Listening to Indians

HEATHER 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.

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December 26, 1975

Tempe, Arizona

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1978
Sam Myers:
I'm talking to Heather Wilson, a young lady I talked with a year ago, right here, sitting on this same couch in her home in Tempe, Arizona, and since then lots of things have happened. You were going to Dartmouth College then, weren't you?

Heather Wilson:
That's right.

SM: And you went back to school?

HW: No, I haven't been back to school yet since last year, because I went on foreign study this fall, so I haven't been back yet as a sophomore.

SM: Are you going back to Dartmouth again?

HW: Yes, I'll be returning January 2nd. Today is the day after Christmas, so that's about a week from today.

SM: What did you do when you left here last year after I talked with you?

HW: Oh, I came home for Christmas. I went back to school and finished out my year, two more terms at Dartmouth, and then I returned home for the summer.

SM: And you were here all summer?

HW: Well, we went on vacation. We went to a family reunion from my non-Indian side of the family. And then, after that we came back through Idaho, visited relations and straightened out a few things with the BIA about scholarships. It was a real hassle, because right now there's some BIA legislation going through about money, and the BIA wants Dartmouth to pay me, help me, and then they want to
supplement that. But Dartmouth wants the BIA to just give me everything, and so they're fighting it out between them, and there is supposed to be some kind of legislation going through where Dartmouth is supposed to look at me and judge me without BIA assistance, and then assist me, and then everything else that I need after that the BIA would supply. But Dartmouth doesn't look at it that way. What they do now is they assess me without BIA assistance, and then everything else that I need after that the BIA would supply. But Dartmouth doesn't look at it that way. What they do now is they assess me without BIA. They say you can have money. Before I'm even sure I'm gonna get this money they say, "Well, you will get it." So we won't give you any help," and then I have to go to the BIA and say Dartmouth's not giving me any help, so will you help me? It's a real can of worms, because both of them are trying to shove the burden.

SM: And you're caught in the middle?

HW: Yeah. Slightly.

SM: Well, that'll get worked out. But, in the meantime, you had some interesting adventures. You went away to Europe, didn't you?

HW: Oh yes. I went on foreign study this fall. I'm a music major, and I thought Italian would help me to finish out my language requirements. I went on the foreign study program in Florence, Italy, and we did a great deal of travelling.

SM: When did you go over there?

HW: This fall, about three months ago, three or four months ago.

SM: This fall back in September?

HW: Right.
SM: And you've been there ever since?

HW: Yeah, I was there for three months, the whole Dartmouth term, which is ten weeks, because we're on a four-quarter system.

SM: Do you get college credit at Dartmouth for that?

HW: Right. Because we took regular classes, and we did studying and the whole bit.

SM: Studied Italian as well as singing, music?

HW: Oh yes. Grammar. I didn't get to study music. I would have liked that a great deal. I'm gonna have to wait for that until I get back to Dartmouth, 'cause it was basically an art program, as opposed to a music program.

SM: Tell us more about Italy and your experiences there.

HW: Well, we had a fantastic time. The group was really close, and we did a great deal of travelling together.

SM: There were a lot of you?

HW: There were 25 of us.

SM: All from Dartmouth?

HW: Yes, from Dartmouth. And we had one professor with us from Dartmouth. It was really an interesting experience, and also you get to see the ideas of another country. Everybody should go to another country, if only to compare it with what you have, because it is so different, and you just don't realize the things that you have every day that
other people don't have. For instance, clean water, good government, laws that help you, as opposed to restricting you. It's hard to explain, but a lot of people are into drugs and things like that.

SM: There?

HW: No, here. Here in the States, and they think that the drug laws are really tough. This is one of the biggest examples. In Italy, the drug laws are so tough you would never dare, never dare even to think about it. If they even catch you with a little bit of, for instance, marijuana, you don't even have to be smoking it, it's just gotta be connected with you and they'll lock you up. You don't get trial, you don't get all rights that we take for granted, they just never even heard of them over there. You don't get to call your lawyer, it's tough luck. They just throw you in jail, and if you get a trial in a year you may be lucky, and then they sentence you to 20 more. It's very tough. They come down on them very hard.

SM: So, does it work then? Are there very few people over there in drugs?

