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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LISTENING TO INDIANS

NO. 132

PENNEY WILSON, Nez Perce
December 26, 1975
Tempe, Arizona
Sam Myers:
    I'm talking with Penney Wilson. Penney, is that your full name?

Penney Wilson:
    No, it's Elizabeth Penney Wilson.

SM: Elizabeth Penney. But it is Penney?

PW: Um hm.

SM: And let's see now. Your dad is Nez Perce and your mother is non-
    Indian. That makes you about half and half?

PW: I'm a fourth.

SM: Have you ever gone to any of the BIA schools or the reservation
    schools?

PW: No, I haven't, but the first couple years I was at a one-room school
    house on the Pima Reservation.

SM: Where is that?

PW: In Sacaton.

SM: Oh, down south of Phoenix here. I was down there, and I talked to a
    couple of people. They have quite an installation of buildings and
    offices and so on for the tribe?

PW: I haven't seen the new ones.

SM: They have a nice new building there, it's an impressive building.
PW: I haven't been inside.

SM: You went to school down there? Do you remember it?

PW: Oh yeah.

SM: How did it go?

PW: It was fun.

SM: No problems?

PW: No.

SM: After that where did you go to school?

PW: Casa Grande.

SM: That's a neighboring town?

PW: Right.

SM: That's the one where that famous ruin is of the Big House of the ancient Hohokam people.

PW: The Casa Grande ruin.

SM: I asked a Pima man if the Pimas and the Hohokam were related. He said of course, they were direct descendants. That was his view, whereas, I guess, the archeologists have been in some doubt. Do you have an opinion?

PW: No.
SM: Well, it was interesting to have theirs because it was spontaneous, and no doubt at all that they were the direct descendants of the ancient Hohokam people. And then they said it Hoo-oo-gum, which was a way of pronouncing it that I hadn't heard before. Well, back to you, though. After Sacaton, where did you go to school next?

PW: South Dakota.

SM: Oh, you moved around.

PW: And then Phoenix.

SM: Any problems in any of those school years?

PW: Just the regular problems.

SM: Like all the kids. What are you doing now after high school?

PW: I'm getting my master's in public health at Berkeley.

SM: Oh, are you going to Berkeley? I was over there a couple of weeks ago. Talked to the head of the Native American studies program, Dr. Wilson.

PW: Oh, I haven't met him.

SM: He's new. He's only been there since last July. Came from Montana. How do you like it at Berkeley?

PW: I don't. I'm tired of school. I think graduate school is pretty boring.

SM: It gets old after a while, year after year. This will be your fifth year now in college?
PW: Sixth. It's a two-year master's program.

SM: What's it going to be in?

PW: In psychology and public health.

SM: Then what are you going to do with it? Do you have any plans yet?

PW: Oh, work with the Indian Health Service and the tribe as a therapist.

SM: Where?

PW: Idaho, on the Nez Perce Reservation, and as a program planner.

SM: You have it all planned, what you're going to do?

PW: Right.

SM: Well, that's good, because most people don't, you know. Have you ever worked there?

PW: Since August, doing my field work, and I'll stay there till the end of March.

SM: Now you're enrolled at the University of California at Berkeley. You're a non-resident there, because you're an Arizona resident.

PW: Right.

SM: So you have to pay non-resident tuition too?

PW: I'm not paying it. There's a grant.
SM: And as a part of your graduate work, you go out and do field work, and you're doing that in Idaho on the Nez Perce Reservation. What have you been doing?

PW: Well, so far I've been counseling some people, and working at the tribal planning office, writing federal proposals.

SM: Is that what a tribal planning office is?

PW: That's what they do pretty much. They plan economic development and social service programs. They're responsible for applying for government federal monies for tribal programs for social service or any kind of economic development.

SM: So when they have a plan in mind they want to accomplish, they write a proposal, they try to get it funded in Washington?

PW: Right.

SM: And you've been helping with that. Is that kind of a frustrating experience, trying to get through the Washington bureaucracy, as it were?

PW: It's not so bad. Not as bad as working with just the tribal government.

SM: Oh, that's more difficult?

PW: Right.

SM: Why?

PW: Because they're slow. They're not that educated, and they resent you for being there.
SM: Do they resent you?

PW: Of course.

SM: Why?

PW: Because you're educated and you know what you're doing, and if you suggest change what you're saying is that they're not doing their jobs right, so in order not to face it, they're not really that competent. Some of them are, some of them aren't. They pick at you.

SM: A man down at the University of Arizona said that this has been one of the main problems, though, that we go out to the reservation and we say their houses aren't adequate so we're going to build them better ones, and that puts them down. That says what they've been doing for a thousand years isn't any good, we're going to do it better for them. And that's a destroying kind of thing. Is that true?

