Listening to Indians

JOHN WILLIAMS, Ponca

September 19, 1975

Ponca City, 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 we're talking with John Williams of Ponca City, Oklahoma. Is it O.K. if I call you Johnny?

John Williams:

Yeah, good. And I'll call you Sam.

SM: O.K. You're a Ponca Indian, aren't you?

JW: Ponca Indian, right.

SM: Have you always lived here in Ponca City?

JW: Well, Sam, I was born and raised right south of here, the Ponca Reservation used to be, now we call it a community. I was born out there February 2, 1915, and I always say that I was born in a tent. Back in them days, you know, February month is a cold month, and we used to camp in my father's timber, and I was just born right in the tepee in those days.

SM: Was that a real skin tepee?

JW: No, it wasn't skin. You know the modern materials was comin' along--I think it was canvas was what it was.

SM: You just blasted our hopes. We thought we had an Indian that really had a skin tepee.

JW: Well, that could happen. I never seen a skin tepee until I went to one of these historical centers. But anyway, that's the way my upbringing was, that I was brought up in an Indian way. I never learned to talk English until I was nine years old. That was my first year of goin' to school.
SM: You spoke Ponca?

JW: I spoke Ponca. Had a family that spoke Ponca. My father was one of the first educated Indians. I think I remember his record first attendin' Haskell Institute when it was finished somewhere around 1885. He went there in 1887, he was 14 years old when he first went to school. That's where my father attended, and that was one of the first places that the Indians were educated at this Haskell Institute. But anyway, he was pretty well in a line of talkin' English and everything like that, but the mother spoke the Ponca language and the father did too.

SM: You don't have any accent--I don't hear any.

JW: Well, I could talk my Ponca language pretty good. Yes, I could talk it pretty good.

SM: Could you say, "good afternoon?"

JW: Well, good afternoon is: Ah-hoh-la-na-teah . . . that means, "Hello, have you come?" And that's the way we greet people. Ah-hoh-la-teah. Ka-geah means "a friend." But, like I say, I was born and raised in my community.

SM: You went to school out there at White Eagle?

JW: No, my first school was at a little day school. They used to be a day school there called the Ryan School. Now the building still stands there at the place there. That's south of Ponca City. See, we had kind of sections in our reservation--now it's called community, it's not a reservation anymore, it's a community, because I had some dealings with this too. But, anyway, that's where I first went to school--my primary year and my first-grade year. Then my second-grade
year I went to Chilocco Indian School, that's farther north, about 21 miles.

SM: That's a high school, isn't it?

JW: Yeah, it's a high school. Well, I'll say it's always been a high school since I went up there. They started like any other Indian school, you know. First the school when it opened I think it went up to eighth grade, then they changed it up to tenth grade, and then the first year that I was there, I think this was in 1925, they changed it to regular high school, secondary high school, it went up to 12th grade. But then I spent my 11 years of learning right there. All my 11 years at Chilocco. I left there in 1936.

SM: Did you like it there?

JW: Yes. Well, I liked it because it was something new that you was getting into. You had to leave home--that was a little hard to do.

SM: How often did you get home?

JW: Well, we come home every Christmas. Once a year they let us come home.

SM: Did you get homesick up there?

JW: Yes, we got homesick, but . . . I would say . . . for my particular self, I had two older brothers that was going to school there already--that kind of helped me. I was only 10 years old when I went up there, see, so that kinda helped me from getting too homesick, but I had got homesick when I first left home. But that's something else, that today I'd be proud to tell this, because I had a father that was educated, and he believed in gettin' this education, and he was a pretty strict old man. He told us, by George, to stay in school, and "One of these days you'll be finding a way to provide for yourself,"
and this is what happened, you know, at Chilocco. And we went to school half a day and we worked half a day. And I always tell that, especially at one time, that we were in a meeting, because I've been a tribal leader in the past for 20 years--since 1954 I got in my tribal business committee down there, and then I retired myself here a couple years ago. But I was gonna say that we were in a meeting one time when the governor of ours here introduced me.

SM: The state governor?

JW: Yeah, Governor Bartlett. He's our Senator now. But he introduced me at a meeting. He said, "I want to introduce," he said, "one of my good Indian friends, and I'm really proud of him and think a lot of him. He's a well-educated Indian." And I said, "Honorable governor," I said, "One thing that I wanted to get clarified here, I'm not an educated Indian," I said. "I'm just an Indian that's probably got an equivalent of about an 8th or 10th grade education. I just wanted to point that out, 'cause these guys might get me wrong," and I said, "might shoot some things at me I don't know nothin' about." But, you know, that's the way it was at Chilocco, but I was glad that I got that education that the government had provided for us.