HW: I would say yeah. I never came in contact with anything like that. I think that if there is such a thing that it is got to be a pretty tight organization, but I doubt it, because the laws are so tough that it's just not worth it. But it's interesting the ideas that people get about things in another country. For instance, people love old American movies. And they see Gary Cooper and the Wyatt Earp shows and the Indian movies. What was really funny to me at first, and sometimes kind of a pain, because you get there and everybody has these preconceived ideas about what you are. If you are Indian, "Oh, you're an Indian!" And right away they think, "Oh, wow, I saw a movie on T.V. last night that tells me all about you," and it's kind of funny, but at times it's really weird. Like I had a bad family situation because, especially the first family, the
woman was trying to get a few extra bucks so she was taking in extra people, and when the college found out they decided to move me, but they did it in such a hurry I got even a worse family. The one that I moved into, the father was a real lunatic. First of all the family just quarreled day and night. They couldn't stay together for more than five minutes without just going off on a rampage about something or other. A bug just crawls across the floor and the whole family just... I don't know, just little things, and they build up into gigantic things. And he had preconceived ideas about Indians, and it's all right to just talk about these things, and I thought as a foreign student trying to learn about other customs it's partly my duty to also tell them about me and tell them... how can you say it, it's a two-way street. You can't just go and say, "O.K., you show me all your customs, you teach me your language, and this." You have to also give them part of your experience, because that's supposed to be why they're taking foreign students in—not for the money, but for the experience of learning about another country.

SM: Exchange of ideas about both cultures.

HW: Sure. O.K. So this guy had just seen this Kirk Douglas movie on T.V. last night. They're funny. They're funny, I got to admit. You see all these Indians talking in Italian, perfect Italian, none of this broken stuff. Dubbed in. And it's none of this, "Me go here, you go," stuff like that. It's not that "how" stuff. It's perfect Italian, and it's very funny. But if gives them funny ideas.

SM: And they accept it?

HW: Well, sometimes they think, "Oh well, it was probably a long time ago, it's probably a little different now," but it's really funny. Like my Italian father, he's a very violent type of person. He yells and screams a lot. I've known him to go into a rampage for two hours,
simply because I refused a piece of fruit at the table. He doesn't yell at me, see, because that would be impolite, or something, I don't know. He's got a weird sense of chivalry, I guess. So he keeps insisting that I take the fruit, and his wife will finally get fed up and say, "Now listen, Gustavo, quit forcing this on her." So he'll turn on her and just explode, and for two hours he was pounding the tables and yelling, and of course, the minute he started she got into it and the whole family. It's like living in a powder keg. So all I could do was go in my room and lock the door and try to study. But it was a little difficult. But anyway he got this idea that all Indians were like one tribe, like saying that the French or Germans were all one people. Like saying that all Europeans were one nationality, so all the tribes in America, they all knew each other, spoke the same language, they all patted each other on the back and helped each other do this and that and the other thing. And I tried to explain to him that that wasn't the case. He had this idea that all Indians shared one basic philosophy, and he tried to explain this philosophy to me that he was sure all the Indians shared--it sounded kind of Catholic, in that you worshipped the one God and you believe in a Messiah and that you're very nature loving. I don't know, but my mother who's a historian, told me that maybe the Indians did love the land and things like that, but one of the reasons that they didn't pollute it or exploit it was because there weren't enough of them. They exploited it as much as they could. I mean, they exploited the land in the ways that they knew how, and if they had had all the technology that we have today, then I'm sure the love of the land probably wouldn't have kept them from the desire of being rich and powerful. But, at the same time, there was, I am sure, a love of nature.

SM: Well, kind of built into the whole world view there was this thing too.

HW: Sure. But, oh, anyway, he had this idea that every Indian had this one philosophy and they all shared it just like they shared their
language and shared everything. They were just like one people. And that's not even true where they are all one people, like, for instance in France, where they speak 900 dialects, or have all the provinces, or the same in Italy.

SM: Now you were talking to him in Italian?

