Listening to Indians

EUGENE WILSON, Nez Perce

December 26, 1975

Tempe, 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.

This transcript series was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and by support from St. Louis Community College.
LISTENING TO INDIANS

EUGENE WILSON, Nez Perce
December 26, 1975
Tempe, Arizona
Sam Myers:
Today I'm talking to Mr. Eugene Wilson. We talked to him about a year ago, but he has since had quite a few changes in his life. We want to ask him about those and anything else that he has discovered in this whole world of the Indian people in the country. Gene, I'm glad to meet you again today. I think you're looking very well. Have you relaxed a little since you retired from your HEW job?

Eugene Wilson:
Oh, a little. The job is kinda interesting because it just covers only a specific area in education.

SM: You were working for HEW here in Phoenix, in charge of four states, but now you're up in Idaho?

EW: Yes. I was a tribal affairs officer for the Indian Health Service, which is within Health, Education and Welfare. That was last year.

SM: And then you retired?

EW: Retired September 19, 1975, and I thought I was just gonna, you know, relax and do nothing for a long time, but the state of Idaho education department asked me if I would take a position as the coordinator of Indian education in the state department, the state department of education. That's in Idaho. So technically I cover the entire state, but my emphasis is on the Fort Hall—Shoshone Bannocks and the Duck Valley or Western Shoshone Indian Reservation in Idaho and Nevada, around Owyhee, with the Paiutes and the Shoshones, Western Shoshones.

SM: You work with the Nez Perce too, don't you?

EW: I work with the Nez Perce, I work with the Kootenai out of Bonners Ferry, I work with the Coeur D'Alene out of Plummer and that area.
SM: Duck Valley, that's the one on the northern edge of Nevada and the southern edge of Idaho?

EW: That's right. The reservation straddles the line between Nevada and Idaho.

SM: Those are the Shoshone people, and they were the ones involved in that movie of the Broken Treaty of Battle Mountain. Isn't that the same?

EW: Could very well be. Many of the Western Shoshones are around there, they're scattered in that area there.

SM: Your work now, how is it going?

EW: I started December first and, of course, my work fortunately is not as complex, because I know all the Indian peoples scattered down from Idaho clear down to Nevada. I've worked with them in Indian Health Service so I know them, and since I had worked in education for several years I know the problems that the Indians encounter in education, so hopefully I can get around this, you know, the political football game, and get these funds put into realistic and valuable Indian programs, because the Indian children are having problems in coping with the kindergarten, elementary junior high and high school curriculum, you know.

SM: Why?

EW: Well, number one, Sam, I think that the environmental factor dealing with Indian children is rather difficult. They come from a rural environment, the cultural carryover of Indian parents not knowing the value of education, the value of training their young in the home. This tells upon the Indian child when he or she enters kindergarten,
first grade. They might come in there with a 200 or 300 word vocabulary, when they should have, say maybe 1,000, at ages two and three.

SM: Do very many of them come in speaking only their own native tongue?

EW: Well, a lot of them do. Lot of them just speak primarily the Indian language in the homes, but then there's a smattering of English, because, you know, actually the Indian home now is bi-lingual. But of course, lot of the Indian families still prefer to speak Indian. And then the fact that this deters a little bit their learning the English vocabulary. You know, the English vocabulary, whether it's Indian, black, Mexican or Anglo, the English vocabulary, knowing it, reading it and writing it today is very, very important. You know, you've got to have that English, because you're judged, and you're in competitive life in what you know and how you can write English, how you can speak it.

SM: It's a matter of the practical necessity to communicate.

EW: That's absolutely right.

SM: Well, what other problems that you have seen there are you going to work on now?

EW: Well, I'm working with education and children right now, Indian education. The Indian child does have these problems of lack of classroom orientation, lack of the English language, and so forth and so on, so you need special programs to supplement the regular state-prescribed curriculum course. Therefore you need the funds, but in this case Johnson O'Malley is the basic funding that pays the tuition for Indian children who come from non-taxed lands, and it gives supplemental, remedial training for the children who are behind in their English. And the thing there is money. It seems like the state is
reluctant in putting out its own tax money, but since the federal
government is more or less responsible for Indian education, you find
the Johnson-O'Malley monies and other federal monies fluctuating.
Like this year they cut the Johnson-O'Malley educational funds in
half.

SM: Could you tell us in an over-simplified sentence what the Johnson-
O'Malley Act is?

