Listening to Indians

EUGENE WILSON, Nez Perce
December 22, 1974
Phoenix, Arizona

This transcript is one of a series of interviews with American Indian people throughout much of the United States by S. I. Myers of the History Department of St. Louis Community College at Florissant Valley, St. Louis, Missouri, 63135.

The purpose of these interviews is to bring the Indian peoples' own comments to students in classrooms, and to foster greater understanding among the peoples of the United States by providing Indians the opportunity to express their ideas and opinions to a wider audience.

This transcript has been edited for clarity and ease of reading, but every effort has been made to preserve the original feeling. Conversations and opinions were encouraged on any subject of interest to interviewees; questions and responses do not necessarily reflect the viewpoint of the interviewer, the National Endowment for the Humanities, or St. Louis Community College.

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Sam Myers:

We're talking today to Mr. Eugene Wilson in Phoenix, Arizona, and Mr. Wilson, may I call you Gene?

Eugene Wilson:

Yep, that's right.

SM: Gene Wilson, I had thought you were a BIA official, but I'm not right on that.

EW: You were not right. I am not a Bureau of Indian Affairs official. I worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs for about 15 or 16 years as a schoolteacher, coach, counselor, vocational counselor, and a guidance officer in athletics, but in 1963 I joined Health, Education and Welfare, or the branch of Health, Education and Welfare which is known as the Indian Health Service. We give health services to Indian people and Alaskan natives.

SM: Well then, Gene, what is your title now?

EW: I am known as a tribal affairs officer. In other words, I represent the Indian people to the Indian Health Service. Then, of course, I am a liason for the Indian Health Service towards the Indian people. In other words, the Indian people must understand what the policies, regulations and the services of the Indian Health Services are in the way of health services. And, vice versa, I am a person who tries to clarify the cultural aspects, the attitudes and the day-to-day community living of the Indian people, so that the services that we extend to the Indian people may be effective.

SM: What area is involved in this?

EW: I work in four states: California, Utah, Nevada and Arizona. That is known as the Phoenix area of the Indian Health Service.
SM: So you're the tribal affairs officer for the Indians of these four states?

EW: Yes, I am the tribal affairs officer for the Indians in these four states in many respects and, of course, although I am, you might say, an ombudsman, I am a public relations man; I am an advocate for the Indian people; still there are many aspects of Indian life that I, as an advocate, must pursue to see that the Indians get a fair shake, or are dealt with with sensitivity.

SM: Gene, we've got this point clarified. Let's go back and get a little biographical sketch of yourself, because our listeners will be very much interested. Were you born here in Arizona?

EW: No. I was born in north central Idaho on the Nez Perce Indian Reservation.

SM: You are a Nez Perce Indian?

EW: I am a Nez Perce Indian. I was raised in north central Idaho. I was born in Kamiah, Idaho. It's up near Lewiston, Idaho, and it's on the Nez Perce Indian Reservation, and at about seven years old I was sent to an Indian military school at Sherman Institute in Riverside, California, for about five years.

SM: Did you go there speaking English, or only Indian language?

EW: I had a pretty fair understanding of the English language, but I was bilingual. I could speak fluent Indian; I could speak pretty fair English, because I went to public schools and the Catholic boarding school in Idaho up to about the third grade, you know, third or fourth grade.

SM: That was when you went to California to the boarding school?
EW: Yes. Then I went to California.

SM: Well, your experience then--leaving home and going to a boarding school--was typical of many 19th century, early 20th century Indian experiences of having to leave home to go to a boarding school, was it?

EW: Yes. This was the typical pattern for many Indian reservations, because the boarding schools were seeking students--well, just like my mother in about 1900. She went to Carlyle Indian School. Now my mother not only graduated from the tenth grade in Carlyle, which is a vocational training school and a military school, but she worked for a group of people known as the Quakers in Pennsylvania. And I think this is one of the finest things that could've ever happened to my mother, because, you know, the Quakers are a hard-working people. They're conservative, they're frugal and certainly they have, you know, high sense of values.

SM: Gentle ways?