HW: Oh yeah. He doesn't speak English anyway, except a couple of obscene words that he learned from the American soldiers which he used to spring on me every now and then. He was kind of weird. Anyway, we got into this gigantic argument. First it started out, I was patiently explaining to him that Indians were all different, each one had a separate language and there were hundreds of tribes, not one or two--I think he knew about Apaches and maybe Sioux or something because he'd seen them in a movie--he thought that maybe there were like two or three big tribes and that's it. And he didn't believe me. I told him that Indians didn't grow beards, and they didn't, and he didn't believe me, he thought I was making all this up. And he got really violent, and he was yelling and shouting. He told me that I didn't know anything.

SM: He got angry then?

HW: Oh yeah. Well, I should have expected that, but he was yelling at me that I probably was just too young and didn't know anything, and that he knew that he was right and this and that and the other thing. So finally I just gave up, and I didn't talk to him about that any more. He kept trying to bring it up, because he was sure he was right. He was that kind of a person, but the fact remains that in Italy, and I'm sure in most of Europe, they have preconceived ideas, because they watch these old, old movies.

SM: That's where they get it mostly?
HW: Oh I think that's it mostly, but he also had this first grade encyclopedia-type book knowledge, with a little paragraph about Indians in it, and that's as far as it went. It was very general. I mean you have to keep things like that first-grade type stuff general, because it's what they comprehend. But that was his basis for all his big knowledge on Indians.

SM: Were the other people similar to him, or a little bit more understanding?

HW: Well, I was kind of unusual in getting in bad families, because I went to other families and they were just incredible, wonderful people. And when they found out you were Indian, they just thought it was wonderful, and I've met people like that in the States, so that's not weird, and also, as I said once before, people at Dartmouth still believe that Indians live in tepees. And that kind of stuff is so ridiculous you don't know whether to laugh or cry. But in Italy I can understand it more, I think it's a little more excusable. Anyway, so they get these ideas, but most of them were really, really, wonderful people, and if they didn't know something they were willing to listen to you, and they asked questions.

SM: Did you have to learn to speak Italian before you went so that you could cope with this, or did you learn it there pretty much?

HW: Oh, I had taken three terms of Italian at Dartmouth, but over the summer it got kind of lost. But I picked it up right away when I got back there.

SM: Because you had a background.

HW: And I didn't really have any problems. And we were taking grammar classes. We never spoke English in these classes, we always spoke
Italian. We had grammar, we had a literature class in which we always had to explain our ideas in Italian. That got pretty difficult though.

SM: So you really had to know, didn't you?

HW: Yeah. The art classes too. We did have to speak some English, especially in things as abstract as literature. When you're trying to form ideas and explain them to the class, things like that get awfully hard, even in English. Sometimes we didn't even know what we were trying to say in English, and I'm sure you've had that experience where you just couldn't explain what you meant—you had something in the back of your head that you were trying to formulate, but you just couldn't articulate. And so that was even harder, because if you can't say it in English, how in the world are you gonna say it in Italian. But we did. I did feel that I had pretty much mastered the language by the time I left.

SM: Did you feel that you managed to get across to any of the people a more realistic impression of the Indian people over here?

HW: Well, the thing is that Indians are a thing that are very, very far removed from their culture.

SM: They're interested.

HW: Oh yes, they're interested, just like we're interested in dinosaurs or something. Something that's so far removed that you see it in movies, right? You see it in movies, you maybe read about it in books.

SM: Were you the only Indian student there?

HW: Yeah, I was.
SM: So you had to carry the burden of that problem all by yourself.

HW: Well, and I had to carry the burden of explaining it to my fellow students, and that was hard. They were interested, but there's the added burden that Dartmouth--did I explain about the Dartmouth symbol, the Indian?

SM: Yes you did, last time I was here. They discontinued it too, didn't they?

HW: Well, actually it's like beating your head against a brick wall to tell some of these people why you want the symbol discontinued, and I suppose it does seem strange at first. For instance before I went to school--I guess I said this before--I was really proud that they had chosen the Indian for their symbol. I thought, "Wow! I mean, that's really special. I'm gonna go to this school and I'm gonna see the symbol, a place where the Indian's really looked up to or admired." And you usually look up to and admire your symbol. I mean, that's pretty true. And you know something about the symbol, I'm sure, and so I went there and it was a weird thing. It was something totally different from anything I'd ever imagined it would be. For one thing, drinking is a big thing at Dartmouth, as it is at most of the schools in the nation. I'm sure drinking is a big thing. I can't even explain what I mean to say. But, so it fits right in with the Indian there, because the Indian has had an alcoholic problem for years, and it started when the settlers gave them liquor which they couldn't handle, which they had no tolerance for. And so the drunken Indian fits right into that clever white man slipping the rum to the drunken Indian, because in Dartmouth's history what it was was a white man starting a school for Indians. A historian came to speak to us, and he said that originally the charter was for a school for educating young British boys, and then when they went to England to get funds for it, they changed the charter into a school for Indians so that
they could get more money from people, because they were on this big, religious mission to train the heathen into Christian ways.

