's band--somehow my father, well... I'm the only one in a family of nine that's enrolled at Leech, so all my brothers and sisters have the right to rice there.

SM: On Nett Lake, but you don't?

WT: I go up there. I lived there all my life, everybody knows me, so I have to apply to the tribe to get a permit to rice.

SM: That's interesting, isn't it?

WT: And this is how they're governing themselves. This come about in the last four or five years.

SM: How did you refer to the name of that tribe?

WT: Bois Forte. That's the official name of it.

SM: Of the tribe?
WT: No. Well, that's the band, yes. The Bois Forte Indian band and the reservation.

SM: Maybe you can help me there. Someone was telling me there's a Pembina band and a Mississippi band and a Pillager band.

WT: Right. Mississippi band, right, Pillager, a Bois Forte band and the Grand Portage band.

SM: All Chippewa? And the Chippewa people are part of a larger Ojibway group?

WT: The Ojibway nation.

SM: I wanted to pursue this riceing a little further. It used to be, I think, in the state of Minnesota, that non-Indians were not allowed to harvest rice, but now they can?

WT: Right. They buy a permit, and they can go on any of the other lakes.

SM: They can buy a license, but one place they cannot is on Nett Lake itself.

WT: On Bois Forte. Now my wife can. She's white, and, being the head of the household, I can take her on the reservation if I was enrolled there now, or if I was voted that I can rice there. She can, because she's my wife; I have to take care of her—the old Indian belief is when a person gets married you take your wife to his lodge. O.K., now if my sister married a white man, she can rice there, but he cannot because he is the head of the household. He's supposed to take her to his lodge.

SM: And still a moment ago you said in the old days sometimes they traced the families through the maternal side, the mother's side.
WT: Right. Well, they enrolled you on her reservation.

SM: But still the male member is the head of the household. And in some societies, I guess, it was even more strongly matrilineal than that.

WT: Well now, when I left there you could go out in the woods, you'd see the man cuttin' the wood, sure. But to take that wood home, it was the wife's job. She'd put it on a sleigh, and he'd walk in front of her with the axe. But now, like say, this women's lib bit. . . . (laughter)

SM: So the Indians can preserve their culture if they want to work at it, but it takes an effort.

WT: Sure. I think it does, and I think they're workin' towards it.

SM: Yes, I think there is more now of a conscious effort to preserve Indian culture around the country than there was 20 years ago.

WT: Right. I think they're tryin' to reunite themselves to bring the Indian population up.

SM: Well then, this is getting better in the sense that the Indians are saving or preserving their culture. Have you ever participated in any Indian dances?

WT: Oh yes, I've danced all my life, even when I come home on leaves. They'd have what they called a warrior's powwow in my honor. As the Indian warrior comes home from the wars they'd have a big dance for 'im and the chief takes you and leads you around in different movements and things like this.

SM: Is it a ceremonial acceptance and welcome home?
WT: Right. It's a welcome-home dance, is what they give you.

SM: Well, that's very nice. How about any of the non-Indian dances?

WT: Well, I'm a professional square-dance caller. I called all over the United States and in Hawaii.

SM: That's interesting too. So you've engaged in ceremonial Indian dances and in the non-Indian square dance.

WT: Right.

SM: And you're a professional caller.

WT: Right. I enjoy calling. I bill myself as "The Calling Indian."

SM: You know, I used to think that "alamone left" was alimony.

WT: (laughter) I'll betcha a lot of people that's payin' alimony might think that too.

SM: Well, that's fascinating, really. I didn't know they had a welcome-home ceremonial like that for the warrior who returns.

WT: Oh yes. When you come home on leave like that they always have a powwow for you, a dance.

SM: Is that because you've been off to the wars?

WT: Right. This is what I say--you're supposed to be off to war, and you're comin' home, and when the warrior comes home they welcome him back.

SM: In World War II, the Navajos were famous for their communications,
because nobody could decipher what they were saying. They were very effective. However, I heard one time, I think it was the Hopis, that there, because they're a peaceful people and try to avoid war, when young men came home from the wars they had to go through a cleansing ceremony, rather than a welcoming ceremony. The welcome came after the cleansing.

WT: Right.

SM: But the Chippewas, the Sioux, are not that concerned with avoiding conflict?

WT: No, actually the Chippewa was a very peaceful tribe, but they weren't a tribe to be pushed.

SM: And they were pushed from the east, so they pushed the Sioux out of their country originally.

WT: Right. They pushed the Sioux right out of Minnesota here.

SM: Yes, you know your history better than some. The Chippewa and the Sioux were traditional enemies.

WT: Right, we were. We've got some war grounds right up here in this area, where you can go out and find your arrowheads and things like this, if you so desire. We have a Lakota Sioux Reservation in the southern part of the state.

SM: Down near Pipestone?

WT: Right.

SM: I want to get down there too. I wonder if they'll let me on that pipestone site where the stone is.
WT: I don't know--I've been there. Like I say, I went to school there in Flandreau which is just 15 miles away from Pipestone. I had a relation that worked there at the Pipestone Indian school, and I used to go there quite often.

SM: You are in a unique position, understanding, and not being antagonistic to either side. So is there any advice you can give us how maybe we can be more effective in making life a little better for everybody involved, Indian and non-Indian, in this whole confrontation?

WT: That's a hard question.

SM: That's what you're devoting all your time to, isn't it?

WT: For people to get along in any race, I think they have to have the knowledge of each other. I think they've got to understand their ways of life, instead of condemning it.

SM: Understand instead of just saying, "That's not good because I don't know about it."

WT: Why that's true. I've told some of my experiences on the reservation, things that's happened to me through the medicine, and things like this that I wouldn't care to speak about on tape, but I've sat down with people and tried to explain it to them, and they just say, "Well, it can't be good." You ask them why and they say, "We don't understand how it works," or, "There's gotta be a trick to it."

SM: You mean the healing process?

WT: Healing, and their medicine dances and things like this. Its the things that I've seen as a child, and both my grandparents, my mother
and father were high in the Indian religion. Myself, I don't disbelieve it—some things it's hard for me to believe, but I've seen it and . . . well, that's like any religion, I guess. But I think the main thing in the world today is understanding other people, their problems, what they're going through, their background, their ethnic background, their culture, and I think if a person really wants to understand an Indian he should go up there and live with them, see how they live.

SM: It's hard to do that, of course you know, practically, but we're trying in another way. I hope this tape helps a little. I think what you have said on it helps, and then your work, your daily effort week-to-week helps. It seems that a lot of people are trying, so maybe we're going to make some progress.

WT: Well, I'm hopin'. I'm hopin' to get more Indians involved in the court system. Bob Peacock, the Indian planner for the tribe in Duluth, we're workin' up some proposals to infiltrate the court system with Indians so that we get a better representation. Like Judge Patrick O'Brien down there. He says, "I am glad that we have an Indian probation officer here, because when we go to court the Indian can talk for him; he can talk to the Indian; he can bring me his viewpoints; I can sit down and evaluate these," he says, "And when I get down to sentence this man, I know nobody can holler, 'prejudice!'," And that to me was just a fabulous statement, because he is one of the judges in the area that are really pushing for the Indian people.

SM: For fairness?

WT: For fairness in courts and things like this.

SM: Bill, I want to thank you very much for this hour that you took out
of your busy day, even held up your trip to Duluth to make it possible, and I hope you have the best of luck in your work helping the people, and that it goes well with you personally too.