EW: Gentle ways, and they love the Indian people and the students. And, of course, the important thing was that Mother worked for these people, and she worked from dawn 'till dark just like they did, so consequently she developed a sense of responsibility which she brought back to the reservation, and the concept that education is the only way for the Indian people.

SM: That must have influenced you then?

EW: It influenced my entire family very much. I had three other brothers and two sisters, and, of course, on the ranch--my mother came home from boarding school in Pennsylvania and married my father who was a rancher--small ranch. And, of course, it was get up five o'clock in the morning, go out and husk a little corn, slop the pigs, milk
the cows, and then haul in the wood, eat breakfast and get to school. And, of course, the support she gave us in going to school was fantastic. We always had meals ready for us. She was always at home advising us, "Go to school! Don't miss school! Study!" And, of course, on the other hand, we had a modest little ranch house, but the fires were always burning, there was always plenty of food, good warm food when we came home from school, so this encouraged us to go to school when we were in elementary school and in high school.

SM: You didn't have that experience that so often happens where some Indian child goes to school, gets turned off by the situation, the language problem and some discrimination--you didn't encounter that so much because you had your mother's support, and the whole thing was a positive approach rather than a negative one.

EW: I think that I had an advantage over other Indian children because my mother and my father could speak English, and they were aggressive--my father was a rancher and my mother taught school. But yet, I knew the Indian language; I could speak it fluently, but yet I could speak pretty good English, so this left me to compete with the rest of the non-Indian children in school. But there was . . . I wouldn't say outright discrimination. I think, in fact I know, there was a feeling against Indians that just, you know, "They're Indians."

SM: In Idaho?

EW: In Idaho. Oh yes, there was very much discrimination, and in California they discriminated very much against the Indian and against the Mexican-American.

SM: You were there for seven years, was it?
EW: I was there five years. I was up in Riverside County, Riverside, California, at Sherman Institute for five years. But getting back to the Indian child that I went to school with in public schools, they were not as fortunate as I because many of their parents, and many of them who lived with their grandparents— their concept of seeking an education wasn't like my mother's, and they could not assist their children in English grammar, arithmetic, fractions, decimals, these things; the curriculum of elementary schools, junior high schools was foreign to a lot of our Indian people on the reservation. Therefore their concept of education—what it contained—maybe wasn't like my mother's, which I think was an advantage to me.

SM: We can see then that if we accept the idea, which I think we do, that education is a good thing and helpful, that one person, your mother's contact with the Quakers, was instrumental in making your life more effective. One person, then, can really do something.

EW: Very much so. It made me aggressive, and it made me assume responsibilities even though I constantly say, "Well, when my mother came back from Pennsylvania after working with the Quakers for eight years, it was get up, slop the hogs, milk the cows, get in the wood, husk a little corn, and all those nasty things." I always throw that in because, you know, I think it was a compliment to me that my mother subjected us to all these chores and made us accept responsibility!

SM: After Riverside, did you go to school then back in Idaho again?

EW: I finished the eighth grade at Riverside, and my mother pulled me out and decided to send me to a public school at Kamiah, to stay at home, and I went home and went to four years of high school and graduated in 1934. And I had a fantastically large graduating class of eighteen students. Nowadays it's four, five, six, seven hundred.
SM: Back there, did you run into any problems in high school?

EW: Yes, there were still Indians, and there were still the non-Indian, or you might say, the Anglo community. Indians were still Indians though. In other words, in those days an Indian could not buy beer in a . . . well, in fact, prohibition was on then, but then, he couldn't buy beer. I felt this was social discrimination. The Anglo world treated us, as far as relationship with the girls was concerned, they detested Indians for, you know, smiling at the white girls, and I found that the Indian was a better than average athlete, and they certainly weren't the ugliest people in the world. The girls, you know, the girls from nice white families thought we were acceptable, and socialized with us.

SM: You found less discrimination among your peers than you did among the adult community then?