PW: Some people look at it that way--the ones that aren't willing to go ahead and change themselves, the people that would rather just live their lives.

SM: Well, can't they? Do they have to change for health reasons?

PW: Health reasons, financial reasons, just general adjustment reasons, more efficient. Everybody needs some kind of change, should be constantly changing.

SM: But the problem, sometimes, does it get to be a delicate one between them having things the way they want it, and we, who say we know better, telling them they should change to be more like us?

PW: That's essentially what's going on.
SM: So you and I would kind of resent that too, wouldn't we, if someone did that to us?

PW: I don't.

SM: Don't you?

PW: No. Most people do, but I don't see my life that way. I see it as something that should be constantly changing, and I just accept the fact that it's not going to be easy.

SM: You look around and say what can you learn from everyone and anyone, and make progress and improvement from that learning? And they don't always do that?

PW: Most people don't. I mean it's not Indians. I mean any ghetto community you find someone else, if they get an education, they call them, say they're trying to be white, and criticize them.

SM: Have you been accused of that?

PW: Well, everybody is. Most people are.

SM: So you have felt resented at times?

PW: Yeah.

SM: Because you're trying to help, change things. Because changing things, you think, will help?

PW: Right.

SM: Yes. This is a delicate point. This is part of the thing that has crushed a lot of people.
PW: Yeah, the hardest thing that we have is just trying not to give up and leave.

SM: Because it's a temptation?

PW: Sure.

SM: To give up and say, "Well, to heck with it, I'll go and do something easier?"

PW: Not easier, but where you get more appreciation.

SM: A man who has lived next door to the Papagos for the last 20 years, and likes them very much, feels that we have sort of hurt them by saying--not in so many words, but by our actions--that they don't know how to do things, and they're somehow second-rate people because they haven't done better in our way of doing things, you know, having a nice new house with an electric stove, for example, instead of a house with a dirt floor that they built and have been building successfully for hundreds and thousands of years. But you still think they should recognize that we all do change continually?

PW: Oh well, yeah, but I wouldn't necessarily criticize someone because they were living in a tepee or a hogan. That's not what kind of change I'm talking about. I'm talking about being efficient. I mean, older Indians were very efficient about the way they lived, whatever they lived in, and they were constantly changing. They were always changing, that's the Nez Perce way of life--like incorporate new things, like to incorporate tepees. When they started going after the buffalo, to incorporate different ways of hunting buffalo, horses, whatever. That's the old Indian way.

SM: They learned rapidly, didn't they? They adjusted.
PW: Right, because they realized they had to survive. And the problem with Indians today is they've been forced to be children of the federal government for so long that they're not really capable of taking care of themselves. That's the problem.

SM: Why?

PW: Well, I mean, if you don't let somebody look after themselves, and then all of a sudden expect them to look after themselves, they're not going to be capable of it. It's like with most children, I think, in the United States today. Their parents try to think for them, and then when they become 18 they push them off to college, and they can't function. There's no reason why they should be able to. And so you have incompetent people, and it's not really all their fault. It's the fault of the federal government.

SM: And the conditions that they found themselves in for one reason or another, whatever.

PW: Right.

SM: Well, it gets to be a delicate situation then, to try to help, to try to make the change effective, still not to hurt people or make them feel hurt. But you do run into resentment. It's complicated, isn't it?

PW: Yeah, it's complicated.

SM: And your psychology major, you're going to have to use everything you ever learned to manage to do the most good, aren't you?

PW: Um hm.
SM: And you do want to accomplish something good?

PW: Something. Whatever is possible to accomplish.

SM: Do you think you can stick it out?

PW: Yeah, for a while. I mean, I never say that I'll be doing something for a set number of years, because I've moved so much. If it got to the point where I was completely ineffective, I'd leave.

SM: And do something different?

PW: Right.

SM: Do you think you'd try working with Indians somewhere else then?

PW: No, only the Nez Perce. I wouldn't go through this for any other tribe.

SM: You feel loyalties to this group?

PW: I care about the Nez Perce, but I don't... I'm not... I don't feel motivated to go to some other reservation and go through the same struggle for another Indian tribe. I really don't.

SM: How do you like the country up there?

PW: I like it.

SM: Different from here, isn't it?

PW: I never liked Arizona, never.

SM: The heat or the desert?
SM: This is a nice day today. The people up north would think it's wonderful to be here in the sunshine.

PW: I know it. They're all jealous.

SM: And you don't even care.

PW: I don't care.

SM: When are you going back?

PW: The fourth of January.

SM: Whereabouts is it in Idaho?

