MacDONALD 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
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Sam Myers:
I'm talking with Mac Wilson today in Tempe, Arizona. Mac, is that short for MacAllister?

MacDonald Wilson:
MacDonald.

SM: MacDonald Wilson, an old family name. Are you still going to Mesa Community College?

MW: Right. Right. Just finished up my third semester there.

SM: So this one starting in January will finish your two years there?

MW: Yeah.

SM: Are you going to go on?

MW: Well, I'd like to get into the police academy after this two years.

SM: Here in town?

MW: The Phoenix Police Academy. That trains for all the law enforcement agencies in the valley.

SM: Now you can go into the police academy. You don't have to have a college degree do you?

MW: All you need is a high school diploma.

SM: But you have high school plus two years of college at Mesa Community College?
MW: Right.

SM: You know Mesa Community College I often think of as a kind of a parallel to ours, Florissant Valley. You have an outstanding record in athletics, football?

MW: Oh yeah!

SM: And our school has an outstanding one in soccer. Soccer, in particular, I think. Three out of five national championships.

MW: Is that right?

SM: Yes, and they're about this same size, I think, so I always thought of Mesa as being closest thing to our school, and in this part of the country. You like it there?

MW: Yeah. It's a real nice school, and their football team is very good.

SM: And did you go to high school right here too in Tempe?

MW: Yeah.

SM: Did you always go to school in Tempe?

MW: Well, since my seventh grade, yeah.

SM: And a few other places before that. O.K. Then, at Mesa again, the football team has been outstanding, do you participate in sports?

MW: High school, the first two years in high school I did, and then I sort of switched from sports to music. Yeah, I'm in the choir at Mesa now too. It's just given me a lot of options, you know, to go either way.
SM: Your sister, Heather, is in music too, isn't she?

MW: Right. She's taking it for the major, and a music major is pretty rough.

SM: What kind of music is it? Vocal or instrumental?

MW: Vocal. In the choir.

SM: Mesa High School's beautiful new buildings look like a college campus. They had a program there, an a cappella choir, a week or so ago that was very nice, outstanding.

MW: Yeah, Mesa, they got a real nice auditorium over there. We did a concert there last year, and I don't know if we're gonna get to do one there this year.

SM: What do you sing?

MW: Baritone. We did a concert at Westwood High School once. Well, we have one there every year.

SM: So now then you're going to finish in the spring. You're taking liberal arts courses?

MW: Well, really, I'll still have to pick up a few more credits. The way I look at it, I just picked up things for my major, and I picked up my music classes and a few other classes, but I really haven't taken any of their required courses for graduating just yet, which is what's holding me back. I just didn't feel there was any need to go through and take all the required classes right now. I hadn't planned on graduating yet this year. I just planned on going into the academy, getting through with that.
SM: Now it doesn't make any difference whether you graduate or not, as far as the academy goes?

MW: Right. It doesn't make any bit of difference.

SM: But your college credits will help you in working for promotions and so on, if you get on the police force?

MW: Oh right. See, the way it worked out, I picked up a little bit of inside information, you know, on the academy session comin' up, and some encouragement because a few people I know on the force wanted me to get on, get on while I was young, you know. Tempe has got a growing force right now, and the way they say it, it would be really good for me if I could get on now, because I could always go back and pick them up.

SM: What decided you to be interested in law enforcement?

MW: I've always had sort of an interest in it since high school. But in high school there's really no way you can expand over there. You got all your classes cut and dried, and they send you through. I saw the option when I got to college, started lookin' at different things, and I saw lotta classes for it. Mesa Community's got a real good program, one of the better junior college programs for law enforcement, and NAU of course, up here, is rated in the nation as far as law enforcement.

SM: That's Northern Arizona at Flagstaff?

MW: Right.

SM: Well, did you take the law enforcement curricula then?

MW: Yeah.
SM: So then, when you get through you will be at the same point where a lot of the men who have been in police work for ten or fifteen years go back to get those credits?

MW: Right.

SM: We have a big program like that in our school with several hundred people either aiming at it or already in law enforcement work. Did some of your friends talk you into it, sort of say, "This is a good thing to get into?"

MW: No, my friends really didn't.

SM: Do you have any kind of a goal to achieve by getting into law enforcement?

MW: Well, a career, and just something for myself, a direction to move in, which is something very important.

SM: That's good too. Does law enforcement scare you?

MW: Oh, I can think of scarier things. It's fascinating work. It's interesting.

SM: It should certainly be not dull.

MW: No. Not by any stretch. Maybe the hardest part will be working with people, as far as I'm concerned.

