Part I

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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BROTHER MAURICE WILSON
January 12, 1976
St. Louis, Missouri
Part I
Sam Myers:

Today I'm talking with Brother Maurice Wilson, of the Alexian Brothers Order. You have been involved with the Gresham, Wisconsin, monastery or abbey take-over by the Menominee Warrior Society from its beginning, haven't you?

Brother Maurice Wilson:

Yes. Actually it involved our novitiate, and everybody started calling it abbey because I think St. Norbert's Abbey was only about 50 miles away, and it was a much easier word to spell and to pronounce than novitiate.

SM: You know, before we get into conversation about the novitiate itself, can I ask you about the Order, because I think that is a fascinating story too. When was the Order begun?

MW: We trace our origin back to the 13th century in Europe, a little before the Black Plague probably, where laymen grouped themselves together to serve the poor and to meet the needs of society as they found it in the community where they were living. And eventually it became more and better organized, but for many years, I guess, they never kept any records, and they weren't the educated people of their times, so that our early history is very difficult right now to substantiate. We do have someone working on it now, Dr. Kauffman here in St. Louis, at St. Louis University. Dr. Chris Kauffman.

SM: That will be an interesting story when it gets finished.

MW: I think so. He just about has Volume One completed, I think for publication, and so we're anxious. I haven't read it myself yet, but I know that he's been working on it for a year or so, and I think he will help us a lot when it comes to the early history. Volume One deals with the early beginnings of the Alexian Brothers, which in the
beginning probably was centered around the Beghards, or poor men, who did what I said before, like trying to meet the needs of the people. Like even burying the dead was a big problem at that time.

SM: During the Black Plague, you mean?

MW: Yes.

SM: In other words the Brothers helped the people who were sick, buried the dead, and so on.

MW: Yes, because there was a great fear, and probably superstition about the disease at that time, and so no one wanted to get involved with it. Well, these men felt that this was their calling, so they started out that way, and then for several centuries, I guess, through the times, why they worked together. They were not too well organized until probably around the middle of the 19th century, at which time they organized into sort of a national body that we know now as probably the German province.

SM: This was in Germany?

MW: Yes in that area, right. And then during various wars why they suffered not only natural pestilences and things, but also government persecution, even, I guess in some cases, persecution from the church government, as some orders did at that time, so that through those years the Brothers really weathered a lot of trials and tribulations. At one point they were down to three members because of the pressure of Napoleon's government.

SM: Where did they get the name Alexian?

MW: I guess some of the early records indicate that St. Alexius, a fifth
century saint, was a very popular patron at that time, so that we had named a chapel in Germany St. Alexius Chapel, and the people, because of the lack of another name, called us the Alexian Brothers, after St. Alexius Chapel.

SM: Oh, the people sort of named the Order for you?

MW: Alexian Brothers, yes. We were also known as the Cellites probably at that same time, or maybe even before that. We're not sure what the origin of that word is, but we think it either has to do with the Cella, which would maybe mean the room that we stayed in, or a spade that we used to dig in burying the dead. So we're known today yet as the Cellites or the Alexian Brothers. Around 1866, as we mentioned before, the German province sent Brother Bonaventure over to Chicago and then down here to St. Louis, to establish hospitals and to get an American group started, and at that time also, they sent a delegation to England to establish the English province, and I think there was some fear because of all the governmental problems they were having in Germany that there would be a lot of persecution on the Brothers in Germany, and this way they would have an outlet in America and England to establish themselves and continue their work if things got too bad in Germany.

SM: It was 1864 that the Order came to the United States?

MW: Well, 1866 we established our first hospital, and it was before that that Brother Bonaventure came over from Germany.

SM: The St. Louis hospital dates back to what time?

MW: Well, Chicago was 1866, and I believe St. Louis was just a couple years after that.
SM: And here it is still the same hospital, isn't it?

MW: Well, the same. Part of the buildings here are over 100 years old, and as I mentioned to you before, we're in the process very closely to initiating a building project to replace these older buildings, so that we've been in St. Louis over 100 years.

SM: In case anyone isn't familiar with it, we're down here on South Broadway in St. Louis. What is the address in St. Louis?

MW: 3933 South Broadway.

SM: And you are stationed in Chicago, though?

MW: I'm stationed in Chicago, right.

SM: You're down here today for some meetings, and I'm grateful that you consented to talk with us, so we can ask you now about the situation in Wisconsin. First of all, how did the Order acquire that piece of property, and when was that?

MW: Well, about 1950 the Provincial at that time was offered the property by Mrs. Jenny Peters, who was the widow of Mr. Peters, of course, who knew the Alexian Brothers' work in Chicago, and I guess had talked a lot about them. Mrs. Peters, having built the building very carefully for her daughter who was an invalid, decided that she wanted to move away, because her daughter died, and after living there a few years after that, why she wanted to move back to New York, I think. So she offered the property to Brother Ludolph, the Provincial of the Brothers at the time, and the Brothers thought that it would make a good location for our novitiate. At that time novitiates were set up in secluded spots because the emphasis was more on the seclusion and contemplation, and it was later on, say in the 1960's, that
novitiates began to move away from the secluded, isolated spots into more of a central, mainstream of things, where they could integrate the apostolic works of the Brothers along with the prayer and community training that are essential for the Brotherhood. We moved our novitiate program from the novitiate then about 1969.