EW: The Johnson-O'Malley was passed in 1934. You see, in many states
where there's a large Indian population, the Indian children go to
public schools, so the public schools need to run their school dis-
tricts on taxes taken from the lands, you know, that are within the
district. But with lot of Indian children enrollment in these
public schools who live on Indian lands that aren't taxed, it creates
a negative impact on the tax money to run the schools. So therefore,
the federal government, under the Johnson-O'Malley, 1934, and as
amended in 1936, gives this--it's an impact fund--because the impact
of the Indian children flooding these schools coming from non-taxed
land bases, well, the school districts need money to run their educa-
tional programs. So the government, then, through the Johnson-O'Malley
program, has given the school districts these funds to educate the
Indian children. But this is primarily for tuition. Now as time
goes along there are other supplemental funds, different federal
laws, like the Secondary Elementary Education Act, the Indian Educa-
tion Act, and these various titles to these laws that give supple-
mental aid, you know, not only tuition, but also give extra financial
assistance to remedial programs which will help the Indian child. You
know, just paying his tuition is relatively simple, but to retain that
child in school and have him progress academically is also important,
so you need special services, special staff. Consequently it needs
more money. But right now I want to say, Congress and the President--
I think it's criminal that they would allow these funds to be curtailed
here this school year, and cut in half. Just like I think the state of Idaho, under the Johnson-O'Malley, was supposed to get approximately, we'll use round figures, $450,000. This year they cut that right in half, and the state of Idaho got only around $230,000, and this knocked out services. It's very discouraging to the school districts who have to work with Indian children.

SM: And the state doesn't make them up?

EW: The state is very reluctant and hesitant in many cases. They're willing to play with the federal dollar, you know, and say, "Good, we'll help the Indians in education if Uncle Sam pays the bill, but the minute he cuts the money off, we don't get any, we're not gonna do anything." You know, there needs to be attitudes changed in the entire state system and federal school systems.

SM: Do you have some work to do in public relations too then?

EW: Yes, I do public relations with all types of organizations, like the Inter-tribal Policy Board of Idaho, consisting of an Indian organization, federally funded, of all the tribes in Idaho, you know, in Boise. They have programs dealing with manpower training and alcoholism and, hopefully, I can pull in education. Now the state of Idaho's education department also has federally funded programs like Title IV Civil Rights, or Title VII, the bi-lingual educational project. If I can do public relations and coordinate these with Indian education and, you know, Chicano and black, the minority education, we can probably help with bi-lingual funds in educating Indians or helping them alleviate their educational problems.

SM: So right now the problem still exists, and then the funds right now have been reduced from what they were.
EW: They have been reduced, but there is a bill that was introduced by Senator Montoya of New Mexico which would restore these funds in states like New Mexico, Arizona, Idaho and South Dakota where there's a large Indian student population and keep that level of appropriations up in years hereafter. Now I understand that this bill by Senator Montoya was passed by the House, passed by the Senate, had gone to committee, and it was passed at committee and sent back to the House and the Senate and approved by voice vote, then it was kicked to the President for signature, but we got word that the President wouldn't get to it until he got back from his vacation. It's rumored, maybe it isn't rumor, that he's in Vail, Colorado, skiing, you know, but hopefully by the first of the year he will sign this bill so that we can get this money back, and then, of course you know, the wheels of Congress and the President and so forth grind slowly. Hopefully, if he signs it after the first of the year we'll get this money by February 1st so we can re-buff up our programs in the state of Idaho and in the state of Nevada, any state.

SM: Well now, if the funds come through, how do you go about overcoming this problem that the Indian kids encounter? Do you have special training programs, special classes, special teachers?

EW: Right. We have remedial teachers, you know. Remedial teachers, and the Johnson-O'Malley, under a new law, Public Law 638 that amended Johnson-O'Malley, it gives the parental responsibility more support. Public Law 638, which is the Indian self-determination and educational assistance act, they passed it in November, but cripes, they didn't appropriate any money for it, so what good is a law? They passed it without any funds, and I guess they're dragging their feet on appropriating money for it, so again, what Congress legislates now should be supported with immediate and adequate funding because the situation facing the American Indian student and other minority groups in these various state schools or private schools is tragic, and hopefully, this money that was cut in two this school year of '75 and '76, will be restored by Montoya's bill, and we're anticipating
this funding to be restored by at least February, if Congress gets back and the President signs the bill. And there's a possibility that he may not even sign it, and I think that when Congress and the President look very callously at domestic programs like education and health, I think our country's headed for trouble. And, of course, I'm primarily interested in the Indian child, because of the unique situation of the environment being rural and, of course, our reservations are many years behind time in health and in education. The homes aren't well supplied with intelligent parents—many of our Indian parents aren't sophisticated in education to the point so that, when the children bring in their homework in mathematics, English and other subjects, they can't be helped, and this again is tragic because I think that every American middle-class family helps their children develop and adopt professions in early life—what they're going to be, and then prepare for it.