EW: Well, I found it among my peers also, yes. Of course my peers, which means my classmates, they just voiced what they heard at home, and I know my mother used to tell me, "Just don't pay any attention to this type of garbage. Those people are," she'd just say, "ignorant and illiterate. They're narrow-minded." And I didn't realize until I went to college what she meant by that, because she learned this in Pennsylvania where people treated each other as people, as an individual, and she came back to the Northwest, the Indian reservation, with this concept—that there are people that will treat you as equals—those are the people that really care and are worth knowing. The rest of the people that are narrow-minded and are going to discriminate against you, they're just to be pitied and ignored, which was very interesting.

SM: It's a great lesson to learn from someone that you respected and admired like your mother, and so it has influenced your life too?
EW: But this discrimination, social and otherwise, in high school and in public, is certainly a hard role to play, and very few people take it gracefully.

SM: Can we jump ahead a moment now, and then we want to get back to your school days. Do you think from your experience with your own children that there has been any improvement in this attitude in our schools, in the schools themselves and among school children, or school students, or is it pretty much the same as it was when you went to school?

EW: Well, I think that as far as my children are concerned there is less discrimination, because my children went to school in, well, like Alaska, South Dakota, Arizona, in public schools.

SM: This is what's interesting now, and one of the reasons I'm here asking you these questions, because you've had this broad experience--growing up as a child, of your mother going to school at Carlyle, and all these experiences with your own children--it should be one of the most over-all views we can obtain from one person about the whole situation. Now back to your schooling in Idaho then. You went back from California to Idaho to high school, and after that you went to school some more?

EW: Yes, but before I go into this I would like to mention at this point--my mother was old for a high school student. She was, I'd say, around 19 or 20, and she cooked, she took home economics, and she cooked for the famous Jim Thorpe and his football fellows. And she knew Pop Warner personally, who was the coach, and she cooked for people like Lewis Tewanima, the famous Indian Hopi from Shongopovi. He was a long distance runner. But she knew all these athletes personally.

SM: And she knew Jim Thorpe?

EW: She knew Jim Thorpe personally, and later on she introduced me to
Jim Thorpe when Jim and I were working as extras in a movie. I knew Jim Thorpe personally, and I worked with him in the movies.

SM: That movie of his life?

EW: No, I didn't work in that. I worked in some other movies, like Northwest Passage, Drums Along the Mohawk, some other small productions. I worked as an extra back when I was going to college.

SM: Gene, do you know Grace Thorpe?

EW: Yes, I know Grace Thorpe very well, and she's a personal friend of mine. I think Grace is studying law somewhere in Washington, D.C., right now.

SM: Someone told me that she was dean of a school someplace northwest of Los Angeles, but she's in Washington, D.C.?

EW: Yes. When Grace lived in Phoenix several years ago, we had the Phoenix Indian Center—I was the President of the Phoenix Indian Center Board, and Grace was the chairman of my committee on public relations—and she took pictures of the Indian center and publicized it to the general public, which was very good, so Grace is a very capable person, she did the Indian center a service; we missed her when she left for California, but now she's studying law in, I think, the Washington, D.C., area, and I certainly hope for her a lot of luck in it.

SM: Is she younger than Jim was?

EW: You're talking about Grace, his daughter?

SM: I thought she was his sister.
EW: No, no. Grace was Jim Thorpe's daughter. You see, Jim died in about 1957, and Grace, I would say, is in the neighborhood of, say, 45 or 50.

SM: Oh, I'm glad I asked you because I was misinformed.

EW: Grace is one of Jim's daughters.

SM: I would like to, when we finish our conversation, get her address, and perhaps she would make a tape for us too.

EW: I think that'd be a nice idea.

SM: Now, back to where we were before I interrupted you. You were back in Idaho and going on to school.

EW: In the fall of 1934 I got a non-reimbursable loan of $75.00, and went back to Riverside, California. Very interesting, though. When I finished my four or five years of college, I was indebted to the tune of $450.00.

SM: That was quite a lot of money then.

EW: Now it's only a week-end for the students, you know. $450.00 buys you only about a wheelbarrow full of groceries, but, I stayed again at Sherman Institute. I stayed there, boarded there, and then went to Riverside Junior College at the time--this is in 1934 and '35. I think this is where I begin to realize that people are not prepared for college the way they should be in small schools. In fact, I think that's true today. Many of our students--Indian and non-Indian--that go to college aren't prepared to study; they don't have the background in biological sciences, mathematics, chemistry, and, you name it.

