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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LISTENING TO INDIANS

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BOYCE TIMMONS, Cherokee
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Sam Myers:
Today is another beautiful day in Oklahoma, and we're talking with Mr. Boyce Timmons here at the University of Oklahoma at Norman, Oklahoma. We're just southeast of the city of Oklahoma City, aren't we?

Boyce Timmons:
We're about 20 miles south of Oklahoma City.

SM: It's a huge campus, and this is where the famous Oklahoma football team comes from?

BT: Correct.

SM: Mr. Timmons, would you explain to me what your position is here on the campus and in the Indian work?

BT: I've been at the university for over 40 years, partly as a student, and 38 years as an employee, and during that period of time I represented most of the Indian functions for the university, and actually was considered the unofficial representative for the university in Indian affairs, although I was registrar most of that time. My most recent work at the university has been as director of the Indian education department, and chairman of the American Indian Institute, and also executive secretary of the Oklahoma Indian Rights Association, which I now hold. I retired from the university this summer, and my activity is with the Oklahoma Indian Rights Association, and also with the National Advisory Council on Indian Education, of which I'm a member. From what I've talked to you, Mr. Myers, you're mainly interested, I believe, in my experiences with the Indian community with respect to its relationship to the non-Indian community, and some of the problems that exist between the two groups.
SM: Yes, anything that will help us to understand each other better. You are retired now from all the other connections with the university except the Indian Rights Association?

BT: Correct.

SM: Is that a national organization?

BT: It's a state organization.

SM: And you're still heading that up, and operating it, and trying to get it built up more here in the new quarters?

BT: Right.

SM: And then if you would go on with any experiences that you could describe.

BT: I think one of the most interesting developments we've had here at the university in the last ten years was a project in adult education in which we would go to an Indian community, and ask the Indian leadership if there is a need for community organization to help solve some of their problems locally. And at that time there was no such thing as a self-determination act. The only organization that the Indians had at that time was sort of a loosely-knit, elected tribal council business committee, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. We had a good response from local communities, and we did organize, with the Indian groups locally, over 32 adult centers.

SM: And this was as recently as eight years ago?

BT: Some of these are still in operation.
SM: But changes have been coming rapidly lately?

BT: Right. What the local groups did at that time was to help meet some of their problems with the local community in changing educational opportunities, employment opportunities, which were almost nil. For example, in one city in northwestern Oklahoma, which is in the Cheyenne and Arapaho area, when we first met there, there were two Indians employed out of about a 25% Indian population in that community. Two people! And four years later there were 32 Indians employed in that community, and we attribute this to two things. One is the organization of the Indian community within the community of the Indian people to help solve some of their own problems, and sort of inter-face with the non-Indian community structure. The other was the changing of the attitude of the community. For example, one of the businessmen in Watonga owned a bowling alley, and we knew there were no Indians ever bowled there, because we went there once a week and we never saw Indians in the bowling alley. So we took some of our Indian leaders to his place of business, and he'd lived in this community for 20 years, and he gives what the Indians call a typical white man's remark. He said, "Well, I've lived here for 20 years, and I know my Indian people." And we asked him why they had no Indian people in his bowling alley, and he says, "We had a little problem a few years ago with a couple of boys that came in and had some beer, and they caused a little trouble." So we introduced him to our leaders, and he was quite surprised at the quality of leadership that was in his own community among the Indian people. And he said, "I'm amazed to find in my own community this type of leadership among the adult Indians. You people pick out the night you want to bowl, and you're welcome to come over and bowl any time you want to." But that seems to me was the most difficult thing, and still is, I believe, with the Indian population, in identifying themselves as citizens of the local community, and separating some of the responsibilities from the Bureau of Indian
Affairs to their own groups. And the Oklahoma Indian Rights Association was the result of a state-wide Indian meeting of these centers about four years ago. And we asked them what was one of the most pressing problems at this time that they would like to consider. They said the mistreatment of Indians by local law enforcement and the judiciary in Oklahoma. And, as your students may know, and you know, the white man, or almost all peoples, used to have to have somebody sometimes as a scapegoat, one they looked down on so they could satisfy their own ego. That is so true here in Oklahoma where the Indian is forced into a mixture with the white man. He has no reservations here, and your students ought to realize it, that the land was all taken away from the Indians, allotted to the white man, homesteaded, and the Indians were given a little share, so they were forced into integration with the white man.

SM: Years ago.

BT: Years ago. Psychologically and almost physically they've stayed away from integration for the simple reason they still feel that their culture and their way of life is better than anything the white man has to offer. And you can see a college graduate with a master's degree in business who's a full-blood Indian that still says that a lot of things they have in what they call the Indian way of life is better than the white man's, so they keep it.