SM: You moved the people out of the building up there at Gresham?

MW: The present building, right.

SM: Actually, why in the world did they build such a big structure for a family? Do you have any idea?

MW: Well, I understand Mrs. Peters daughter, whose name I don't recall now, designed the building herself, and worked with the architect who built it. At the time it was a very expensive building. I think it was close to a million dollars maybe, and this was back 40 years ago, so it was a very expensive, and a very well-constructed building.

SM: Quite a piece of land too.

MW: On a very choice spot in that part of the country, because it overlooked the waterfalls of the Red River there, and a lot of thought went into the building by the daughter of Mrs. Peters, but unfortunately the daughter died before the house was completed, so Mrs. Peters lived there for about seven or eight years after her daughter died, and she was pretty much up in years too then, I think, by that time, and then she moved back to New York. Then the Brothers moved in in 1950 and utilized just the mansion for it, the old building which we call Peters Hall, after Mrs. Peters, and then in 1954 or '55, we built a large extension to the building, which is the new section of the building.
SM: It's huge. I was surprised any family would build anything so large.

MW: The original building was much smaller than the present building, and we acquired additional land too.

SM: How many acres altogether then were involved?

MW: There was 186 and 56 . . . so, less than 250.

SM: Just about 250 acres, and the original building plus the additions that the Brothers made. Then, you were in Jersey when the story broke and somebody called or wired you that they needed you to come and help cope with the problem, because it had been taken over by a group of Menominee Indians, the Warrior Society of the Menominee Tribe?

MW: The Menominee Warrior Society, which is a splinter militant group of Menominee youth.

SM: Are they all pretty young fellows?

MW: Yes, they were most of them were in their 20's. They'd been in Service, a lot of them, and they were a younger group, militant group, and many of them were at least part Menominee Indian.

SM: How did it happen? You're in New Jersey working at your usual duties, then, bang! this news comes. I imagine that was quite a shock.

MW: Yes, it was. My present position is coordinator for province planning. That's for the Alexian Brothers in America, our hospitals as well as our community life and our spiritual life. We try to include all that in our planning. I was coordinator of province planning at that time, as I am now, as well as director of the associate program which is the first phase of formation for the Brotherhood. And
that's why I was out at Elizabeth, because our associate Brothers were stationed at Elizabeth then. We had four Brothers in the associate program. It's very complicated why I was involved, and it does involve a number of people. For one thing, Brother Florian had just been operated on for heart surgery in the latter part of October, and he was told by his doctor, after a very fine convalescence, that he could start back slowly on his job as Provincial, in Chicago, beginning January 1. And so, when we got the phone call, it came from the novitiate. The caretaker, Mr. Joe Plonka, called Brother Felix out at Elk Grove Village, Illinois, at which place our medical center is located. He used to be with Brother Felix, and he probably knew the number of the medical center because he had worked there, so that his first call out of the novitiate was to the medical center. Well, the call was received by the Superior of the community of Brothers at the medical center, who said that this should be referred to the Provincial. When Brother Eugene, the director at Elk Grove, called our Provincialate at 6007 North Kenmore, he was told that Brother Florian was convalescing, and since it was 1:15 a.m., Chicago time, they didn't want to disturb him, and so they said, "Why don't you call Brother Robert?" Well, Brother Robert, the assistant provincial, was on vacation down in Meta, Missouri, at the time, and they didn't have his telephone number handy. They didn't know what his home telephone number was, so they said, "Why don't you call Elizabeth and talk to Brother Maurice, or talk to Brother John Walsh?" Both of those were stationed at Elizabeth, and we're both on the Alexian board of directors, and I was lucky enough to get the call at Elizabeth. And this was at 2:15 a.m., New Year's morning.

SM: In 1975?

MW: Yes. So I got the call from Brother Eugene, and he explained to me that Joe Plonka had called him and had said something about Indians, but he wouldn't explain anything about it, there was noises in the
background, and that he said, "Please, have a Brother call right away!" And he said it with such urgency that Brother Eugene was convinced that he wasn't kidding, and it wasn't a joke, that he was really worried about it. And so I tried to call Joe Plonka then from Elizabeth, but twice I called and I guess one of the Indians answered, and he was very emotional, and he said, "Is this Brother Florian?" And I said, "No, this is Brother Maurice," but before I could explain it any further he said, "I want to talk to Brother Florian," and he hung up the phone. So I immediately called right back and it was the same young man that answered; I said, "This is Brother Maurice, Brother Florian is not here but I am speaking for Brother Florian. What can I do to help?" And he said, "I want to talk to Brother Florian or else." And he hung up the phone again. So I really got frightened then. I couldn't figure out what the problem was there, because he said it very emotionally and firmly, you know, and, of course, I had no control if he hung up on me.

SM: Who of the novitiate personnel was on the premises at this time?