SM: Writing, reading.
EW: Writing and reading and the comprehension of the English language in depth, because this is the key to education; reading, writing and expressing yourself in a manner you can be understood, and to understand what is on the written paper—the basic tools of education, reading, writing, speaking.

SM: It just dawned on you then when you went back to junior college in California in the '30's?

EW: This is what I lacked because when I got into competition with the non-Indians in southern California, I found that they were highly competitive and highly intelligent, with good backgrounds, and I think that first year of college was my most miserable failure in my life in trying to comprehend foreign languages, my lack of grammar . . . I failed there, and then trying to tackle chemistry, English and all these other courses, you know, without having a solid background.

SM: But you did make it somehow?

EW: I made a fair attempt at it, but the following year I went to school in Oklahoma, at Bacone College, which is in Bacone, Oklahoma, just in the suburbs of Muskogee, but I went with a different attitude this time—I went there prepared to study. Although I engaged in athletics, athletics were secondary to my studies. But it's hard to engage in athletics and study; to give both equal time. Many times, as a boxer or basketball player or baseball player I would be too tired to study.

SM: You participated in all those sports?

EW: Yes, I participated in all athletics—baseball, boxing, yes and track. Now I went to school two years in Bacone. It was primarily an Indian college. It's not an Indian college per se, like Haskell
Junior College. When the Baptist missionaries came into Oklahoma, they asked the Five Civilized Tribes for acreage to build a school on; they told them that they would emphasize Indian education; they would give scholarships, they would promote, encourage the Indian to go to college, to go to high school.

SM: Did they do that?

EW: They did that very well, and they even established an orphanage, Murrow Orphanage, in connection with the college. But I'd say the atmosphere, the Indian atmosphere in Oklahoma, was very prevalent at Bacone. We had non-Indians going to school with us and I think it was very refreshing.

SM: Were they a minority in that school, the non-Indians?

EW: Yes, I would say they were in the minority, and they took their share of joking, ribbing, and, you know, it was the humor directed towards the non-Indians at the time. It was very, very much in fun [more] than in cruelty or caustic in nature, you see, and we got along real nice with the Indians and non-Indians. There was a certain amount of joking--I think it was wholesome joking. I think that at this point I would like to say that's a most cruel and inhumane thing that can happen to any minority group in any school situation or a social situation, where the majority of the people or students ridicule the minority because of his race and his shortcomings, and so forth. I think this is tragic, but it is done. I finished Bacone, and I did two years of junior college work; then I transferred to the University of Idaho at Moscow.

SM: Now back in Idaho again.

EW: Back in Idaho again, and I finished my two years of junior and senior
college work, got my BS degree in Education; then I taught school for the public school system in Idaho, up in north central Idaho.

SM: Was that high school or elementary school?

EW: It is high school. I was the principal of the elementary school; I taught high school subjects; I was the superintendent, principal, coach, school teacher, janitor, dishwasher, and I carried on community work.

SM: In your spare time?

EW: Yes. Like community first aid classes.

SM: What town was this in?

EW: Oh, this wasn't even a town—it was the district. It was up out of Grangeville, Idaho, or in Idaho County. It was up into the mining area of Elk City, Golden, or of Grand, Idaho.

SM: And then?

EW: Well, that was about the time a gentleman named Adolph Hitler began flexing his muscles, and I taught school in 1940 and '41, and then that summer, in the fall of 1941, I enlisted in the Air Force as a private, to get my one year out of the way, you know, the draft status out of the way. Well, as it was, I went in in '41 and I didn't get out 'till 1946.

SM: Even after the war was over? That was five years then.

EW: Yeah, I was in . . . flying with radar ships in the Air Force. And we couldn't get out because it was considered . . . radar was considered a secret. . . .
SM: A secret weapon yet?

EW: Yeah, a secret defensive, and it was classified, and I didn't get out 'till 1946 then, but I did fly as a navigator, bombardier, and a radar operator from 1941 through 1946. I went overseas to North Africa. We flew over Europe in bombers, B-26 bombers.