SM: Did you go to school anymore after that?

JW: No, I didn't. That was it. In 1936 when you got out of school, well, boy, that was h..a..rd times them days.

SM: Well, what did you do then?

JW: Well, when I got out, in 1936, there was three of us boys that had played football up there, and we was asked to come to this Warner Aggies at Warner. And that fall we was gonna go with her, but we had
to have $18.00 for interview. We didn't have it. Family didn't have it. And that's why I say they was hard times them days, and couldn't find no job, you know, so you had to go to work down around home and for farmers and such as that. And it was just that rough, you know. My first public works, outside of working in farming and all that, was here at the Rock Island railroad track. I got a job in 1942.

SM: A job on the railroad?

JW: Yeah, railroad. That was my first public work, and from then on it seemed like luck kind of turned up. Then in 1942 that same year, November, I went to work right here in town for an aircraft job. They had a small aircraft plant here.

SM: Whose plant was that? What did they make?

JW: They subassembled it for Beech Aircraft, Cessna, and Aeroparts. And Aeroparts was makin' parts for Boeing, you know, making ailerons and then flaps and things like that, even cabinets. That started in November, '42, '43, '44 and '45. I worked at this little plant here. Then they done away with the work here in '45. In March of '45 I went from here to Spartan Aircraft in Tulsa, and worked up there for about three months. Then I come back home here and then went to work for Continental Oil Company, May 25th in 1945.

SM: You've been with them ever since?

JW: Been with them ever since.

SM: You're an old hand there now.

JW: I kinda think that I am, yeah. But I'm about to get through there, though. I got 18 more months, and I'm gonna be retired. Yes sir.
SM: In 1976?


SM: You've got 30 years in. Do they have a good pension plan there?

JW: Yes, we have a good pension plan. I've been very fortunate. I've always saved myself, and I've told officials of Continental that several times, you know, that they're a good company, and they've been good to me. And I've raised six kids, you know, in the time that I went to work there.

SM: Now do you have to work there 30 years before you can retire?

JW: No. We have an early retirement. You can retire any time after you're there, I think it's ten years, if you're 50 years old. But you get deductions, you know. I'll be 62, I'm 60 now.

SM: Are you? You look a lot younger than that.

JW: I'm about 60 and a half now.

SM: How do you account for looking so much younger?

JW: Well, I don't know. Just keepin' goin' I guess, and keepin' happy. I try to live a pretty happy life, you know, and I've been that way ever since I been an adult.

SM: But you haven't avoided problems, because you've been in the thick of everything.

JW: That's right. I've been in the thick of all of it, but then, like I say, it's just all in the upbringin' I guess. I give credit to my family, my parents. My dad always said, "By George, it's better to
get along with people than to try not to get along with 'em.' And this has been a motto of mine, and I don't care who he is, I'm tryin' to make the best of gettin' along with 'im. Now this has been my life up to now, and it's been a good one.

SM: Now in your work at Continental Oil Company . . . there are lots of groups around from minority groups, women, and so on, and people without degrees. Each one sometimes has some claim of being discriminated against. Have you run into anything like that?

JW: No. There again I will make a statement here to that effect. And I'll go back . . . back there when I started, say in public life. When I started meeting this, you know, and, speakin' for my Indian people, I've seen a lot of it. I've seen a lot of it. I've seen a lot of bein' discriminated against, but then, an individual has to prove himself, you know, you know it yourself, to the people. This I have done in many a time in my lifetime, and I made this remark in my tribal operation days when I first went to Washington and to speak to our government officials up there, and one remark that I made, and it's still that way, I'm sorry to say, you know, the Indian will always be an Indian to a non-Indian. It's just that way. They just can't get it out of those guys. I'm the only Indian that's been in this one department for a long time. They're good to me, and I try to prove myself, but still, yet in a group even, you know . . . if I'm talkin' they won't listen to me, but they'll listen to somebody else. But that's always there . . . because you're an Indian. But then it's not so much now. They're getting to where now, this minority program that they got is takin' a lot of that out now. It's takin' a lot of it out. This helped a whole lot, and we Indians been helped for the first time by our government. I would say it started helpin' us within the last 10 years. Because before that they wasn't much help, because I know this for a fact, because, like I said, that I've been in the business a long time, and while I was growin' up my dad was, you know, in this tribal business, and he tried and tried . . .
it seemed like the government would lead us just so far... then they won't forget us, but they keep us in a kind of bay at that point. They hold us back. And this has been for many a years, but now, like I say, I think in the last 15 years that we had some tribal leaders had them thoughts that all come to one thought in the mind of the government. And the government allus said, "Boy, we can't solve your problem. How we gonna solve your problem, Indian problem?" Well, Indians don't have a problem, but they're the ones that make the problem themselves. We're wanting help, we're wanting to be assisted so that we can have something for ourselves, but that had been... slow coming. Now, finally, well this has been one of the things here that I'm gonna... particularly myself now, in watchin' every step of a government legislation, I would say that one of the first Presidents that ever thought about the Indians in one of his first press conferences was that Kennedy, President Kennedy.