SM: You don't have any mission to accomplish, like correcting some of the inequities of society?

MW: Well, that's true. The way I see it that goes without sayin'. You can sit around and complain about, you know, society, all you want,
but you gotta put your hands right in there and start doin' some-
thin', and you can't say from the beginning, "Well, I'm gonna be a
policeman and I'm gonna clean up the city right now." You gotta get
in, you gotta start workin' within the system to make things happen,
and the only place you can start is at the beginning, so to me, cor-
recting things would be the final goal, the top achievement, but, you
know, you gotta take things one at a time. The first thing is to
prepare yourself and get into it, get to the start.

SM: That's a good healthy attitude, I'd say.

MW: You've got to be realistic about it.

SM: What do you think you're going to feel when someone comes on with this
stuff about the "pigs" and so on?

MW: Well, to me it's sort of a prejudice, and I've seen prejudice. I
suppose at times I am prejudiced, but, you know, it's there and you
have to be able to see through it. You've got to look around it and
see what's really there. Prejudice is a problem, but you can't use
that as a face value judgement of anything. It's maybe a fault, but
you gotta find good things in people and things that are prejudiced,
and you gotta see around them. You can't let them be your sole . . .
it's like lookin' at a cover, you know. You can't judge a book by
its cover; you can judge a person by prejudice a little bit, but you
can't judge completely.

SM: I always marvel at the police officers who let all that sort of slide
off of them. It seems pretty stupid for someone to say things like
that.

MW: It is, and you just gotta learn to live with it and try to understand
it, and make the best of a bad situation.
SM: Police officers are like everybody else, they make mistakes and do things wrong, but, as a group, it seems they put out more in risking their lives for less than certainly most of the people who criticize them.

MW: Right. Well, you know, it's part of the job.

SM: Well, you certainly seem to have a realistic, well-adjusted, balanced attitude, so that you'll probably survive and cope with it very well. You feel you will, don't you?

MW: I think so. I think I can do a job.

SM: Are you going to take any law enforcement courses next semester?

MW: Yeah, I got some more courses to pick up. Not that many more, but a few.

SM: Are you going to try for a job on the force here in Tempe?

MW: That's what I'm gonna try for. It's about the only place I really feel like workin'. I know some of the guys, and I know the area. What I want to go into right now would be the motorcycle division.

SM: Some towns don't have them any more.

MW: They have a very good one. They don't have one in Mesa.

SM: What do you think about motorcycles with loud mufflers? (laughter)

MW: Well...

SM: How is yours?
MW: It's very quiet. I can sneak up on a house and nobody'll even know it. I'll come up to a house and people say, "I didn't even hear you comin'", you know. It's nice, it's a four-cylinder, it's got all the equipment on.

SM: Is it a big one?

MW: Yeah, it's fairly big. I'd like to get a bigger one.

SM: The one you've got, we won't give anybody a plug except it's a Honda. Do you like that model, or do you like Harley Davidson, or something else?

MW: Well, the Hondas are real good. The thing about them is they're built to last. You can run 'em through the mill, you know, up through about the first 20,000, which is about what I've got on mine now, and then they're about due for some work, like mine is.

SM: They're about the most economical way of getting around there is, aren't they?

MW: Oh yeah.

SM: How many miles do you get to a gallon of gas?

MW: In town I can probably get about 40 I'd say. I'm probably gettin' about 30 right now. It's not tuned very well.

SM: I thought maybe it'd be more than that.

MW: Well, it would seem that way, but we get 40, 45 miles in town. On the road you can get about 60. You know, it's a bigger bike, so it's not gonna get that much better mileage. That's a 500, and the
750's are a little bit less mileage, and I used to have a 350. The smaller you get the better mileage you're gonna get. That's what it amounts to.

SM: In Tempe now, they have the motorcycle corps?

MW: A very good one, yeah.

SM: O.K. Is that sort of an elite group that you have to work at to get into, or can you go right into that?

MW: That's the good part about it. It's not the elite. It's for the people who can do it, and for the people who can do it well. If they need you, they'll start you right in on it. Like in Phoenix they've got a waiting list, you know. Take you about five, six years to get on it, on the Phoenix police, and it seems to be the top, you know, the main thing. At Tempe it's not that much in demand, but it's a very important part of Tempe. The thing about it, motorcycles are just... they're assigned to control traffic, that's all. That's all they do, the motorcycle division, and now the way it stands, Tempe policemen hand out more tickets per cop, you know, than any other agency in the state, in comparison to Mesa. Like Mesa policemen are somethin' like 30 to 50 tickets a month, and Tempe are well over 100, 150 like that a month.