SM: Out of England?

EW: No, we flew out of North Africa, Sicily, Sardinia and Italy. We moved as the Axis powers weakened, and we moved up the Italian peninsula.

SM: You finally got back home in '46?

EW: I was fortunate. I was rotated— I finished my 50 missions early in 1944— and returned to the States in about March.

SM: You were still in the Service?

EW: I was still in the Service, and that is when I became an instructor here in the States on B-24's and B-25's, in radar—bombing through overcast. We were getting ready for the assault upon Japan with B-29's and with radar equipment, you know, from high altitudes. You see, the radar, you could fly in any kind of weather and still bomb from 20,000, 30,000 feet through overcast. This was the advantage that we had in the Air Force because the weather in Japan was just a lot of overcast, so it didn't matter whether we bombed them at night or daytime or in any kind of weather.

SM: And then after the Air Force, did you go back to school any more, or what did you do then?

EW: In '46 when I got out I went back to teaching for the public schools
in Idaho. I taught there 'till May of 1949, and at that time I got married and decided to use some of my G.I. Bill of Rights benefits, educational benefits, so I took my new wife to the plains of Kansas, Kansas University at Lawrence, and worked there for the P.E. Department, and officiated basketball, football, umpired baseball in my spare time, and got my master's degree in Education. I wrote my thesis for my master's in Physical Education, and the other half was School Administration, Counseling, Vocational Guidance, and this and that, you know, and the other.

SM: A good background for your work ever since.

EW: Guidance, yes, I always specialized in guidance, and I feel that at this point, when I was pursuing my master's in Physical Education, I was subjected to courses like Anatomy, Advanced Physiology, Kinesiology, and Community Living, which makes my work in the Indian Health Service - a great help - because, knowing of the gastro-intestinal tract, knowing the nerve endings, and knowing the human body and its relationship to your environment certainly makes my work easy, along with being a public relations man, you see. Because the concept of Indian people as to health crises - how to use the services that are available to them, is a little bit fuzzy, although the services are here, sometimes they aren't used to the best advantage of the Indian, because of his lack of understanding.

SM: So you got an MA then. . . .

EW: Got an MS from the University of Kansas.

SM: And then did you go immediately into the BIA?

EW: I went into the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Alaska.

SM: You've already been around more than most people do in a lifetime,
and you were just out of school.

EW: On my way to Europe, we went down through South America, Africa, Ascension Island, Africa—we flew around the Horn in Africa and then flew on into the area of Tunisia and Algeria. But now, in 1950 when I finished my graduate work at Kansas, we had one daughter who was just a few months old. We took off for Wrangell, Alaska, to work for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. We stayed in Alaska for approximately two years, because by that time we had two children, and the environment up there was not, you might say, conducive to proper child-raising. They had to stay inside, and we had an upstairs apartment, so, because of the frustrations our children were evidencing—they were getting frustrated in being cooped up—we moved back down to the States. I transferred to Phoenix Indian School in Phoenix, Arizona, in August of 1952.

SM: Still working with the BIA?

EW: Still with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and here at the Phoenix Indian School I was attached to the Guidance Department; I was one of the counselors. I did coaching, helped in intramural athletics and extra-curricular activities like youth groups, scouting, and just general disciplinarian work. It was in 1952 and '53 at the Indian School in Phoenix. In August of 1953 I was transferred to Stewart Indian School at Stewart, Nevada, which is just two or three miles out of Carson City, and I was the department head of the Boy's Guidance Department, and the athletic director of the school from 1953 through 1956. In 1956 I quit education, and went to what was known as the old Relocation Program, which is now known as the Employment Assistance Program, whereby Indians were sent from their local reservations to urban areas under a work-training program, controlled work-training program, and vocational training.

SM: Does this tie in with that termination policy that was prevalent
in the '50's?

EW: No, no, no, no. I could see no connection between termination and the fact that this was a program to enhance the economic opportunities of Indian people.

SM: But you were trying to assist people who were coming to urban areas on their own, not because they had been terminated on the reservations?