SM: Do you remember what he said?

JW: I do not remember what he said, but I've always been hoping that maybe I can get that, you know, that what he did say about the Indians at that time, but I was listening to it. This wasn't the first one of his, but it was one of the first ones. When he came out they was makin' remarks, and he said, "I want to make two or three remarks before I go on with the..." You know, the press conference he was havin'. So the first remark he made was on the forgotten heritage. And this he said was "the Indian people of our country, our good country." That was the way, some way that he pointed out that really impressed me, because here I am, you know, wanting to help my people down here, and a lot of ways that I can't. And of course the President is the man who signs these things, and we've been wanting our claim and things like this, and we're wanting better living conditions—all of this we're wanting, and then, hearing the President makin' that kind of remark made me feel pretty good. And
seemed like since that time that every President followed up on that, and every President's been. . . .

SM: The attitude has changed a great deal.

JW: They sure have. Now I'm really grateful for it, because they've come up . . . like my people down here . . . this development program down here that I had a long time convincing my people to even get out of old houses.

SM: What was that program, Johnny?

JW: Development program.

SM: Where?

JW: Down in White Eagle. We call it White Eagle. The development program started back there in 1965. They finally got some guys on the tribal business committee that, you know, would listen to one another. Before that, they wouldn't. It wasn't like that. I was on the business committee, but they always said . . . if I wasn't at the meeting why I was at the job, why one old guy made a remark, said, "Say, we got another councilman that we oughta have in here to kinda help us think, John Williams." One guy said, "Aw, let him be, let him go ahead and work. Heck we don't want him here. Every time he comes around he allus gets after us." But I was just tellin' 'em the right things that they could do for the people, and tried to talk about something that would be helpful to the people. So in 1965, this is the kind of a councilmen we had, and I was the vice-chairman at that time, and the guy that we had as chairman, why he listened to me because he didn't know anything about tribal operations, but I knew it because I grewed up in it. My dad, and then I come up. So I told him some of the things that we ought to be doin'. So he said, "Well,
O.K., if you want to do these things you go ahead and talk to these people that's involved in it. So I did. I involved myself into all these ideas and they came up ... they don't come up over-night, or two years, they take quite a while to develop. The government don't act that fast.

SM: Does this business committee run the tribal affairs?

JW: Right. That's the governing body.

SM: Do you have a chairman of the council?

JW: Right. We have a chairman.

SM: What do you call the committee?

JW Ponca Tribal Business Committee.

SM: You served on the committee?

JW: Yes, I served. In my last seven years I was the chairman of it. That's when all the development started down there. They got the housing.

SM: So that's where you get some of your reputation. You got things done.

JW: Right. That's where I got all my reputation. And they got an industry down there then. Of course, they didn't keep that up, but then at least they got the building still down there. Then we have some of the things that we had talked about for ten years; they're coming up and coming around. But the main thing that I wanted for my people was the housing.
SM: Have they got housing down there now?

JW: Yes, they got it. They're livin' in brick homes, and we have a tribal office down there. That's one of the things that I had EDA to do for us. And then as you go back further, why then you see that housing development back there. But those are the things here that I always say, I don't like to say "I," but I have to. It did happen. It happened, and I allus say to everybody, my people don't care because they don't think that much, but to people I'm acquainted with, I'll say, "I just wanted to prove something to myself, individually, that they can be done." Then by doing it, then you had to convince the tribal business committee. Then, still they themselves be in doubt about you, but still, then, you got to, you know, do it yourself, just getting out and having it done.

SM: Now you're working all the time you're doing this?

JW: Right. I was working all the time I was doin' it.

SM: I suppose you spent most of your evenings and week-ends on it?