MW: Well, Mr. and Mrs. Joe Plonka and their two small children. He was the caretaker and he had been caretaker for about three years at this time.

SM: Is this all the people that were there?

MW: No, he also had a friend and his wife over, so that there were two couples and the two children who were in the caretaker's residence at this time.

SM: So that's how you got the news, and it was even hard to find out what was happening because they didn't explain at first.

MW: Yes. It was one call after another at Elizabeth, New Jersey, either
incoming or outgoing, just rapid-fire calls, the first one came in at 2:18, and I made the last one, according to the telephone bill, at 4:51 a.m., and I was on the phone continuously at that time, calling back and forth, and calling different people, receiving calls and things, just to give you some idea of how much time I spent on the telephone that morning.

SM: It must have been a very strenuous and tense time for you.

MW: Well it was, but I really thank God that I was able to think about whom I should call and what I should say, and I don't know if it was because of the hour or I had just gotten enough rest to clear my head and everything. I did have to make a lot of phone calls, initiate a lot, and also respond to a lot of questions immediately, you know.

SM: How did it come to you finally what was going on, because up to now they hadn't really explained, had they?

MW: No. I was really going by what Gene and I talked about very briefly, and also with the two phone calls that I was interrupted on, and of course I became more interested and more concerned, so I didn't know what else to do, but immediately I said, "Well, I've got to call the chief of police and see if they have any calls about it, disturbance, or a party, or anything." So I finally found out that they didn't have a chief of police, and I had to call the sheriff of Shawano County, which I did, and I explained to them that I had gotten this phone call; that I was mystified by the response and everything, and inquired whether they had had any complaints, and he said they had heard nothing. He said they'd check on it, and I said, "Will you let me know then?" And so then there was another call waiting for me as soon as I hung up there. It was a message saying I should call Joe Plonka, that they would talk to me in place of Brother Florian. And
so then I immediately dialed the novitiate back again and Joe Plonka answered the telephone, and he said that that was a very bad thing I did in calling the police. Then at that time I talked to Mike Sturdevant, the leader of the Menominee Warrior Society, who were occupying the novitiate at that time, and he said, "Why did you call the police? You'd better call them off," and so I said, "O.K., I'll call them off so that we can continue talking," and I never offered any explanation or anything else, which I think is providential, because I said, "I will call them off." So then I hung up, called the sheriff's office back, and by that time the assistant sheriff was back at his office and was in charge of the operation. So then I talked to Mr. Chester Dahl, who was the assistant sheriff, and he said, "Oh, we can't do that, there's people in danger there. That's our job to protect life. I think we'd better go in and rush that place so that we can protect the lives of Joe Plonka and everybody else that is in there." I really pleaded with him. I said, "You'd better call it off, because I don't want to be responsible for any violence." It sounded like they really meant it, they weren't just kidding, you know, just casually mentioning it. It was real determination on their part. So I said, "Please call them back, otherwise there's going to be real violence there."

SM: Did they threaten to kill the people in the building?

MW: I can't remember them saying that, but that seemed to be the implication, as I understood it.

SM: We got that same impression from the news accounts. Did they call him, "Mike, the General, Sturdevant?"

MW: Yes, that's right. I think Mr. Neil Bennett actually is the one that thought of that name, because at one time they didn't know how to refer to him, because they didn't want to mention his name. So Mr.
Bennett, who was with me at the time from the central office, he said, "Why don't you just refer to him as the general?"

SM: It caught on, and so they called him "Mike, the General, Sturdevant." Was he a pretty reasonable person that you could talk with?

MW: Mike? A very cool, deliberate person, and very measured and very strong. He came across very strong.

SM: About how old was he?

MW: I think he was in his late 20's.

SM: I thought he was older than that.

MW: I would safely say early 30's or late 20's. Most of the Warriors were in their 20's, but I think Mike might have been a year or two older than the average, and with a lot of experience.

SM: How many people were there in the building?

MW: Well, somebody said on the telephone at that time that there were about six or eight, but I think it'd be hard to determine at that particular time how many there were. I think there were probably about ten, but then the number increased and decreased very sporadically.

SM: They were there how long altogether?

MW: Thirty four days.

SM: Now did they keep your caretaker and his family there and the people there all that time?
No. The assistant sheriff finally said, "O.K., we'll pull back," so then I called back and told Mike Sturdevant on the telephone. He said, "Did you call the police off?" I said, "I called them off."

And he said, "O.K. Then we want you to come up and talk to us about negotiating for repossession of the novitiate." And I said, "Repossession?" He says, "Yes, this is Indian land," or something like that. I can't remember what he said. I know he said "repossession" but I can't remember how he elaborated on that. And so he said, "If you come up and talk to us about giving us this land back to the Indians, there's no reason for Joe Plonka staying—he can leave."

And I said, "Well, I'll come up and talk to you, but I'm out in Elizabeth, that's near New York City, do you realize that? And it's going to take me a long time to fly from there up to Gresham, Wisconsin. I can't make it in an hour or so, it might be evening before I get there." He said, "I don't care when. If you promise to come, Joe Plonka can leave immediately." And I said, "O.K., I'll be there."