SM: Is it ever true that policemen do work on a quota, like people say?

MW: I talk to them a lot. There are no specific quotas. That proves it right there, you know. Mesa policemen, if they hand out one ticket a day, it's no problem. And at Tempe, maybe eight a day.

SM: That's a lot more. So as far as the two towns go, there's no comparable quotas?
MW: What the quota amounts to is how much your superiors want you to put out, really. That's what it amounts to. You know your agency says how much . . . they want you to be on the ball. And the traffic errors are there. They are there, you know, and surely Tempe policemen don't pick up any more . . . I mean they probably only get half of what's goin' on, and the Mesa police, I guess they just sort of ignore 'em and pick 'em up when they happen to run into them. Tempe police are asked to go out and look for 'em. Traffic cops are probably harder in Tempe than any other place in the state.

SM: Tempe sounds like a more strictly-controlled city then.

MW: Just as far as traffic, yeah.

SM: As far as traffic goes. A report of the Civil Rights Commission said that 25% of all alcohol-related arrests of men in Phoenix were Indian men, and 50% of all the alcohol-related arrests of women were Indian women, while the population of Indian people in Phoenix is about 1% of the total. Is there any truth to that?

MW: I've never heard that. I've never run into that. I wouldn't find it hard to believe, but at the same time, I've never heard anything like it. I've never heard anything about it.

SM: Do you think there is any prejudice against conspicuously Indian people in the Phoenix-Tempe area?

MW: I wouldn't be surprised if the problem did exist. If it was only partially true, if it was only half of what they say, I wouldn't be surprised, because your low-income people . . . there's really not much for 'em to do, and alcohol has been always the age-old standby, you know.

SM: It's been a problem.
MW: Sure, it always has, and you get a little bit of money and it's not enough to go out on the town, it's too much to go to Jack in the Box or something, you go out and buy a bottle of liquor or beer especially, you know. Beer is easy to get ahold of. I don't know, people just tend to fall toward it, because there's nothing else to do, or a weakness or, you know, just . . .

SM: That was a staggering statistic--1% of the population causes such a high percentage of the alcohol-related arrests. There's something wrong somewhere.

MW: Well, it's not maybe that they drink more, it's just that they get arrested more. I mean, I'm sure that they don't drink any more than the high school students or anything like that around here, 'cause that is a definite problem too.

SM: How about Mesa? Is there a problem there too?

MW: Oh yeah, it's a problem just about everywhere. Probably less in Mesa because Mesa is more heavily populated with Mormons.

SM: And they're against the use of alcohol?

MW: Right. But I'm sure they don't drink any more in comparison. It's just I think maybe--just speculation--maybe Phoenix police are out on the watch more for Indians, or they're easier to spot, you know.

SM: Maybe you can confirm this then from your own experience, because you're around all the time, you're an active young man in the college over here and the neighboring community. They're all like one big city really, aren't they?

MW: Right.
SM: Someone said that the average Indian who gets drunk is simply more conspicuous because, well, if a successful white businessman wants to get drunk he goes home or goes to a night club or something, and he's out of sight, he's not visible, he's not conspicuous. But, like you were saying, the man who had just barely enough money to get a bottle gets drunk out in the open where people can see him. Is that true?

MW: Oh, it's got to be partially true. There's gotta be a little truth in that. You know, you buy your stuff and you ride around—you buy your beer and then you just cruise around in the car drinkin' it, you know. You leave home so that you can get out and drink, somethin' like that.

SM: We've got to quickly add, of course, that there are lots of Indian people who are more successful than many of the non-Indian people, right?

MW: That's true.

SM: Do you have any feeling that there's prejudice that's going to bother you in law enforcement work?

MW: Oh sure. I'm sure I'm going to run into a lot of problems. More often than not I'm mistaken for a Mexican.

SM: Now that's a minority group, a large one in this area. Do they have problems of discrimination like this in this alcohol-related arrest sort of thing too?

MW: First of all I didn't even realize that the problem existed with Indians.

SM: You had never heard that before?
MW: I'd never run into that before. And I've never heard anything about it about any of the minority groups.

SM: I do admire the police officials, how they can cope with the kind of problems they encounter. There might be a lot of training in this in the process of your education, isn't there?

MW: It comes more with on-the-job training, and you have to be well-prepared for it, and you just have to learn to become immune to it, it just bounces off you.

SM: They warn you thoroughly and repeatedly so that you sort of expect it? If it didn't happen you'd probably be surprised.