JW: Yes. There's been a lot of times I worked like a hoot owl like this. A meeting come up, maybe say, at Oklahoma City, down at Lawton. I'd get off at 6:00 o'clock in the morning, and by 7:00 o'clock I'm on the road without no sleep; go over there and help them guys to talk about some things that could be beneficial to Indians, because I believe in the whole group . . . the Indians. You know, I'm for my Indian people, first I'm for my Ponca people, but then I'm for all my Indian people, I'm all out for my Indian people long as if they're in the right means of tryin' to do something that would be beneficial to the Indian race of people, I'm all for that. We were the first ones to get the housing project.

SM: How many people do you have down there?
JW: Oh, that last count that we have, we have that Ponca roll, that's one-fourth degree of Ponca blood—you've got to be one-fourth Ponca. We have a lot of intermarriages down there, but they got to be one-fourth Ponca or more. We have, I think, 2,023.

SM: Are the rolls still active?

JW: Yeah. The way we had that whereby they'll just be active from here on out.

SM: Forever?


SM: If you drop off the rolls, then you're not counted as an Indian any more?

JW: Yeah. Well, that's one of the reasons why I'm getting up this roll. We have this tribal roll and then we have a census roll. The census roll is less than one-fourth degree of Ponca blood. And if they're livin' and of course been born there, the parents are Ponca, but they had intermarriage into another tribe and they don't come up with the blood quantum there, but still they're there in the community, so they declare themselves Ponca and they want to go on the census roll, then we put them on census roll.

SM: When they are less than a quarter Ponca they could still be a full-blooded Indian?

JW: That's right. They could be full blooded, but less than a quarter Ponca blood. Right. It does get complicated, and they have some questions . . . and there again, my people, they don't think, you know. And right now, why this guy here's not one-quarter Ponca, well,
they think he's not Indian. That's not so, you know. He could be full-blooded Indian, but maybe one-eighth Ponca, and the rest of it's part Cheyenne, part Oto. Like me, I got some grandkids that's part Cherokee, part Creek, Shoshone and what not. But then, they're Indian. But this is my thought when I presented myself, of treating ourselves as Indians instead of tribes. We used to not hardly get along ourselves, you know, like all people do. In Oklahoma I think there's somewheres around 30 or 40 different tribes, and we've got two sections we call the Five Civilized Tribes and then we got Western Tribes.

SM: The Civilized Tribes are in the eastern part?

JW: Yeah. The Five Civilized Tribes, and then there are some small tribes are connected with them over there, affiliated with them. They're under this Muskogee office, Muskogee area office. Then there's 23 tribes over here in the western half of Oklahoma under the Anadarko area office.

SM: Are you here under the Anadarko office?

JW: The Anadarko area. And we had a little conflict. And when our government started assisting us, say about 1969, I think it was, it happened that I attended a meeting. That's when I first become our chairman, and when I attended this meeting, why these tribes, tribes from over here on the east and west, they were fussing at one another, saying, "All right, you, tribe so and so." And I was listening and I didn't like it. You know, that's not good. And I'm from a tribe that's needing help, and these guys are fussin' over something here that we could talk over.

SM: You're losing your influence.
JW: Right. We're losin' our influence by doin' it. So after I listened a while they was gettin' out of hand how they got to arguin'. "I'd like to put my two cents worth in here as chairman," I said. "John," he said, "go ahead." I said, "I want to say this, fellows. I'm a pitiful man. Look at me, I don't have the education that you guys here have. One guy here's a doctor, and this gentleman right here, he's got some kind of a degree, and I know of him, he's been in the state legislation for about ten or twelve years," I said. "No, it's been 15 years, John," he said. "O.K." I said. "Fifteen years he's been in the state legislation. But you guys are sittin' here fighting, fighting like kids. And I'm a pitiful man. I don't have but equivalent to about a eighth grade education," I said. "But I'm a chairman of my pitiful Ponca people down there. They're needing help, and this program we're talking about, I'm just enthused about it. I'm gonna get some help for my people through this program ... and here I come up here and you guys are fightin', callin' one another names, and all this. If you guys are gonna fight like that, I'd better go home, 'cause I'm not here to listen to that. I'll go home. But before I do, I'd like for you guys to look at one another as Indians. We, all of us, have the same problem. We're talkin' about the same problem. And we're here as one body. Let's unite ourselves, better ourselves, where we can understand ourselves, bring our problems together here, let's put 'em in one bottle, whatever it might be, one basket."