And I said, "I'll let you know later about what time I can make it up there." So then I talked to Mr. Joe Plonka immediately, and I said, "Joe, how do you feel about this, is that all right?" Joe said, "Brother, if Mike Sturdevant says that he should let me go, I trust him. I don't know of any reason why he shouldn't be trusted. I believe that this is very good." So I said, "O.K., when you get to Elk Grove Village, call Brother Gene immediately so he knows you're there and that you're O.K." He said, "O.K." so then he hung up. Well then, I called the sheriff back and explained it to him, and he said, "Oh, tell Joe Plonka that we want to see him, that he should stop back by the sheriff's office when he comes out so we can talk to him and know that he's O.K." So then I called back the novitiate again, and said, "I'd like to talk to Joe Plonka." Well, by that time, it must have been ten minutes later, I can't remember why it was so long, there was probably about a ten-minute interval between the time I hung up on talking with Mike Sturdevant and then I talked to the assistant sheriff and called back. And at that time they said that Joe Plonka had just left. So I said, "O.K.", and then I called the
sheriff back and said, "Joe Plonka just left, I'm sorry, but he's supposed to call us when he gets to Chicago. When he does I'll give him the message whatever you want." And they said, "Well, we'd like to know when he's left." And so then I hung up and I just had hung up and I got a phone call from Brother Gene Gizzi, and so I talked to him. He said Joe Plonka is at this telephone number in Shawano, but he doesn't want to call you. However if you want to call him, he's at this number." And I said, "Well, I don't know if I should call him or not." Gene said, "Why don't you, because, you know, maybe there'll be a question or something he'd want to ask you." So then I called Joe Plonka back at this number, his friend's house in Gresham, and then at that time Joe told me, he said, "It's a real take-over." I mean, he elaborated a little. "It was frightening," and so forth. But I was concerned more about getting him out of Gresham than about getting the details about what was happening there. So I said, "Joe, will you go to Chicago right away?" And he said, "Well, I don't know if I can get a car," or this or that. I said, "Well, can't you borrow a car? I think it's essential you get out of that area, because you're the only contact that they know about with the Alexian Brothers, and if there's a change of heart or something, they'll come after you, so I think you should leave immediately, and go directly to Elk Grove and see Brother Gene Gizzi, and if you need anything he'll work it out with you." So then he said, "O.K. Brother, if you think so." And he left immediately for Chicago, and then I called the sheriff back and I said, "He's O.K., he's at this number." Then I think the sheriff said, "We'll call him right there right away," so they called him and Joe Plonka went to the sheriff's office before he left to go back to Chicago, and gave them some kind of a report. And he left and went back to Chicago.

SM: It might be helpful right here to sort of establish the geography, because Gresham, Wisconsin, is the name of the town always used, but the building is not actually in Gresham, is it?
MW: No, it's about three and a half miles outside of Gresham.

SM: To the east of it?

MW: I'm not sure.

SM: Anyway, the larger town to the south is Shawano?

MW: Yes. Lot of people mispronounce that, but it's Sha-ndo.

SM: Yes, the local people said "Sha-ndo." That is the largest town nearby.

MW: That's about nine miles from the novitiate site.

SM: And from Shawano you go up north to Keshena, and then west to the novitiate site, or if you went to Gresham first then you would go east or northeast to the novitiate site. Is that approximately correct?

MW: I think so. And the location of our novitiate was not very far from the edge of the reservation.

SM: It was not on the reservation, was it?

MW: No, it wasn't. It was at least 100 yards from the reservation. It seems to me 100 yards or 1,000 feet, a couple blocks from the edge of the reservation.

SM: Now the Warrior Society is a splinter group, a small group of the younger male members of the tribe, I guess. Is that a fair way to describe it?

MW: I think so. I called them a splinter militant group once, and Mike
Sturdevant was offended by the word splinter. He didn't mind the adjective militant, but he didn't like the word splinter for some reason or another, and I think that's pretty accurate.

SM: The leadership of the tribe was represented by Ada Deer, and she said if they took a vote it would be voted down overwhelmingly, that they did not approve of this act, so that they didn't represent the tribe per se, did they?

MW: Yes, we found that out afterwards.

SM: At the time you didn't know?

MW: We did not know that. We thought there was one group of Indians and one group of white people up there. We didn't realize there were many different factions, and we didn't realize either that previously we were negotiating with an Oneida Indian, Mr. Adam Webster, to utilize the novitiate for an alcoholic treatment center for Indians. He was representing the Wisconsin Indian Task Force, and they were within---well, January 30th I think they had planned to move into the novitiate and start the alcoholic treatment program.

SM: They were going to set it up themselves? This is the Oneida Tribe?

MW: Well, not the tribe really. It was a group of Indians representing the Menominee Indians, the Oneida Indians, the Winnebago, they called themselves the Wisconsin Indian Task Force. Adam Webster was the chairman of this program, and he was an Oneida. But we knew Adam Webster---we thought he was the same group that Mike Sturdevant and Ada Deer and everybody else was in, but we weren't aware of all the different tribal feelings and also the feelings within the Menominee Tribe that you mentioned before about Mike Sturdevant. He and the Warrior Society ran for office a number of times, I think, and were
defeated, and some say that this was one reason why they took over the novitiate—to try to get established politically as a power or a force opposing Ada Deer. There was real strong feeling between Ada Deer and the Warrior Society.