PW: It's by Lewiston, Idaho.

SM: Is it on the west side?

PW: Yes, Lewiston is right on the Washington border, and then it's about three miles south of Spokane. So it's right up there.

SM: Is that flat country over there? Prairie country?

PW: No. It's hilly on one side of the reservation, on the west side, and more mountainy.

SM: As you go to Spokane then it gets flatter? And then as you go east it gets more mountainous? It gets cold there, doesn't it?

PW: Yeah, it does, but I'm in a little valley, and it doesn't snow too much. Not severe like South Dakota.
SM: Describe a typical day or week, would you? What goes on, what you do?

PW: Well, what I've been doing is different from what I'll be doing when I get back. What I've been doing so far is getting more familiar with the area now. I go and I have a little office in the Indian Health Service unit right there in Lapwai. That's where the Bureau of Indian Affairs is, and the agency and tribal offices. So I go to work and sometimes I see different people, counsel different people. Sometimes I go over to the alcohol treatment unit, see people there, and sometimes I work on program coordination, calling meetings. There's a lot of, well, we pretty much survive on government money. I mean, the tribal council makes up a resolution. They say they want, like an adult basic education program on the reservation. They want a program for youth alcohol counseling. Those are the two big ones I'm working on now. So they give it to the tribal planning office, and I help them and I take it and I start writing the proposal, and I go about the whole process of setting up the grant, writing up the narrative, and working out the budget, talking with people, trying to decide what kind of new programs we need there.

SM: What office do you work in or out of?

PW: I work with the mental health worker in the service unit.

SM: Is it part of HEW?

PW: Right. Indian Health Service, and so my immediate supervisor is the health worker, and then my next supervisor is the service unit director, and then, down in the tribal office, the tribal council has to O.K. everything I do, and right below them the tribal planners. There's an economic development planner, and there's a social service planner, and they have the ultimate responsibility for writing these programs.
SM: Have you encountered any experiences that would help us to understand some of the problems a little better? Like you mentioned you go over and talk to the people in the alcoholic rehabilitation center.

PW: It's a live-in treatment facility. It's very good.

SM: Do people move in, stay there until they feel well?

PW: Right. Thirty days or sixty days. When I go back I'll be a therapist there three days a week.

SM: Is there anything to the old saying that the Indian people in the country didn't have the ability to withstand the effects of alcohol like the Europeans?

PW: That's true that they didn't have it, they weren't used to it, but that's neither here nor there in terms of... of course you know that. I mean, it's neither here nor there in terms of the quality of human-ness or whatever the Indians have.

SM: Biologically they have the same resistance?

PW: Or they would build them up.

SM: They didn't have any resistance to some of the comparatively mild diseases that Europeans had built up immunities to, so they died in great numbers. Would this be a probable corollary in alcoholism? Is it still that way, or would they have the same resistances or tolerances as the average John Smith?

PW: I think it's more psychological now. That's the way I would see it. Because of the tremendous rut people get into living in any small town area, and they're confined to a reservation, and the frustrations
that you experience. It'd be much easier under those circumstances
to let alcohol get out of hand in your life, because you don't have
control of your life in the first place.

SM: The lack of control over personal destiny, and the frustrations of
being unable to do much of anything about it all, leads to the drink-
ing problem more than any biological differences?

PW: Yes. I don't believe that all alcoholics are born alcoholics and
can't help it, because of some physiological problem. I think that
nobody who really has self control would let alcohol take over, if
they really had that self control in the first place. I think that
you have to have the problem before, regardless of the alcohol. I
don't like the whole AA philosophy, saying, "I'm an alcoholic. I
will always be." To me that's just saying, "I'm an alcoholic now,
and I never want to face why. I'm just gonna stop the drinking,
remove the symptom, rather than the cause."

SM: They claim to have had a lot of success.

PW: Oh, they're the most successful, I know, but I disagree with them.
I disagree with the basic philosophy, and also I don't like it because
they're so Christian oriented. They claim not to be, but I think they
really are.

SM: Do you see any kind of solution to it so far as the Indian people are
concerned?

PW: Well, if you had a solid economic base, you could at least try, and
you had healthy people, mentally and physically. That's the solution!
That's the biggest thing I've been realizing since I've been up there,
that economic development is the most important issue right now on
any reservation, and competent administration of money, and careful
planning for social service programs. Without that Indians will cease to exist, they'll just dissolve.

SM: So now somebody says, "Well, but that's materialism." But still, you can't escape that, can you?

PW: Well, everything's materialism. You have to eat.

SM: Right. And that's materialism, isn't it?

PW: Right.