And this was the first inter-tribal meeting that I attended, and I was proud. I was proud. I went there with a chest out, "Boy, here I'm going to be amongst my big, educated Indians, you know." And I'm proud, I'm proud of them. And then this occurred. And I said my piece in that respect. And I told them, "If we work together, this is gonna happen, but if we're gonna come here and fight like this, these guys right here, the Public Health Service officials—they were sitting there, this was a Public Health Service meeting—"They're wanting to help us in health, and that's one of our main
problems, the health condition," I said. "They're listening to us, and they're gonna go home with the report, just sayin', why them Indians just fought all through that meeting. Let's give them something to take back with them that will be more helpful to them and to us." But I didn't make my talk very long, but them are the things I said. I said, "Fellows, I'm here depending on you."

SM: Did you get together?

JW: Yeah, they did. This guy, Mr. Bevan, he still remarks about that. He got up and shook hands with me before I got through with my talk. "John," he said, "good! This is what kind of a talk we need, instead of us fighting." And he was one of the guys that was doin' it. He realized. But that's all it needs, that's all it needs for anybody. If a child is fighting and you go and part 'em and tell 'em the good things, they'll forget. This is the way to love. But then, that settled them. From then on it seemed like we started working together, and any time I got up at inter-tribal meetings, I allus be proud, and I meant it. They know I was proud to be amongst 'em, because, like I say, whatever they talked of getting, I'm gonna be involved with my Ponca people.

SM: Would you say that the Indians of Oklahoma are doing better now?

JW: Oh, much better! Oh, much better! Oh, this is within the last ten years, this has all happened in the last ten years. We're more togetherness than we ever did in the history of Oklahoma.

SM: You have more political influence that way too.

JW: That's right, we sure have. And then ... I allus say ... like me, uneducated, but then, I guess through hard work and thinkin' for myself, and to help somebody else, this some way reflected thoughts
towards me, then I'd have a little voice in something. And this is the way it's been through all my tenure that I have been the chairman, and attended inter-tribal get-togethers. But this is what I would stand up for is unity among the Indian people, because that's the only way that we're gonna get anywhere. And this has been happening, and we're getting everything that we're askin' for to be helped. Like I say, one of our first things was health, and I thought the next thing would be housing. And one time one of those old guys asked me, "Why do you want housing?" I said, "I'm gonna tell you. I'm gonna make myself an example. I lived in a tent, and I grew up in a tent when I was a child. And even after I was a child I lived in a tent, because this house wasn't big enough for us, so I put up a tent." And I said, "Always after I got my mind to thinkin'" I said, "I want to live in a house. I wish that I could get in a house." Well, this I had done. I had done this all on my own. Never got no help from nobody, but what my dad said that, "By George, these hands are to work with, your mind to think with, long as if you think the right thing for yourself, that you can provide for yourself, you're gonna do it, it's gonna happen, but you're the one that's gonna make it." I said, "I tried this on myself first, and it happened. I got me a home in town here, not an elaborate home, but it's a home, a dwelling place. It made me proud. I wanted to clean it up, then I wanted my children to see that it was clean, and keep it clean. This starts off of bettering yourself in your livelihood. And then after that is gonna come the thinkin'. And these childrens, they're gonna be thinking they oughta have better things too. Things like this. This house is gonna do that. That's the reason why I want housing for my people, that's one of the main things, so that they can think better for themselves, in makin' a better person out of themselves."

SM: Do they have schools down there in White Eagle?
JW: No. We had a school down there. Now that's the school that we had down there that the city was overseer of that school. We had what you call a day school, White Eagle Day School. And I was involved in that when they wanted to move, they was kinda in doubt about movin' the Indian kids up town, but then I said that would be one of the best things that they ever done, of getting our kids to come to school up here.

SM: Do they come up here now?

JW: Yes, they come up here. Then they give me a building for my Ponca people down there, a community building. And then the federal government, seein' that we was in need of bettering ourselves as a business committee and all that, they give us funding to renovate that. You can even when you go down, go into that place and see the renovation of it. It's a nice place.

SM: When your kids from White Eagle come up to Ponca City to school now, they ride the bus these five, seven miles or so. And then, do they have any problems when they come up?