SM: Would that be true of the famous Mr. Keeler as well? [W. W. Keeler was the Principal Chief of the Cherokees, and the Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Phillips Petroleum Company.]

BT: To a certain extent it will be.

SM: I understood from someone yesterday that he is very much concerned about his people, and is always open to their needs, and listens and helps all he can.
BT: To get back to the Indian rights movement, and why it started, I'll give you one example in one little community where we had a signed affidavit from a young 18-year-old girl who was drinking, and they picked her up without a complaint--she was on the street--which they do all the time, because it's two things. It's an easy way . . . an Indian doesn't want to stay in jail, there's just something about being closed in they can't take, and it's embarrassing to the family, they don't want their children in jail, the grandparents don't. So they can make money off the Indian, easy income for the city. If they can't pay, then they let them work it out. They can work the streets, they can work the garbage truck, they can help build buildings and they can do that sort of thing. But this young girl signed an affidavit that she was thrown into a car, and pulled out of the car by the hair of her head, and kicked into a cell. And we had several other affidavits similar to that where this physical mistreatment, beatings--and actually one family was shot at. But again, coming back to that community, the adult Indians, in an organized effort, confronted the city management and forced a change in the whole community attitude.

SM: And it did come about?

BT: It did come about, but it needs constant reinforcing of that whole idea. It's easy to arrest an Indian, because an Indian doesn't fight back, he's almost given up. He's been defeated for so many years, for 200 years he hasn't won anything, so it's a defeatist attitude that we're trying to overcome, and the Indian's overcoming it with his self-determination. The tribes now are getting into all these programs, and they're standing up for individual Indian rights. 'Course an Indian is very independent, which is one of the reasons that he's lost so many of his battles. His tradition has been as an individual and as a family, so it is difficult to get them to organize and stay organized for the united front for any length of time. We
have, here at the University of Oklahoma, approximately 500 Indians, and most of those are at least a quarter to full blood. We have a great many full-blood Indians here at school, and they're enrolling in everything. We have 18 students in the college of law; we had one of the first full-blood Indian women graduates in law school; we have seven in the college of medicine; we have engineers, pharmacy and teachers, social work; it covers the whole academic field.

SM: Would the population on the campus represent the same proportions of the state as a whole?

BT: Yes, there are over 3,000 Indians enrolled in colleges in Oklahoma, that's Indian students at all levels.

SM: Out of a population of 30,000 or 40,000?

BT: Oklahoma has the largest Indian population of any state in the nation. It's estimated over 100,000.

SM: In Arizona it is rapidly approaching the same proportions, whereas ten years ago it was like 1/10 or 1/20 of this ratio

BT: I'll give you the proportion again back to Indian rights. In our jails and penitentiaries in Oklahoma, on the basis of percentage of population, there are three times as many Indians in these jails and penitentiaries as there are whites, and twice as many as there are blacks, based on percentage of the population.

SM: This figure, I think, holds up and gets worse in some areas.

BT: Right.

SM: It gets so much worse that the Civil Rights Commission reported 25% of the alcohol-related prisoners in one city were Indian men, whereas
the population of Indians is 1%. That's staggering, isn't it?

BT: Alcohol is a real serious and major problem with Indian people, I think everywhere. They say, "That's just another damned Indian can't handle his liquor." We hear this quite often. I was a friend of Clyde Warrior, who was one of the early AIM people in Oklahoma. He's a full-blood Ponca Indian, and Clyde was a student here at the university, and he had this problem we're discussing. He told me quite often, "I don't know whether to be an Indian in the white man's world, or to go back and be an Indian in the Ponca world." And he said, "It's driving me crazy." He developed ulcers from it, torn between the two of them; he didn't know which way to go and he finally died from alcoholism, because I think he never could get himself adjusted to either side to his own satisfaction.

SM: There are others who have had this problem. Another famous one would be Ira Hayes. And then there are others who have made the adjustment.

BT: Well, there are 11 alcohol centers in Oklahoma operated by Indian tribes or Indian groups, and they're facing, taking a realistic look at the problem. I think they're gonna help solve it.

SM: We had an interesting day at a rehabilitation center for alcoholics, but I think that was run under government auspices, or at least financed.

BT: That's probably a center for all alcoholics, not limited to Indian people.

SM: It was not limited to Indian people, they had two centers in town. One was on the north side and the other on the south side, and the people segregated themselves. Only Indians came there, although all people were welcome, and the other people go to the other one, and
it's just sort of one of those understood things.