SM: Could you give us a word picture of the various groups that are involved in this whole situation now?

MW: I could, yes. Initially the Menominee Warrior Society were the occupiers of our novitiate building. Then there is the Restoration Committee, which committee is the officially elected interim leadership of the Menominee Indian Tribe at the reservation. In addition to that there was another group that we were negotiating with, and we had come within one month—in fact it would have been completed January 30th—to start the alcoholic treatment program that they were negotiating with us for. This group was called the Wisconsin Indian Task Force, and on its board it had represented a Menominee Indian and Oneida Indians and other groups too. It was very well organized, I think, because it didn't represent any political positions; it represented more directors of alcoholic treatment programs in that particular area, so it would seem to be . . . we were very impressed with the way they organized it.

SM: This was a spontaneous group that had grown up out of their ranks?

MW: Well, I don't think it was really spontaneous. I think it was pretty well thought out and planned as a response to the problem of alcoholism within the Indian communities.

SM: It wasn't a government agency though?

MW: I think it had government sponsorship in some ways. In fact, when I mentioned January 30th, that was the date that they had anticipated
that they would receive something like $350,000 grant from the HEW for the implementation of the alcoholic treatment program in our novitiate.

SM: Providing they could get the facilities from your Order?

MW: Right. And we had assured them that we would.

SM: Oh, you had already promised it to them?

MW: Absolutely. And to such an extent that we said that for two years we would give it to them on a lease-purchase arrangement whereby they could lease it for two years, and then if they wanted to purchase it the money they spent on the lease would apply to the purchase price.

SM: But the take-over by Sturdevant and the Menominee Warrior Society occurred on January 1st, which kind of blew up the other arrangements?

MW: Right. Apparently that dissolved the whole agreement that the Wisconsin Indian Task Force was depending on.

SM: One of the news accounts reported that the Alexian Order was considering selling the property also, and had had it appraised.

MW: Yes. We had been in the process of transferring the property, either by sale or lease, for at least four or five years. The Brothers had lived up there until 1971—a small group of Brothers more or less maintaining it, not having any program in it after 1969—just with the idea of maintaining it until we could transfer it to some other ownership, so that we actively had it on a real estate market to try to dispose of it, right.
SM: You were trying to transfer it to somebody that would use it effectively, somehow?

MW: Right.

SM: Whether it was for sale, lease, or loan, or whatever?

MW: Well, mostly for lease or for sale. Even the Wisconsin State Police Academy were considering transferring up there and using that site for the training of state police. This was a couple years before. However that was defeated, that was not accepted by all the political approval that they needed for transferring the academy there. And there were a couple other programs too. Phoenix Academy, which was a drug-addiction program, we had talked to them extensively about it, but we weren't able to terminate that successfully either.

SM: Is that a Phoenix, Arizona, group?

MW: No, I don't think so. I think Phoenix was maybe from the original symbol of Phoenix.

SM: The Phoenix bird rising out of the ashes?

MW: I think it was something like that, I'm not sure. Because it had to do with drug addiction, and I think their connection was, you know, maybe to try to get new life back to people who had seemed very hopeless.

SM: Wasn't there an appraisal made that the property was worth several million dollars?

MW: Well, our building cost over $1,000,000, probably $1,500,000. The addition we put on it.
SM: Just the addition?

MW: Right. Then also we purchased an additional farm, as well as getting the original property from Mrs. Peters, so that if you consider our investment it would run over a couple million dollars, I think. However, the real estate price was $1,000,000--maybe $750,000 to $1,000,000. It was in this area that we were asking a price.

SM: That's what you were asking, but an appraisor had looked it over and said it was worth $3,000,000.

MW: I'm sure it would be. Right. He was probably thinking more in terms of replacement.

SM: But you had been offering it for $1,000,000 or $750,000 if you could transfer it to someone for a good use?

MW: Yes. That's where the figure of $750,000 came in, in the initial negotiations.

SM: So with all this, then, the way it is standing now is you've got the phone call as you were explaining, and you are confronted with this thing and then it goes on about 33 days of almost interminable tension, didn't it?