EW: That's true. This had nothing to do with termination. They just came to the urban areas to work, and they were helped financially, with counseling, helped with housing and helped with counseling while they're on the job. Now I might add at this point, Sam, that there are many people who are ignorant, to put it mildly, of social programs, that say the Relocation Program or the Employment Assistance Program was a miserable failure. I differ with the people who make these statements about Indians. This did the Indians a lot of good. It developed independence, it gave many Indians skills, work skills, and certainly general education about what the rest of the world was like.

SM: This Relocation Program?

EW: This relocation whereby they went into urban areas like Dallas, Cleveland, Ohio, Los Angeles, the Bay Area and Oakland, and San Francisco, Denver. . . .

SM: Minneapolis?

EW: No, we didn't have an Employment Assistance Office in Minneapolis. The closest to that was Chicago and Cleveland, Ohio; St. Louis for a while, Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas.
SM: That's a phase of the program most people haven't heard too much about, I suppose.

EW: Well, it really picked up speed right around 1951, '52, and got in high gear in the middle '50's; and then, of course, after the middle '50's, Public Law 959, or the Vocational Training Program, came into being, which then supplemented the employment program. I stayed with the Employment Assistance Program until October of 1963. I was stationed at Sacaton, Arizona, that's the Gila River Indian Reservation.

SM: You were moved from Nevada to Sacaton?

EW: Stewart, Nevada, to Sacaton.

SM: That's a little south of Phoenix.

EW: About 30, 35 miles south of Phoenix. The Maricopa Indians and the Gila River Pima live on that reservation, and I spent from 1956 until 1963 at Sacaton, but I covered the Phoenix Indian School. I was the vocational counselor for Phoenix Indian School, employment counselor, and I covered this part of Arizona--the Salt River Reservation, the Fort McDowell, the Ak Chin Papago Reservation, and the Gila River, and other associated activities that were assigned to me by the Bureau of Indian Affairs Superintendent. In 1963, October, I was offered a position in Aberdeen, South Dakota, with the Indian Health Service.

SM: So that's when you changed?


SM: And went to Aberdeen, South Dakota?
EW: Aberdeen, South Dakota, which was the area office for the seven-state area of North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan. So I had the opportunity to travel those seven states from 1963 through 1967 with the Chippewas, the Oneidas, various bands of Sioux, Winnebagos, Mandans and Hidatsas.

SM: That's an interesting reservation map you have on your wall there showing all the reservations.

EW: That is the Indian world right there.

SM: Bureau of Indian Affairs?

EW: Branch of Industrial Development. But you see, the Branch of Industrial Development came into being with emphasis on developing industry on reservations around 1958.

SM: How long were you at Aberdeen then with the HEW?

EW: I was there for about four years. I went there in 1963 and left in '67.

SM: Did you come back to Arizona then?

EW: Then I transferred as a tribal affairs officer to the Phoenix area which now covers, as I said, Arizona, California, Nevada and Utah.

SM: And are you working with all the Indians in those four states now?

EW: Yes, I work with all the Indians in the four states, but also in another project I'm running out of the area office. It's called the Student Health Program--health education for Indian students in higher education--colleges, you see, technical schools--we're
supposed to follow with comprehensive health care to these people, and, of course, in my area which is a desirable area for college work, I work with Indians from all over the United States and the Alaskan natives, which includes the Eskimo, the Aleut and the, you know, the Indians.

SM: As well as these four states?

EW: Right.

SM: Well, actually in your experience and work you have not only gotten around the world in the military service, but you have covered the western half of the United States very thoroughly, actually working in most all the states west of the Mississippi, and to some extent east of it.

EW: My work, meetings and working relationship with Indians, carries me to the eastern seaboard, Florida, going to Washington to meetings, and work with the Indian people in developing policy and working out services for these people--what is best for them; do comparative evaluations so that maybe programs we have out west would benefit--the Mikasukis in Florida, or the Choctaws in Philadelphia, Mississippi, or the eastern band of Cherokee.

SM: Have you visited the Choctaw villages around Philadelphia, Mississippi?

EW: Yes, I've been through there and I've been down in Florida visiting the Seminoles. I have many good friends down there, and I've visited the Cherokee Reservation in Cherokee, North Carolina.