SM: So it was easier to raise money?

HW: Yeah, easier to raise money, so that was kind of strange. I never knew that, and I'm sure most people never knew that, and most people wouldn't care, I suppose, but it's interesting to know about.

SM: It is part of your reaction to the Indian symbol, the new school back East, and all the rest of it.

HW: Well, the thing is that the Indian symbol at Dartmouth is the stereotype head with war paint and an earring and a Mohawk hairdo, and that's what they know about Indians. I mean it's the same as in Italy. They don't know anything about Indians. They know what they've seen in movies. It's astonishing how close it is to the mentality of the Italian people towards Indians. And for instance, as I said, people have asked me at Dartmouth College, which is supposed to be the big, Ivy-league, which is supposed to be where you are very intelligent, they've asked me, "Do you live in a tepee, or did you live in a tepee?" Or something like that, and that's just absurd. I mean, anybody who has read anything—that's pretty far . . . anyway. And some people come up to me and say, "Oh, wow! I never met a real Indian before." At a school where it's supposed to be the big thing to train Indians or educate Indians!

SM: Founded for Indians.

HW: Yeah. Well, what I found out is that actually only nine Indians or so have ever graduated from Dartmouth, because Dartmouth doesn't really go any further than putting them into the school. Once they're there they're on their own, and maybe that's all right. I have said that to
some people, and they go, "Well, so what? Once you're here you should be on your own, why should they treat you any different?" O.K., fine. They shouldn't treat us any different, but the thing is that all the alums and half the people at Dartmouth believe that we are getting treatment which we aren't getting. For instance, this is the even bigger fairy tale, that I am getting free room, board and tuition, simply because I am an Indian. People ask me that constantly, and when I tell them, they are shocked. Some of them don't believe me.

SM: Tell them what?

HW: Tell them that I pay room, board and tuition, and that Dartmouth College hasn't given me a cent towards my education. And I don't mind not being treated differently, but I object to everybody thinking that I am getting a free ride, and therefore saying, "Well, why should you object to the way we treat the symbol? We are giving you a free ride. We and our parents who went to Dartmouth, we're alums and supporting the school and giving you a free ride, why should you complain?" And people, when I tell them that I pay room, board and tuition there, are absolutely flabbergasted, and I'm almost as amazed that people have these little fairy tales running through their heads.

SM: You did manage to get rid of that symbol?

HW: Yeah, kind of.

SM: Not completely?

HW: Officially, but not unofficially, which doesn't do that much good, because obviously the college can't tell the stores in the town to stop selling sweatshirts with Indians on or ties with Indian heads. This little stereotyped Mohawk head. Or they can't make the people in the frats, when they're boozing it up, stop yelling the big cheer,
Indian cheer, "Wah hoo wah." That amazes me too. "Wah hoo wah." That's supposed to be their fierce Indian cry. I don't know what third-rate move they got that out of, but it's really, it's so juvenile that I can't believe it. Why couldn't they be the tigers ... well, that's Princeton. Something, I mean, anything. Why couldn't they be something and really know something about what they're doing. "Wah hoo wah"--it grates on my ear. They have really obnoxious songs that they sing, like this one called "Eleazer Wheelock." And the lyrics are just unbelievable. It's all about Eleazer Wheelock who was a real figure who started Dartmouth College. And in this song he meets this big chief, called the Chief of the Wah hoo wah's, and the song says, "If he was never a big chief, there was never a squaw who was," and he had thousands of wives. And Eleazer was the faculty, and then it goes on to say that the whole curriculum was 500 barrels of New England rum which, you know, goes into the big drinking thing, what good are those Indians, all they know how to do is get drunk. The big drunken Indian thing. That really grates on my nerves.