MW: Yes. We completed all the phone conversations, I completed them in Elizabeth, and the last phone call I made was at 4:51 a.m. Then I got cleaned up, went to chapel, and right after our chapel morning service I got on the plane and went to Chicago and met with Brother Florian, the Provincial, and Mr. Neil Bennett, who is vice-president of our board in the area of hospital administration and financial management, and Mr. Neil Bennett and myself, after having conference with the Provincial, flew up to Gresham in a very dramatic way. It's
of interest to me because it was such a new experience. As I was coming into the O'Hare Airport that morning, probably around 9:00 o'clock, I was being paged. I answered the phone; it was the district attorney from Shawano County, and he said, "Please come to Gresham as soon as possible, because we think this is going to get national publicity, and with national attention we're afraid that the problems will be compounded, so we'd like for you to come up as quickly as you can and be as discreet as you can in making any public statements about it." And I said, "Well, we definitely want to cooperate." He said, "How are you coming up?" And we explained, and he said, "Well, why don't you take a plane to Oshkosh, don't drive" which we had planned to do. He said, "Take a plane and I'll have a police plane meet you at Oshkosh and fly you into Shawano." So that's what we did. We got out of the commercial plane and into the police Cessna plane at Oshkosh, Wisconsin, and flew directly to the airport at Shawano, and got out of the police plane into a squad car, and raced to the sheriff's office in Shawano County, where we were ushered into a conference room where Sheriff Montour was, and there were FBI agents; there was National Guard representatives; there were the local police representatives; officials were there, as well as sheriffs from surrounding counties, and other officials; special agents of the state law enforcement and things. And we explained our experiences and sort of got appraised and updated as to what the recent events were that day. This was probably about 4:00 o'clock. We still had not been out to the novitiate to talk to Mike Sturdevant. It was only later that afternoon that he called in over the telephone to the sheriff's office, and that we talked to him and tried to make some arrangements for meeting him.

SM: Did you go out there then?

MW: We didn't go out there that day, because that day, at that time, in fact, Judge Myse and an attorney, Mr. Lenihan, were in the novitiate
building trying to negotiate with the Warriors. They spent the night in there, and they were still there at that time.

SM: What prompted their going in?

MW: That happened before we got there. I guess in an attempt to talk the Warriors into some kind of compromise.

SM: They thought they could settle it?

MW: Yeah. And they were there till 10:00 a.m. the next morning, and then they came out without accomplishing their goal.

SM: Then you went out later?

MW: Well, they attempted to set up some type of negotiating spot, and I talked to Mike Sturdevant on the telephone then. He said, "I thought you were coming out here?" And I said, "Well, I'm in Shawano." He said, "Well, come on out to the novitiate and talk." And then the district attorney said, "I would not advise you to go into the novitiate building at this time." And so I told Mike, "Well, we'll have to work out something else, because I can't come into the novitiate building now, but I did come up to talk to you, and I would want to talk to you very soon." And so it ended there very abruptly or we were cut off or something. Mike Sturdevant didn't want to come out of the building to talk any place else, and we were advised by the local law enforcement and the district attorney that we should not go into the novitiate, because I guess at that time there was a fear of some type of hostage or something. Our position at that time was to cooperate with the law officials with regard to any and all official functioning. So we said, "O.K., if you say we don't go in, we don't in." With those circumstances then, Mr. Artley Skinadore, employed by the state as a consultant and as a negotiator, talked to Mike
Sturdevant the next day after Judge Mize and Gene Lenihan, the
attorney, had come out, and they reported and we were there for the
report in the morning about 10:00 o'clock, and so then Artley Skinadore talked to Mike Sturdevant and he arranged with him to meet in a
trailer, a Winnebago trailer, half way between the farmhouse and the
novitiate. Artley Skinadore was an Oneida Indian, a huge bulk of a
man, and he was a former sheriff of Brown County, which is Green Bay.

SM: Oh, well, he kind of represented both sides in a way, didn't he? An
Indian and also an ex-law enforcement officer?

MW: Yes, right. I think he proved to be an able negotiator.

SM: A go-between. And so, did you set up a trailer then?

MW: Yes. Sheriff Montour borrowed a Winnebago trailer from someone, and
so then it was shortly after that, I don't remember the day, it may
have been that same afternoon or the next afternoon.

SM: This would be January 2nd or 3rd then?

MW: Yes, in the afternoon, and we arranged for the meeting then, so we
drove out to the Lamberies' farmhouse, which is about a block and a
half from our property, up the road and overlooking our property, and
we met Artley Skinadore and Mike Spencer, who is the special agent
for special services in the police department on the state level in
Wisconsin, and Mr. Neil Bennett and myself arranged to meet with
Mike Sturdevant and his representatives in the Winnebago trailer.

SM: Did they have any lawyers to help them on their side?

MW: No, there was no legal representation on either part at that time.
SM: O.K. then. So you did meet with them?