BT: I think it's probably true even with a college student. We found this true with the adults in the community centers in which we work. On an evaluation at one place, we asked what they considered--and this was in a county seat, a large town, not a huge city--one of their major problems as an Indian in that community. And they said a feeling of not being welcome. To me that reflects in your alcohol centers, reflects in your educational programs, reflects everywhere. But, as they say, "Well, we don't feel welcome there. If it's one Indian and three whites, we just don't feel like we're wanted, so we move out." We have Indian churches still in Oklahoma, still have Indian doctors, people treated traditionally in the old Indian doctoral way. And it's a self-imposed type of segregation . . . 'course part of the reason they feel like the white man doesn't have anything to offer is the way they've been treated over the last 200 years, and I think basically there's a feeling of resentment among most of the Indian people against the non-Indian. They overcome it, and they don't behave like it sometimes, but they still have the feeling.

SM: Lots of them do have either over come it or else cover it up.

BT: They control it, at least.

SM: I get very friendly receptions practically everywhere, and that's almost like 99% of everywhere I've been. This Phillip Deer, would he be one of the old medicine men?

BT: He'll be a traditional medicine man in the sense that he's a spiritual leader. He had training at a religious institution earlier in his life, which was a white-controlled and operated institution, so he has an interesting comparison between the two religions. For example, he says you can read in the Bible to observe and watch the ants, how
they work and save and get ready for the winter, and that sort of thing, store up for the wintertime. He said the Indian always observed animals and nature and how it existed, how it lived, and how it provided for itself. He said that's nothing new to the Indian. He makes that type of comparison on the religion part of it. And I heard a statement by a young Cherokee boy, a full blood. He says that you take that road to a God with no name, and to God with no face, which to them is the Spirit God, the Creator. They don't identify it with any particular individual, group or sex. It's there!

SM: It's an all-pervading Spirit?

BT: Right.

SM: Some of the tribal explanations of this come through very clearly, like the Iroquois Orenda, or the Pawnee Tarawa, where they have specific terms. In other languages they had no words even for the Spirit itself.

BT: Speaking of words, I'd like to make one comment about the language. You'll find few curse words in an Indian language anywhere. They use ridicule for their weapon, which is real sharp, they're real clever with it.

SM: I've heard Indians say, "We don't have any bad words in our language."

BT: But they had other methods that were just about as sharp, but they weren't as crude.

SM: Ridicule. I read that in the Southwest, at least, it was not good taste to stand out as against your friends, and if you did, you would be ridiculed by the others until you would sort of be put back in your place, and so there tended to be a lack of aggressive attitudes
or lack of aggressive leadership even. But then another group up north, I think they were Chippewas, they said anyone who stands out is a hero to the rest of the children.

BT: Were they speaking, I wonder traditionally, or were they speaking as contemporary heroes?

SM: The attitude I was describing of the Southwest is of the older ones from older books about people at least 50 years ago, whereas in the northern Minnesota situation they were talking about their own school now. And they are the ones who said if a student stands out he is a hero to the others.

BT: Probably so in the modern educational sense, in the modern institution. I have a Navajo friend come to the university several years ago, and he was, I believe, 20 years old at the time, and he had to tell his family that he was coming to Oklahoma to work, because to them he was a grown man, he should be out working on the reservation, doing something for the tribe, or operating a ranch, or something of that type, getting married and raising a family. He was old enough to do that, but he couldn't tell them he was going to go to school because they felt like he was intelligent enough to do what was the normal occupation on the reservation.

SM: And he would be a little bit frivolous to do this other thing?

BT: That's right.

SM: What are the main goals of the Indian Rights Association, besides those that are inherent in its title?

BT: One of them is to educate the Indian as to his own civil rights and legal rights, to protect himself personally and his land. We're still losin' land in Oklahoma illegally.
SM: The Indian rights, then, are not quite the same as other citizens?

BT: They're the same, but they're not aware of it. That's true of most citizens, but the Indian is not aware of his own legal rights, and when you're not aware of them, why they'll take advantage of you.

SM: The Indian people, or Germans or Swedes all have the same rights, legally. The problem is that not knowing about it and traditionally not expecting to have the rights, they do lose out frequently. Is that it?

BT: That's right. You see, originally their protection and all their services came from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and at one time they had federal marshalls hired by the Department of the Interior in Oklahoma. They also have attorneys, and the U.S. District Attorney legally has the responsibility to protect Indian rights, but he doesn't have the time or the staff, he tells us, so the Indian has never had any local contact. He had a problem, he went to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and there was no one there to help him with his legal problems, except to write a will, or to describe land or to check an abstract, so he was at the mercy of the local people.

SM: And then, of course, at the mercy of the personality and temperment of the particular BIA official?

BT: That's right. We have examples. Just a recent example in one western community in Oklahoma, and I'll repeat again, there are 23 tribes on the western side of the state which are normally called the Plains Tribes, and on the east the Civilized Tribes. But we found that violation of Indian rights is equally as high in number on the east side as it is on the west side.