JW: Well, anything, you know, you have problems. We're having a problem nationally I know now. Well, same thing happens wherever. We had a little problem there. And that, I instigated a little thought there. You know, they called a meeting, and, boy, there was fighting over the deal of bussing and things like that, bus drivers kickin' somebody, and all this. I said, "Let's forget about that. Let's all try to cooperate." I said, "I'm gonna suggest something here, whether you do it or not. On these busses there ought to be a mother on these busses. If she's got a child there, a mother could be given a seat there, and then taken back." It was just a thought. Well, they did that. My idea was taken evidently to the city school board, and then they started a teacher's aide--women in the classrooms.
SM: A teacher's aide from the Indian people?

JW: From the Indian people. The mothers were taken in and then they'd ride these busses in town, and this solved that problem.

SM: It would also help the kids ease over the transition.

JW: Right. And this is one of the first programs that started here in the state of Oklahoma that worked. Now I am proud whenever they tell me, "Well, John, this is one of the first ones that ever happened." It makes me proud, because I had a hand in it. Now we've got a little school up here, and had a hand in that. Up here that's called a pre-school.

SM: In Ponca City?

JW: And Ponca City is helping to have that school. They didn't give it to them, but they loaned that school--Pleasant View it used to be. They come in town, that school is empty out there, so they give it to the Indians. They got Indians handling that out there--little kids, you know. The mothers are workin', they're bussin' 'em up there. Now that's one of the things there that I'm so proud of. That's where we need the education to start, at the little fellows. Get 'em away from their parents, take 'em up there and start teachin' 'em something that they know. And they're learning out there.

SM: Do most of the Indian kids from White Eagle learn to speak Ponca?

JW: No, not any more. I did, yes, and my kids, my oldest ones, they know a little bit.

SM: Do you think they're losing their culture that way?
JW: Yes, they are losing their culture. We've lost a lot of it. We've got a lot of it, but they have lost a lot of it by doin' that. That I have seen in my time of goin' to school, and even in our government schools. They didn't want us to talk Indian, you know, they caused us to lose it. Now they say, "We want you to keep it." You know, these are the kinds of things are happening, see. And I think that people, non-Indian people, needs to know the depth of this Indian ways. I say it's good, it's good ways. At one time one lady from Washington, and I visited with her like this as she come by and I was the chairman, but she wanted to talk to me in regards to some program that she was goin' through the country with here--I think it was Quo Vadis over here. But, anyway, we were talking. She said, "One of the things, Mr. Williams, I'm proud of the Indians. But you can go anywheres in any Indian reservation, and you go to an Indian and he'll stand there and open the door for you, and he'll say, 'Come on in.' He knows you. He doesn't know your name, but you're welcome in. No other nationalities have got that. You're going to be met at the door, and if you're a stranger, they don't know you. But you Indians have this," she said, "and I hope that this will never die out." And this is same thing about our culture.

SM: Do you do anything like this down there at the community now, to help preserve the culture?

JW: Well, we're wanting to. We're wanting to, but we're still having little problems. Now I got out of there two years ago, as chairman.

SM: Are you still on the board?

JW: No. I just completely got out of there and give it back to them to go ahead, take it from there, and better it. I want 'em to better it. No, they're kind of messed up a little now. Now they're askin' me to get back in. I don't know what I'm gonna do.
SM: Well, maybe after you retire you can spend more time then?

JW: Yes, that too. But sometimes I think pretty hard at myself. About ten years I really put my effort to it, effort to what's happening down there. Nobody knows but me, and I'll say Almighty God and my government people. They're the only ones that knows. I get vacation. One of the things I want to say I've been havin' five weeks vacation from the refinery for quite some time. I had four weeks vacation, I'd use up three weeks on tribal operation. Take a vacation, maybe go to Washington, try to get something done for my people, then have one week for my family. This went along for five or six years, but nobody knows about that. They don't know the hardship you go through in that respect.

SM: It is very demanding on your time.

JW: And then that's what I say. Everything that's happened down here, I had a hand in it. One way or another I had a hand in it, and I just proved to myself it can happen, when they said, "Oh, heck, John is just doin' this for nothing. Nobody will listen to him." But it's down there, and it's still happening, the things are happening yet down there.

SM: And things are better?

JW: Things are better, right. Things are better, and then, but the tribal operation part of it, I don't know what problems they're havin' down there, but that's what I hear all the time.

SM: Personality conflict?