MW: Yes we did, but they wouldn't come out and meet until they came out to search the Winnebago trailer. I'll never forget the experience when they drove up in their car from the novitiate, and then we were in the Winnebago trailer, we drove in the Winnebago trailer from the farm with these other two gentlemen, so we were waiting in the trailer, and the couple, members of the Warrior Society, came in with guns, obvious guns, and came in to search. However, Mike Sturdevant was not one of them, these were a couple other Warriors who came in, and I've told it before, but it seems so interesting. They searched the trailer, and apparently it had just been used by a family, because it wasn't too clean, and there were still some supplies and things that a family might leave in a trailer that they had just rented or something, so that when the two young Indians came in to search the trailer they looked through all the cabinets and they found a can of pork and beans, and he promptly put that in his jacket without asking any questions. But then he looked in the next cabinet and he found about a half a bottle of gin and he looked at it, and everybody sort of grinned, but he put that back in the cabinet and closed the door—he didn't touch that. So that was sort of a little relief there, and I remember one of them said, "Brother, you look scared." And I said, "Well, I guess I am," something like that. I really didn't feel so scared as I was anxious to work out some satisfactory agreement to both sides. I guess I looked frightened to him, and well, anyway, after they completed the search of the Winnebago trailer, then Mike Sturdevant and another of his Warriors came in, and we talked then. He said he wanted the novitiate, and we said, "Why, it belongs to the Alexian Brothers. We just can't give it to you." And he said, "We want it for a hospital or a school," and we said "Well, if that's what you want we'll be glad to try to work with you, but we were negotiating and we did ask $750,000 for it, so we would expect that you would obtain funds of $750,000 and we'd be glad to negotiate with you then." So it went back and forth like that with no definite conclusion
being established. I think probably with us saying, "Let us go back and see if we can get people interested and kind of help get this thing moving in the area of some type of health care." Immediately we told him it won't work as a hospital. You maybe could make an ambulatory health care center out of it, or some type of clinic, but not a hospital. It was just impossible, because there were too many problems out there. It's not practical.

SM: And your people know about hospitals, because you've been running them.

MW: Right. And we were familiar with the building, so we could say that with pretty definite authority as far as we were concerned. But we did say, "Well, it might make a very fine ambulatory care center," because that's the emphasis nowadays, to give ambulatory health care rather than get a patient hospitalized--it's very expensive care that way. So we sort of left with that idea in mind, and then Mike would always say, "I have to take it back to my people," and he sort of gave us the impression that he was speaking for the Menominee people too, and at that time that impressed us much more than it does now, where we're more sophisticated about the politics and the different divisions even within the Menominee Tribe. And so it ended rather uneventful, with the idea that we would meet again. I think that lasted probably half an hour, and it was very quiet; Mike is a very cool, very deliberate type of person, and the young man that was with him didn't say much. Artley Skinadore did a lot of talking to sort of facilitate the agreement, I think, and after they left we stayed in the trailer and they returned to the novitiate. We drove up the road and into the farmer's lane and parked the car in the barnyard of Willis Lamberies' farm. I was the first one out of the trailer and Neil Bennett followed me, and when we stepped out of the trailer, we looked around the barnyard and saw about six squad cars parked behind the barn, and in the farmyard, and it seems like there were hundreds, but I guess it would be more accurate to say
there were probably 15 or 20 state police officers who seemed to be leaning on the cars with guns pointed at us, and it seemed like they had their fingers on the trigger, that was the impression it left me, that we stepped out of the Winnebago trailer facing at least 20 barrels of guns with human fingers on the triggers. It was frightening, I think that was one of the most frightening times of the whole experience at Gresham. It was just so dramatic, and it was the only time it happened. Probably we all learned a lot by that experience, but it was very frightening! Mr. Bennett and myself, both, have talked about that since as one of the most frightening times.

SM: They were there, I would assume, to protect you?

MW: Yes, and probably they figured that there may be some Indians hiding in the trailer that would jump out and do something, maybe harm us or start shooting or something like that, because there had been an exchange of gunfire before that between the Indians from the novitiate.

SM: They had shot out?

MW: Yes, as I recall there had been some exchange of gunfire--I can't remember where it was from or anything, at that point.

SM: Was it law enforcement officers firing toward the novitiate?

MW: I'm not sure at that point. Later it was, I'm sure, but at this point this was very early. I don't know, but I'm really sure that there was some exchange of gunfire, and there was a knowledge too that the Indians did have arms. This much was established at that point.

SM: Nobody knew whether they would use them or not.

MW: That's right. I'm sure that that's true.
SM: Were there any other groups involved in all this now? We have the Indian group, the Warrior Society; we have the law enforcement people; then we have your negotiating team as it's shaping up here. You are the prime representative of the Order, though, aren't you?

MW: Yes, I represented the board of directors of the Alexian Brothers, as well as Mr. Neil Bennett. The two of us represented the Alexian Brothers, and the Indians, of course, insisted that we come to all the negotiating meetings. I guess there were about six altogether, and this was the first one.

SM: All in the trailer?

MW: There were two held in the trailer, and maybe two of them held in a National Guard bus, of which I have pictures to show you, and then at least one was held in the farmhouse at Willis Lamberies.

SM: That farmhouse is just up the hill there from the novitiate?

MW: Yeah, a couple of blocks, right. And it sort of overlooks--you can get an excellent view of the novitiate from the farmhouse.

SM: The ground slopes down from the farmhouse towards the novitiate building?

MW: Yes. There were about, I guess, 15 checkpoints around the novitiate during the time of the occupation, and this was the main checkpoint. I forget the number of it, but it was a very important checkpoint. Yes, there were a number of groups involved. In fact, it seemed like the characters in the affair changed from week to week. Some people would fade out and then others would come forward, depending on the demands of the circumstances at the time, and, for example, later on the Menominee People's Committee was formed, primarily with the idea
of resolving the occupation of the novitiate, and these were Indians, mostly relatives of the Warriors, probably brothers and fathers and other relatives of the Warriors. So one of their main interests was to assist in the negotiation of evacuating the novitiate. Another was to oppose Ada Deer's political operation on the reservation.