SM: You wouldn't expect that, would you?
BT: No, you wouldn't expect that. For example, a group of Indians were having a disturbance on the street. They were drinking and they got into a little fight, and the law came up and didn't stop it, they just let 'em fight until somebody was hurt. Now if that had been an Indian and a white, they'd have stopped it immediately and arrested the Indian and let the white go. Or if it had been a group of whites he'd have said, "Break this up and go home." But they stood by to watch the Indians beat on each other.

SM: Was this a small town?

BT: Yes, in Oklahoma.

SM: I can't say near a reservation, like I can in most states. Like a famous Indian person recently said, that the town down the road was a typical border reservation town. But here you don't have the reservations, with the one exception that the Osage people have mineral rights on their land. That's the only vestige of a reservation left in the state, isn't it?

BT: Right.

SM: That surprises most people, because everyone expects that since Oklahoma has the most Indian people, they must have the most reservations, and they don't have any, except that one partial one.

BT: We have recent cases where a fence has been moved on the Indian land, and encompasses maybe 10, 15 or 20 acres of Indian land. And if the Indian lives there, or if he lives in town, he doesn't know where to go to get help. He goes to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, all they can do is give him a description of the land. "Yes, he's moved that over. We can't do anything about it." So they have to have recourse somewhere so they come to us, the Indian Rights Association, and we
do the investigating. We have in Oklahoma about 24 attorneys who volunteer their services.

SM: This is an association of Indian people to help Indian people?

BT: Right. It's a board of directors of Indian people--most of them are full bloods, and no white people on the board, and there are three Indian lawyers on the board.

SM: This is not part of the BIA?

BT: No, it's an independent, incorporated group, and their main purpose is to protect the rights of the Indian people.

SM: Are other states picking up and emulating this?

BT: California has something similar, but not to the extent that we have here. They have a California Legal Education Association. But what we're trying to do is to get it down to the local level, and provide a tribe or community with local assistance in some of their problems. And we found quite often that we can call the district attorney's office on a case, and when they find out that somebody on the outside is interested, we can solve the case over the telephone, we get it dismissed. When an investigator goes in and makes inquiries with witnesses in the district attorney's office, and different people are involved, sometimes the case is dropped. Which again tells us that, "It's an Indian, so we can get by with it," in the treatment.

SM: You are making it known to all the officials of all governmental subdivisions that this lone Indian has someone back of him?

BT: Right. We had a case last week of a young student in a college here in Oklahoma that had unauthorized use of a vehicle, and he was caught,
tried and convicted, and received a deferred sentence, one-year deferred sentence. And the college in which he was enrolled as a freshman said, "We're going to suspend you, because you were caught." The state regents of Oklahoma say that that's not a sufficient reason. You can use that as one of the reasons, but because he's been convicted of a crime does not necessarily mean that he can be suspended from the college, they don't have to suspend him. And on inquiry there was nothing else—he's a good student, hasn't done anything at all on campus or with the college that would warrant suspension, but he needs some help from the outside to protect his rights.

SM: The Indian Rights Association is successful now, isn't it? For how long?

BT: Yes, it's been operating for four and a half years. We've had over 1,500 cases that we worked on.

SM: Would you venture an optimistic prediction that maybe this kind of approach will gradually overcome any unfairness that has or may exist?

BT: I think it will to this extent. If we can get the tribes to take over this responsibility, and we get it down to that local level—it's just like we were talking a few minutes ago about people who come into a town and make a disturbance and create a problem and then move out. And that's why at one time we tried to run this as a state organization from a state office, and found out we couldn't cover the state. So we divided the state into six areas, we have six investigators. Now if we can double that in Oklahoma, let the tribes assume the administration and control of it, then we've got a vehicle that will change the attitude of the community as well as
the Indians with regard to their rights.

SM: That should make for real progress.

BT: It puts it all on a more permanent basis too.

SM: And the kind of thing that the whole society accepts more readily than the protest sort of thing.

BT: There's another thing that I'll throw in, maybe as a last remark. The self-determination act that was passed by Congress gives the Indians the right to contract for the services of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. It actually tells the Secretary of the Interior, and the secretary of HEW that they must give the opportunity to contract, and if the tribe isn't ready, they train them to contract. So we made a proposal to the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington that they contract out to the Oklahoma Indian Rights Association, which is an Indian organization, to have these investigators in the state protect Indian rights. Our answer back from them was that they couldn't do it, because under the interpretation of the law in Oklahoma we were not Indian country, so they couldn't provide any law enforcement services for Oklahoma, which was Indian territory at one time, and the home of all the tribes, hopefully, for the United States. But I think we're gonna eliminate that through the self-determination act, and we threatened to go into federal court, because that was really a blow to a lot of people in Oklahoma, saying, "You're not Indian country, so we can't help you."

SM: Amazing, isn't it?

BT: Yes, it is.

SM: Well, Mr. Timmons, thank you very much. I do appreciate the information you've given us.