SM: Oftentimes helps without realizing it.

EW: Oh, it helps, because right around the table is where attitudes are formed, whether they're good or bad, whether they're discriminatory, negative, and so forth, but right around the table, when the children are just tiny tots, that's where your attitudes and principles are formed, and future professions are, you know, designated by the child.

SM: So the program is acute right now, more so than it has been because of the lack of funds. Have you noticed any major change in this last year, Gene?

EW: Major change in what?

SM: In the education of Indian children.

EW: Well, you know, in bi-lingual programs or Indian education you need personnel that maybe are native American, or are Chicanos, you know,
people that are sensitive towards the needs of the bi-lingual children. They have had to cut staff because of the money.

SM: Are more people now available and able to help with these remedial programs?

EW: I think yes. I don't say that they're all Indians or all Mexicans. We have very expert, sensitive, non-Indians, you know, Anglos, or as far as that goes, black teachers and Mexican teachers that are specialized in these remedial programs, they're specialists, and they can help our children.

SM: There is then a growing awareness of the problem, a growing appreciation and even a preparation to cope with it, but sometimes, like in this particular case, the funds are lacking.

EW: That's right. You know money talks. Let's face it, money talks, and unless you get the money to make or establish programs in remedial and sensitivity programs, then it's the child that's gonna suffer, when you have this big, political football game going on with finances, you know. We may, the powers of the state may get hurt, somebody may get hurt in the thing, but actually who really gets hurt is the children in these schools, and people don't realize it. People are so calloused in this political game that they don't stop to realize what they're doing to the Indian child, the Mexican child; or as far as that goes, the rural Anglo child can gain from some of these remedial, federal funds.

SM: Also, some of the urban school children come to college without sufficient reading skills.

EW: You see, basically if you're not prepared in the home before you go to kindergarten or first grade, you got a strike or two against you,
and by the time you get into the first grade in elementary and you get going in there and you're pushed through with social promotions, you're ready to be a drop-out in elementary school. And if you stumble on into junior high school, they're gonna get you there. That's why the high drop-out of Indians. If you accidentally get into high school half prepared, not motivated, then you're sure to be gotten there, be a drop-out. But if you stagger on into college un-prepared, then you're almost a dead duck, because I think studies have proven that the formative years of a child's life are, you know, when they're crawling, when they're just little tots, when they're in the high chair. I venture to say that a child in the high chair should have a vocabulary of 750 to 1,000 words, English words, maybe 1,500, so that when they get into kindergarten they're an academic giant, so to speak. They can handle it, and if they got this background they can handle elementary. But when they don't have this training, and with no motivation from home, no image of themselves as one of America's number one citizens, they're pretty well.

SM: Oh, so there's another element there too now. It's not only the fact that they may not have the vocabulary or the preparation or the aid with their homework, but they also feel that they're somehow inferior?

EW: Well, in this respect I blame the curriculum, you know, the historical misinformation, and so forth. When I was going to college, when I was in school, it was "massacre" this and "massacre" that, it was "savage" this and "savages" that, you know, and I used to say to myself, "Gee, that's my grandparent, and that's my mother, and that's my father they're talking about," and if you think this helps create an image that was positive or desirable, you know, you got another guess coming. Because even in college I wanted to crawl into the floor and under the chairs when the professor would talk about the Indians, but I think that, like for example, there should be historical heritage courses taught, not only for the Indians, the Mexicans, but for the Indians,
historical courses that are romantic, truthful and positive, that make an Indian child real proud to say, "Boy, those were my ancestors, and they did contribute something to this country," instead of being a bunch of savages and people that massacred people, even though they did win an honest battle defending their country. Then they felt bad.

SM: Don't you think there has been a lot of change in this respect, though, in the last few years?

EW: You mean change in the curriculum?

SM: Change in the attitude, at least. For example, in my own experience, lots of young people are very much pro-Indian right now.

EW: I think the further we get away from the Indian Wars and the direct contact over land between Indian and the non-Indian, I think the further away we get away from it by years, is gonna be better, because I think that in recent years the public conscience has awakened so that they say, "By golly, maybe the Indian is, through no fault of his, an underprivileged individual." But yet, Sam, when you get right down to where I'm working now, the district where you must spend local taxes to help the Indian, there's still a type of subtle discrimination that goes on, you know, because you might get up and say, "Sure we love our brothers, the Mexicans, the blacks and the Indians, but yet they will strangle the tax money if they can't get federal monies." You know, to kinda stop the flow of services.