MW: Yeah, that would be it. It all boils down to working with the public. I think you get so that you see them more as, you know, he's not black or he's not Mexican, he's not white, he's part of the public, and what's he's saying to you is probably the same thing that anybody else would say, and you just get so much of it, and working with the public you have to learn you just can't let things like that bother you.

SM: Well, it's marvelous that you're able to do it, and I get the impression that you're going to cope with it.

MW: Yeah. It's easier to talk about than it is probably to take it.

SM: Do you plan after you get a job on the police force that you might continue on in school?

MW: Oh yeah.

SM: Would you go to night school?

MW: Yeah. In a lotta my classes there at Mesa there's quite a few Mesa
policemen in there.

SM: Do you get a chance to talk to them quite a bit?

MW: Oh yeah. We have a lot of class discussion.

SM: That helps too, doesn't it?

MW: Yeah, you learn a lot about what's goin' on.

SM: Because you, now aiming at a career, and they already in it, are in the same classes together.

MW: Um hm. Right.

SM: Well, that rarely happens in college. If you're going to an engineering school, you very seldom have any practicing engineers in class with you. But here you do, because these men are coming back to take their credits for promotion, and so on, are they?

MW: Um hm.

SM: You mentioned motorcycle corps, of course. But do you have any other particular area like, for example, drugs or homicide or anything else that you want to aim at?

MW: I really haven't given it much thought, further than getting the job and getting on the motorcycle division.

SM: You like motorcycles, don't you?

MW: It's a real source of pleasure for me, especially down here in Arizona. The weather is really nice all year round, no snow or anything. It's just an ideal place to ride, and I really enjoy it. It's kind of mind
clearing. It's a lot of fun. I have no doubt—talking to these guys I know on the motorcycle corps—it's like anything else, you get tired of it just a little bit, and as much as you enjoy riding, you kind of want something else, so you usually end up going in for a promotion and taking your tests for sergeant, you know, and from there you usually end up over at the academy training session, you know, training the new cadets for a while, and then maybe back to motors for a while. If I could progress far enough, I wouldn't mind over at the academy, you know, training some of the new cadets, and maybe back in for any kind of a detective. It's hard to say. I really don't know that much about any of the higher up positions. I know it's a lot of paperwork. Some of the lieutenants up there, they'll tell you that's the only drawback, say they wish they were patrolmen again, you know. The money's there but the paperwork is tremendous.

SM: Aside from your police work now, have you ever participated in any Indian activities, ceremonies, organizations or anything?

MW: Never participated in any. Well, I've been to powwows, and all those things. Heather's done her share of participating. I never really had the costume or any of the knowledge about any of the dancing really.

SM: Have you ever participated in a dance of any kind?

MW: No.

SM: Some of the people around the country have gotten more and more interested and have found a lot of fun in participating, and it was kind of an uplift. But you haven't got into that too much?

MW: No, I was never really exposed to it. You know, my dad spent most of his time on the road, and never really had time to show me any of the things.
SM: Do you remember your grandmother?

MW: Oh yes, very well.

SM: She was from Idaho, wasn't she?

MW: Right.

SM: She was Indian through and through in her attitude, wasn't she?

MW: She was.

SM: She must have been quite a personality.

MW: Yes, I really enjoyed my grandmother. Sit around and watch her weave the corn husk bags, and she'd tell us stories before we went to bed. Tell us about the old times. She was quite a lady. I really enjoyed her.

SM: Your dad said I could take some pictures of some of those things, what do you call them, cradle boards or dolls that she made for your sisters. What did she make for you?

MW: She made me a nice little vest. It was very nice. Little buckskin vest, design on the back, and I kinda outgrew that, and she used to make me moccasins all the time. She was very good at that. And she made a pair of gloves for my mother's father, and he didn't get much use out of 'em so he handed 'em down to me, and I'm very happy with them.

SM: Now your mother's father, that Francis Haines. He's a well-known author?

MW: Oh yeah.
SM: Do they live out here in this area?

MW: Sun City.

SM: How old is he?

MW: He's 76 right now.

SM: He's non-Indian, but still he's written so much about Indians.

MW: Yes, he's really fascinated with them.

SM: He must be a very interesting man.

MW: He is. He's got quite a lot to tell, he's got some good stories.

SM: So you're all set to finish up at Mesa and aim at that motorcycle corps job with the Tempe police force?

MW: I've got an application in for the reserve right now, police reserve. It's the volunteer thing, and if I don't get accepted for that-- I've passed all my tests up to this point--it's kind of in their hands whether they want me or not. And I suppose if it falls through, then what I'm gonna be shooting for is reservation work, reservation police, Indian police.

SM: Well, I hope it works out well for you, Mac, and thank you.