SM: One of the reasons I'm here is that you have this remarkably thorough overview of the entire situation through a short lifetime--maybe it seems long sometimes, but you're still a young man so that it's a
short lifetime--of working with the Indians in all parts of the United States, actually from Florida to Alaska, and particularly in the western half of the country. One often hears criticism of the BIA. For example, a Pueblo Indian, working as superintendent in an eastern Oregon reservation, said that about 95% of the criticism of the BIA is not warranted. Would you like to comment on that?

EW: Well, let's put it this way. I studied political science, I studied history, I studied elementary economics in college, and we know this: that any time the government gets into some kind of a business, there's going to be a certain amount of wheel spinning and inefficiency, and so forth. But I will have to come to the defense of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, not because I worked for them for fifteen years....

SM: You don't work for them now?

EW: I don't work for them, but I work very, very closely with the Bureau of Indian Affairs; the education program, employment assistance, because in all services to Indian people, whether it's given through the state, Department of Agriculture, Interior, Health Education and Welfare, health services are important, and health services are important and effective only as to how you understand the people, and how you work with the other agencies to bring these health services into play--to make a student more effective, to make a worker more effective, to make the Indian more effective in his own environment.

SM: It's more than Congress just voting money to build a school?

EW: That's right. Legislating laws in Washington, they feel, answers the problem, but this is not true. Legislating something is starting something. It takes the people down on the firing line to really put these things into effect. Now getting back to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, I would say that if it hadn't of been for the Bureau of
Indian Affairs as a trustee for the Indian people in our country, I would say that what little land the Indians have left, what resources that they have left, would fall into the hands of, let's say, the dominant society's realtors, businessmen, what have you. But, as in health services, the Bureau of Indian Affairs can only be a catalyst to motivate the Indian to go out and seek the education. Like, for example, provide grants, provide protection for the lands, provide funds for the Indian to go into cattle raising, farming, and other enterprises. But the Indian must accept that responsibility on a 50-50 basis. The government can't legislate economic development for him.

SM: Or his attitude.

EW: Or his attitude. His attitude must be such that he's getting assistance from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Health, Education and Welfare or some other federal agency, then it's up to him to roll up his shirt-sleeves, take this assistance, and go out and get the education, or go out and hang up his shingle as an entrepreneur. That's a good word I picked up in elementary economics, but anyone who wants to go out, be a businessman, he must assume some stringent responsibilities. He must work!

SM: Now, it's apparent you believe in the value of education, industry, and a sense of responsibility—all these things. But now, let's say that the BIA and the government in other agencies, has provided the money for the basic possibilities for doing something worthwhile, and then, if the programs are carried out, it could be of real value, of real help to the Indian people. Is there any danger, or what is the situation here as to success in the world as we know it, or the crushing of the Indian culture which some would like to preserve?

EW: I'm going to start with education. I, as a bi-lingual Indian, tackled the education problem. I spoke my Indian language; I associated with
the medicine man, I war-danced, I spoke Indian, I lived as an Indian only in terms of an avocation. Now, I was engrained with this philosophy, with this thinking: that you cannot make your living as an Indian, you know, as a war-dancer, speaking Indian. You must pursue an activity which the dominant society, you know, asks you to be. If you're going to live in a competitive world, then you must go out and get an education. I found as a student, as an Indian student, and as an elementary school teacher, I found that there is no conflict between living in the dominant society and living in the Indian world.

SM: You can do both?

EW: You can do both with ease. Absolutely. You can speak Indian at home and you can go to school, learn the English language, the grammar, you can go out and get an education in college, and if you want to maintain your Indian culture, your language, your arts and crafts, your Indian history, do so. No problem. But you cannot sacrifice this pursuit of an education to make yourself a first-class citizen. By that I mean holding down a responsible position, paying your taxes, and the responsibility of sending your children to school so that they may survive in a society that has very strong demands for its constituents.

SM: We have to face the fact that there is no reverting back to the society that some people talk about, of 300 years ago.

EW: That is wishful thinking, and I'll say this time and again; that we never will see the days of the buffalo; we'll never live in tepees; we'll never take the sweat bath . . . oh, I'll take that back, I still take sweat baths, it's . . . like the sauna.