SM: Generally, overall, you more or less feel a note of optimism in it all?

EW: Yes, I'm optimistic, because things have changed in the past 20 or 30 years for the benefit of educating the underprivileged, and, hopefully
the Congress and the President will see that these cuts aren't made. Now what really disturbs me, Sam, is this: somewhere along the line Congress writes and says, "We gotta lower the national debt. We gotta cut spending," and then somebody along the line in this political bureaucratic game you got wizards that are cutting here, cutting there, juggling funds, and they juggle the funds or they cut the funds so that it hurts these domestic programs, like students. I think that these bureaucrats that have these formulas, come up with formulas, and have the knife under the table cutting these funds at the expense of human resources like the children, those guys ought to be brought to task. I mean, it's unbelievable what these bureaucrats do by passing the buck and lying, in fact.

SM: Often not facing up to the real needs, but putting the funds in some other place.

EW: Right, or else juggling the funds so that maybe out of, say $50,000,000 appropriated they juggle the funds with their magic sticks, and the next thing you know the money has gotten to these agencies that are educating Indians, maybe only three-fourths of the money gets there. Where is the other? Where do these funds go? Who is shuffling them off or pigeonholing them or something? But I think these things, these birds that do this kind of finagling in bureaucracy ought to be brought to court. You know, they ought to be made to pay for their inequitable distribution of funds. At this point I'm optimistic that we'll get our money back. If we don't, hopefully I'm in a position to make the Indians ask through Congressional correspondence. This is another thing the Indians are gonna have to do, and Chicanos. They have a strong voice as a political entity, if they speak together, if they write letters to their congressional representatives, and you know, ferret out these inequities.

SM: There is more activity in this direction too then, they are getting organized to a greater degree?
EW: Well, yes, but it's slow, it's slow, because it's a kind of a cultural carryover that Indians aren't adept at writing resolutions and getting together politically, to develop a political clout.

SM: Yes, that's hard to do when you don't have great numbers of people, and you don't have great organizations.

EW: Basically, the Indian has never been an expert in organizing. This is probably why he lost his country. If the Indians would have allied themselves together and fought together in terms of, you know, political resistance, armed forces resistance, they might have been able to come up with a better solution to their problems today--like being put on reservations, and so on. They might have had a voice in what was done to them. I think that the Indian people are going to have to realize that they can have political clout if they organize. And speak to their state representatives, speak to the congressional representatives and let them know that the state and the federal government has responsibilities toward the human resources which are the students, and that there was enough appropriation to carry on the educational programs, because you can let your land go to weeds, but you can always plow it up the next year, and, you know, kill the weeds. Now if you leave your students in certain grades at a certain age, and neglect them educationally, they'll never make that recovery. They're gonna be drop-outs, there's gonna be failures and so forth. So, hopefully, the congressional responsibility doesn't lag here just because everybody's afraid of our national spending. We oughta be more rational in where we're gonna cut the money, and if we want to cut it off overseas, let's don't forget that we have domestic programs where the citizens, or little citizens or citizens of the future should benefit from these programs. So anyway, I'm a little bit optimistic. Yet on the other hand, I'm very skeptical of the political shenanigans that go on at all levels of our political system. It's unbelievable. So I'm gonna leave it at that, and, like I
said, I may be a little bit radical in my feeling towards where these funds are being cut and so forth, but on the other hand, I do get hot under the collar when I see subtle discrimination; when I see inequitable distribution of appropriated funds, and where you see bureaucracy constantly with a big knife and their computers, trying to juggle money or discontinue funds in very, very important domestic programs, especially where it hurts the children in the field of education.

SM: Well, I hope some of those people hear what you've had to say.

EW: Well, I think as they become professional workers, teachers, doctors, and other professional workers, they're gonna run into this program with these inequities one of these days, but this exists across the nation, and some places feel the pinch a lot more than some other areas.

SM: You've been seeing the direct results up there in Idaho, haven't you?

EW: Yes. Yes, it's not good, and I've been right on the firing line, where the people see the cuts and, of course, lot of times the people right at the community level can't see how devastating it is to the educational progress of their children, but I can see it as an ex-elementary school teacher. I've been through the mill, and I see it coming again. I see where it's done a lot of good in the past few years, but I see where it's gonna be a detriment in the next, to educational programs of the youth and the elementary school child, and the kindergarten child, unless something is done to make our national leaders aware that fund cuts here are devastating.

SM: Thank you, Gene, for your comments today.