JW: Personality conflict, that's what it is. I never had that problem. I never had that problem. Seven years I was chairman, I never had
no problem. Everybody was happy, you know, and I had meetings, and they'd get along in the meetings. Of course you always have one or two guys that explode once in a while, but you don't want to listen to that bunch, you know. But anyway, this is what's happened in my life, and I am very proud that our Indian people are being assisted for the first time in the history of our government. I'll say that because I know. I've come through a lot of it, I've seen a lot of it, and I was right in the midst of a lot of it, and now I see that it's kind of relaxing towards us, and then it's gonna take a while yet for non-Indian people to realize this. Even the educated ones are still . . . hollering a lot of things that they shouldn't be hollering about. I was one of the only guys that went up to Washington on trips. I went up there to get help; I talked with them guys; got along with 'em; cooperated with 'em. I never went up there to fight 'em, I never went up there to criticize 'em or nothin', 'cause I know how hard it is to get something, and then if you get it, it's good, and I've seen that. I've seen the government do it for us.

SM: You get more accomplished by trying to get along with people?

JW: That's right, that's right. And I wasn't knowledgeable enough to try to talk to them guys. They got their business, their profession and that, and I'm goin' there and not having that, I try to talk them into assistin' me, and this is what happens.

SM: It looks to me, John, you can feel proud of the years you've spent and what you've accomplished. It makes you feel good, doesn't it?

JW: I am, I sure am. That's right. There's one thing that my dad always said. "Try to do good to everything, and then you will not have any regrets." I don't have no regrets. Only regret I have is my wife is not with me, that's the only regret I have.
SM: She isn't with you any more?

JW: No, she passed away January, '71. First day of January, '71. She's the one that made me quit the council down there. She was tired of it. She said, "I want you to quit." So I did, and she wanted to go on vacation with me for five weeks. She said, "I want this five weeks to belong to me." I said, "O.K., I'll just quit and we'll do that," and then it never happened.

SM: Well, I think she's proud of you anyway.

JW: Yeah, I'm pretty sure she is. That's what I say, I don't want to be like anybody else, I don't want nobody to be like me, because it was hard rowin' for me.

SM: Do you have children?

JW: Yes, I got six children.

SM: Are they all here in town?

JW: No, I got my oldest boy workin' for Continental, and my oldest daughter's husband is workin' for Continental. She's the one that lives with me at the house. My boy lives out in the country. And then I got a younger daughter--her husband is workin' for Continental. Next to the oldest boy workin' in Tulsa, works for the Tribune over there, he's been there about ten years.

SM: The newspaper business?

JW: The newspaper business, yeah. Then my youngest boy he's in Tulsa workin' for the zinc company up there, he's a draftsman for them.
SM: They're all getting along well, aren't they?

JW: They're all well, yeah. That's the reason I don't want to go back into politics, 'cause I know what sleepless nights that you had travelling. Whenever I retire I said I don't want to have nothin' to bother me. I want to go when I want to go.

SM: You've got to keep busy doing something, though.

JW: Yes, I want to keep busy just travelling, visiting. That's what I want to do.

SM: Travel around visiting grandchildren and children?

JW: Childrens and other Indian tribes. Yes, I went to the Crow Tribe here last summer, and, boy, I really enjoyed it. I had a good time. I had three weeks of my vacation, went up there, and just had a ball of a time.

SM: That's up in Montana?

JW: That's Montana, Harding, Montana, the Crow Indians. Yeah, they had their camp there, I'd never seen anything like it. Yeah, they had 532 tepees up there. Lot of people there. Next year they're gonna have their centennial, and they say whenever they invite somebody to come back, they put you in one of those tepees, and by golly, they give you that. So one guy told me, "We'd like for you to come back next year, John, but let me know about two or three months ahead of time. I'm gonna put you up a tepee that you'll stay in."

SM: And then you take it with you?

JW: Probably. Now this is what I heard, so I hope it does happen.
SM: That will be great. I know a man in St. Louis, he's a non-Indian, but he thinks the tepee is the ideal way to live, so he's got one, and when he goes camping he takes the tepee instead of a tent.

JW: Yeah, that's all right. But, anyway, as far as I was telling you now some of the things that's happening amongst my people here, but then, the over-all picture of the conditions of my Indian people towards a civilization now, towards a non-Indian civilization, I think we're still movin' in that direction, but then we'd like to keep ours too. We'd like to keep ours because this is our way, this is our means that Almighty God has given us, but then we do want to go this way too, because, like for instance me, I've been 30 years with a company, and that's a wonderful thing. If it hadn't, I wouldn't have been able to survive with my kids.

SM: Well, like you said, you wanted to live in a house because it was more comfortable, but you still want to keep your native Indian culture too.

JW: That's right.

SM: Can you do both?

JW: Yeah, you can do both. You can do both. And then, here's the thing, that I would like for the people to get more of the . . . depth of Indian culture.