SM: They kind of almost glorify it in this song.

HW: Yeah, because to be a big drinker is a big thing in most schools. That's just the today generation, I suppose, to be a big drinker, to be able to hold your liquor, or to just be drunk is supposed to be funny or cool. And you know, I can't fight that, because that's what everybody's doing, but to take the Indian, who's had this terrible alcohol problem all through the years, and set him up as the symbol of the school. I mean, it's just incredible. That's about as cool as--suppose they took the blacks or something, and they set up cannibals as the symbol?

SM: A good point.

HW: I don't know. You could do it with the same amount of honor and
integrity, it seems to me, and intelligence.

SM: Or understanding, maybe we should say?

HW: Yeah. Intelligence just doesn't enter into these things.

SM: Well, the thing is still carrying on a little then, even though officially the symbol has been changed.

HW: A great deal. The alums send in scores and scores of letters demanding the return of the Indian symbol. Demanding! And the thing is, how do we know how long the administration of Dartmouth is gonna hold out? Who's supplying them with all their money but the rich alums? On the other hand, I've been in the Dartmouth glee club and we toured, and we always stayed in the homes of alums. And when I was in these houses of the alums--maybe I just had a lucky set of homes--but they always agreed with me, and they always said that it didn't really matter to them, because, after all, what is the point of the symbol? You have to ask yourself. Something you can look up to. And it could just as well be a bobcat as an Indian, and at least they couldn't, you know, degrade the bobcat.

SM: I don't think a lot of people have even given it a thought, this whole thing.

HW: It's true. The more amazing thing, except....

SM: Like the Cleveland Indians, for example, or the Redskins from Washington.

HW: Well, they don't do it the same way, do they?

SM: No, it's strictly a label or another way of saying the Washington football team.
HW: But they don't go around doing the whole drunken Indian scene, degrading. I don't even mind that because they're proud of it, they're the Indians, and that's fine. But when you get into a situation, into a society, a microcosm, a little Dartmouth Microcosm, where drinking is a big thing, and it has always been a big thing, back to the time of the alums who are supporting the college. And then you have the symbol, which has always been there also, and the two come together into a degrading combination, and people just can't see how that could offend anyone. And they say we're too sensitive, the NA's. They have no school spirit, they don't love the school enough, "Why don't you just shut up and have a little school pride?" And that particularly annoys me because I do love my school, probably a lot more than I should, because I feel sometimes that I'm even too attached to the school. Supposing my funds were cut off? I'd probably feel the pain a lot more than some of them.

SM: You're going back there now too?

HW: Yes. But with this BIA mix-up thing, they're both fighting over who pays the bills, you see.

SM: Now you came home from Italy, and you're going to be here for Christmas, and then you're going back to Dartmouth in January?

HW: Yeah.

SM: If everything works out right.

HW: Well, now I'm going back, and I think I'll have enough money to last. I'm hoping that the BIA will let me have a little more money this year, because otherwise there's gonna be a big bill to pay.

SM: You'll be a sophomore now or junior?
HW: A sophomore.

SM: And you have two more years. Are you going to finish there?

HW: I hope so, yeah.

SM: And graduate with a major in music?

HW: Yeah, I hope so. It's so hard to set these things down, but these are the things I'm working for.

SM: Will it be a music education degree or performing?

HW: No. There's something that's also hard to say. It depends on the amount of talent that I manage to scrape together. I would love to be in the performing arts. That would be a big dream for me, but you just have to face yourself. And after I've worked with my voice for a while, if it works out, it'll work out, but if not, I'll have to fall back maybe on education, or even something else, who knows?

SM: So then you don't quite know what you're going to do after you graduate, but you are going back to Dartmouth to finish?

HW: Oh well, after I graduate I'll go into post graduate. You really need several years before you can be ready.

SM: Do you plan to go there to Dartmouth for your master's?

HW: No, Dartmouth doesn't have a post graduate program. I'll probably come back to ASU. They have a great music department.

SM: Oh good. You'll be near home too.

HW: Yeah.
SM: You like it here?

HW: Oh yeah, I do.

SM: Well, Heather, thanks very much for talking to me again today.

HW: Thank you.