SM: Yes, very much.
EW: It's still the greatest method of keeping clean.

SM: It's a purifying ritual, isn't it, among Indians?

EW: Right. To be clean if you're going to commune with the Great Spirit—you've got to be clean.

SM: The Finnish communities up in northern Minnesota have their saunas. Sometimes it's said, partly in jest, but good-humored jesting, that when they build a new house they build a sauna first, and then they build the house. With the Plains Indians and the Nez Perce Indians, the sweat bath took on more meaning than just physical cleanliness, didn't it?

EW: Oh yes. It was part of religious ceremonies—purification—because, again, to become a member of a society, a religious society, I mean, you had to deal with the unknown, the Great Spirit, and so forth, so it was a sacred ritual, and purifications through the medium of the sweat house was very, very important. Now what I'd like to say here is—anything I say, and anything that anybody will hear what I have to say—it can change somebody's attitude, you know, to live a different and a beneficial life. This is why I'm making these statements.

SM: This has been your life's work, hasn't it?

EW: This has been my life's work; it's been my life's experience, and I feel that I am qualified by experience and education to make these statements, but I'm not saying that anyone that hears these words ought to swallow them hook, line and sinker. Listen to them, think about it, if they can gain any benefit from them. They have a right to disagree with me, but I would want to say one thing that the Indian world, as we know it, the cultural world, the beliefs, the language... we can live them alongside the dominant society's way of living,
without any friction that might frustrate us or defeat us in attaining certain goals, like education, work experience, jobs, or as far as that goes, marriage.

SM: You proved that too. As you said, your wife is non-Indian.

EW: Is not an Indian. She is Scotch and English and German, but I think in the household she is 75% of the time a better Indian than I am, you know, in that she's aggressive, which the Indians were in the old days. She gives the children the philosophy of being an Indian--how to be proud that you're an Indian, and how to act to prove that you're proud to be an Indian--and these things are very important in child-raising, so that's why I said "Be sure to interview her, because I think, in fact I know, she is a better Indian than I am although she's an Anglo." Now, to close out my interview, Sam, I would like to make one important pitch to the people that listen to what I have to say. As an elementary school teacher I would like to plead with the schools, the parents, the people that are working for the best interests of the Indian people, to view the child, from the time the child is born, as a human resource. They are the Indian's future generations. Do not neglect the training of the child from the time it is crawling, from the time it is in the high chair. The greatest enemy of the Indian people right now is the fact that they have been seen and not heard during the infant years of the individual, because that is where you develop values; you learn; you learn the vocabulary in the high chair, so that when you get into school you know how to read, you know how to write. I think in more of the reservation environments the Indian child is seen and not heard. We must develop the child at the year one, two, three, four, so that he'll be ready to fight the curriculum of the kindergarten, fight the curriculum of the elementary school, junior high school. If not, he's already dead; and certainly engrain in the Indian kids the pre-requisites to go into medical schools; to be doctors and lawyers and other professional people, nurses. We need the background. And we will never,
ever, go back to the days of 1600, 1500, because the world never goes backwards—it spins forward. And I think every person on the face of the earth, to take benefit of what's going on, must get in tune with the world, jump on, and go the way the world is rotating. It never rotates backwards.

SM: The student, the youngster then, must learn to compete in a competitive society, because it's here and we aren't likely to see it go away?

EW: It is here, and who knows what we can expect in the future. But it's here as it is, and we must take advantage of all the opportunities, and not sit back and expect somebody else to do it for us.

SM: Do you feel that there has been any progress lately?

EW: There has been progress absolutely! It's here. Look at the housing. Look at the advancement in education since 1930. In 1930 the Nez Perce people had two or three people that finished college. Now we have 300 to 500 that are attending colleges, which is tremendous advancement. Our housing, the employment opportunities have bettered. The Indian people have automobiles, they have T.V. sets, they have good housing, they are going into the mainstream of American life. You don't notice it because social change is gradual and it is slow, but someone who has been working for the past 35 years in this field sees this gradual change, and it's for the good!