SM: To understand it better, do you mean?

JW: To understand us better, yeah, that's what I mean. To understand us better. Now my language--take my language, it has no bad word in it. And relationships--all my people down there are my relation--you know, they make it that way. Even the relationship that they make is
good, and the respeck [sic] you know, everything is respeck, and everybody to love one another, because they're always togetherness all the time anyways, the Indians, you know. That's one of the things that they stress is love one another. They work together and help one another—this is the way, Indian way.

SM: The world could use more of that.

JW: Visit one another. And then they always say, respeck [sic] the elderly ones, because they, whenever they speak, they speak the truth because they have come through the means, and always respeck an elder.

SM: That's a good thought for you and me, because we're older than a lot of those younger kids.

JW: That's right, that's right. And then they say, take care of the youngsters, advise them in good ways all the time. These are things there I think more of this that our non-Indians would know about our people, you know, we could really be helped more than we're helped now. We need assistance, education-wise especially.

SM: As things get better, though, don't you think most of the Indian people are beginning more and more to come back to a realization that their ways are good too, and that they should keep them?

JW: Well, they are, they are. Now, like I say, my dad was one of the first educated ones. From that time on, things kinda got a little out of hand. You know, a guy got educated and, the heck with the Indian ways. "I wanta get educated." So the generation after you, two-three generations are lost. Now we're tryin' to pick up here, and where are we gonna pick it up at? A lotta old people have died with it.
SM: You can't pick it up at any moment in time, and say, "Let's have our Indian culture as it was in 1890," you can't do that, you have to take what you can.

JW: And my people here—we got an elderly man down there—my family, my brother and myself, we're gonna have a birthday for him in the Indian way. We're gonna put up a tepee and have a ceremonial with it. It's gonna be about mid-month, next month, that'll be about the 18th, and he'll be 97 years old the 18th day of October.

SM: Is he still alert and healthy?

JW: Yeah, he's still alert and healthy.

SM: Perhaps he could help with some of the old ways.

JW: That's right, he could.

SM: And then you could get it written down or even recorded on a tape, and save it, save his ideas.

JW: I'm gonna visit him—the news wants some things off of him too—and I'm gonna visit him next week, and see if I can't get something, tell about himself, about what he has seen in his time.

SM: Have you ever thought of using a tape recorder talking to him?

JW: No, I never have, but I told my brother about it. My brother was thinking that this time that we have him over there that we may do that.

SM: It makes it so easy. Trying to write things down, that's hard to do, unless you take shorthand.
JW: Here you're gettin' it direct, that's good. I went to Oklahoma State over here on something similar like this--there was a graduate, adults, all over the world. They had all the tribal leaders up there. I wasn't a tribal leader, but then they had done just like here. One guy said, "Get Johnny Williams of the Ponca Tribe." So I went down there, and I talked about Indian ways and things like this, and Indian education, and life, and all of this, and they were very interested in all of that. 'Cause I do stress, whenever I say that, that Indians need to be known better of his own ways, of our own life. Then I would like to see in the education that they would have a study, I think that they should have that, that should be a requirement. That's what I told them there, that should be a requirement to learn, because ever since I can remember we learned about nations all over, but Indians...

SM: There are movements that will change this. Like for example, the school in the Chippewa country where they are teaching the Chippewa language. They have lots of their cultural habits and traits, and so on, being taught. And then another school, a four-year college, has a complete new Indian program, with language teachers, music teachers, history teachers, all in their own culture, so this is something that wasn't even there six years ago.

JW: No, that's right. This is what I mean. Then they will know, they might pity us then--pity the Indian--because we have been lost. I would say this, I always say, sometimes we get kidding down at the refinery. I'll say, "Boy, if it wasn't for the Indians, I don't know what you guys would do. But us Indians... we're great. But give us a little peace, give us a little credit. We're involved," I said. I'll tell 'em that, because the United States is a great country. The Indians are there, the Indians are in there, and give us a little break. But I'm proud to say this, that it doesn't matter, that just somebody will hear us and see the needs of the
Indians. We're still needing assistance, what I mean, in every aspect of our life. Now we finally got about 250 Indians workin' at Continental Oil Company. That never happened here five years ago back. Even that far back, I would say. They was beginning, but in the last five years, though, it's grown, changed a lot.

SM: It's encouraging, and I do appreciate your coming over here this evening.

JW: I sure appreciate your inviting me, and I'm at the age now that I allus like to do this.

SM: I'm grateful that you came.