SM: Because Ada Deer was the elected head of the interim committee that ran the tribal affairs?

MW: Yes. Right. Now Ada Deer was not involved directly in any of the negotiations. That much I'm sure of, although we made several attempts to contact her directly to find out how we could facilitate a peaceful settlement of the novitiate, we did have difficulty in making any firm arrangements with her to assist us in any way in resolving the novitiate problem. I think at this point there was a big problem as far as communications went. For example, I recall reading later a very fine press release that she put out through the Restoration Committee, and she failed to give us a copy of it at the Fuller Motor Inn, so that we had no direct knowledge of it, and of course, there was so much action that you didn't have time to do a lot of homework reading papers and things like this, but if we would have gotten a press release from her, I think we would have given immediate priority to that, and responded. I think this is unfortunate, looking back, that there wasn't better communication, official communication between her and the Alexian Brothers at that time. I think both of us could share in the blame for this, but again, this whole episode, I think, at Gresham ... we had to deal with the facts as we saw them, as we were educated about them, so that in some cases we can look back and say, "Well, I wish we'd have known that, we would have responded differently, you know." Not too many cases, but in some cases. I think this is one where the communications between Ada Deer and the Restoration Committee and the Alexian Brothers could have been improved. I think that would have made it easier.
SM: You were gaining understanding of all the factions and factors as you went along?

MW: Absolutely. Right. As one of the Capuchin Brothers who played a big part in the later phase of our problem at Gresham remarked, he said he thought when he first came up there that there was one type of Indian and one type of cowboy, and he didn't find out until later that this wasn't true. As I see, looking back on it too, I think that there were three different processes the Alexian Brothers were involved in, and many other people were involved, but I think the Alexian Brothers were involved throughout the episode from January 1 until November 13, 1975, when we concluded our legal ownership of the novitiate property, and I like to break it down into three different areas. The first was the negotiating process which lasted January 1 until February 3rd, when we signed the agreement with the Menominee Warrior Society saying we would give it to the Menominee Indian Tribe.

SM: Not to the Warrior Society?

MW: Yes, there is a lot of misunderstanding about that. You're right, yes. Then the second phase was February 3rd until probably July 9th, which was a caretaking process whereby we assumed responsibility for caretaking of the novitiate as the owners, and also with the moral commitment—not the legal commitment, but the moral commitment—that we would transfer the property over to the Menominee Indian Tribe. At that time the Alexian Brothers assumed the responsibility to cooperate and assist the caretaking committee to take care of the novitiate to a point where there would be no further deterioration until the tribe decided whether they wanted the property or not.

SM: Because they hadn't committed themselves yet, had they?
MW: Very emphatically they did not. And this was the big problem. That they wouldn't commit themselves to say, "We accept," or "We refuse," or "We'll consider." I mean they just wouldn't give any kind of an answer, which puts us in a terrible position where we had offered to give the property to them, and they wouldn't even talk to us about it.

SM: Now originally you made an offer to the Warrior Society that for a consideration, such as $750,000 or some such thing, you would transfer the title and so on, and then it moved from there to an outright gift, but not to the Warrior Society, but to the tribe?

MW: That's right. From the beginning, though, we insisted it would have to go to the Menominee Indian Tribe. We at no time said we would agree to give it to the Menominee Warrior Society, under any conditions. I mean, this we were very firm on, and I think we were consistent on that.

SM: And in the meantime then, as these weeks dragged by, the tribe itself didn't commit itself whether they'd say yes, no, or anything?

MW: If I could just wind up a couple things, we're getting a couple of things going here. First we had the negotiating process that I mentioned to you, that I gave you the dates, and then the caretaking process which went up to July 9th. At that time the Alexian Brothers came out with the statement saying, "We have fulfilled our commitment," and then I think we went into a selection future planning process which lasted until November 13th. Now we're getting a little ahead of the story, but as I see it, we're really involved with three periods or processes, phases, or whatever. The Alexian Brothers insisted on $750,000 fair compensation for the property until the last hours of January. We did this because we felt that we owed it to the surrounding communities not to give in or fold up, as Father Greeley labelled, not to give in to this pressure of the criminal groups. We were aware from the very beginning that we were negotiating.
with people who had criminal records, according to the white man's laws, so that we couldn't negotiate with them like two businessmen would negotiate a deal in which they both have common grounds. We recognized that, but we did feel we wanted a peaceful settlement number one, and number two we wanted a fair compensation. We wanted a peaceful settlement because we didn't want any bloodshed; we wanted the values in their perspective, as we understood them as Christian men, and that was that the property was secondary, the lives involved were primary. The second thing that we insisted upon was a fair compensation of $750,000 for the property, and this we felt would respond to the fears of the local people that here you got criminals coming in and stealing the land. If they had to pay for it, we felt that this would kind of resolve that problem that they had, and justifiably so.

Part II of this interview appears on a separate transcript.