SM: O.K. If we define it that way then, so you can't escape it and so it's going to be there and you've got to learn to cope with it and master it, don't you?

PW: Right.

SM: So you were surprised when you got up there and found what you now think is the real cause of these things, and how it can be corrected.

PW: Well, it's not so much being surprised, it's just that I've never worried that much about the economic aspects. I've thought more in terms of the psychological aspects, and worry about that. I mean I worried about like half-way houses and federal programs and things like that, without really facing how important the money is. I didn't want to think about business administration, economic development, but I've just been reminded that any person involved like with social service programs has to be really worried about where the money's gonna come from, 'cause you won't have any programs unless you've got that money, and that's the basis for everything--some kind of financial support.

SM: You've got to have some kind of economic material base on which to
function. Somebody said that the administrators of this other particular tribe who have been rather successful were always deploiring the poverty of the people on their reservation, but that many of the people on that same reservation didn't see it that way at all, and didn't agree with their leaders, because if they had a home, no matter how humble it was, and they had a flock of sheep and they had the things that they're accustomed to think of as valuable, that they felt quite wealthy enough, whether their income was $500, $1,000, $2,000 a year.

PW: Well then, those individuals probably weren't. I mean, I'm not saying an individual can't function—raise their own food, animals and what not—and be all right. That's fine.

SM: They still fit your definition, though. They have the basic, material things worked out on a different basis.

PW: But in order to maintain the tribal identity, you've got to have a land base. You've got to have money and food. I mean, not every member of each tribe is going to be self sufficient, in terms of growing their own food and raising their own meat. If you want to keep the tribal identity, you gotta have more than that, or else you have to have everybody to be self sufficient.

SM: Would you say we could make some real progress, even overcome this kind of problem that we've been worried about?

PW: You mean the old Indian problem?

SM: The problem, yes, the particular ones they have, to make things fair and equal.

PW: Well, things have never been fair and equal in America.
SM: Nor anywhere else.

PW: I mean, basically, the Indian problem would be solved if each tribe had a good, financial base and healthy people, mentally and physically, like I said before. But that won't happen, really, until America is healthy, and America is very sick. I mean there's never been equality in this country, and that's what people won't face. There's no concept of everybody having an equal share. There always has to be somebody on the bottom. I think that's how our government is set up. What I mean is like sometimes it's the white people that can get into school, then it's the blacks and the white people are on the bottom, the lower middle class whites. No concept of equality. People think that somebody has to be in good favor and somebody has to be on the bottom at any given time.

SM: Do you really think so?

PW: That's how it works.

SM: But I wonder, a lot of people would be surprised to have to admit that though, wouldn't they?

PW: That's the problem. People don't want to admit anything, I mean really. And you can't solve the Indian problem unless you solve America's problem, and I think what's gonna happen is just that eventually America's gonna be destroyed by the Third World countries on this planet, because we're not gonna give in.

SM: The Third World countries. What would that include in your definition?

PW: Well, the African countries, South America, Red China, Middle East, all these countries.

SM: Where would the American Indian fit in?
PW: That's a good question. I don't know.

SM: Some of them would fit in with the Third World idea, and some would not?

PW: Well, it's hard to say what's gonna happen like 15 years from now, but the way I see it is like Americans are just gonna keep pushing and pushing to maintain their level of economic progression, and all the other countries of the world are just gonna keep getting more and more powerful and pushing away, and I don't know what kind of war or whatever there's gonna be, but you have to look at the whole country when you look at Indian problems.

SM: Are we at the kind of point where somebody, something, all of us, have got to come to some kind of conclusions where we do something differently?

PW: I don't know who that's gonna be.

SM: Have you ever thought about how you would solve the problem? Are there any answers?

PW: Well, the answers are for people to think of each other. I mean, the old simple things that you used to say in Sunday School, all that stuff, that's the solution, I think. All those cliches.

SM: How are we going to get it to happen though?

PW: It won't. I mean, at this point.

SM: Toynbee said that every civilization meets its challenge. Maybe this is ours, and you think we won't face up to it successfully?
PW: We never have tried, I don't think. Really tried. Really tried.

SM: And you don't have much hope that we will?

PW: I can't imagine at this point. I don't understand now why people, the politicians in Washington, aren't just completely terrified at what's gonna happen to this country. Why they aren't rushing over to talk to Chairman Mao and begging him to be friends. I mean, it's just ridiculous. People just have no conception of what's really going on in the world.

SM: It's like people buying a great, big, new car when we don't know how many months it's going to be that we're going to have the supply of fuel to run it.

PW: People don't face things unless they absolutely have to.

SM: So you have an idea how it could be, but it just isn't going to turn out that way because it takes a little bit too much idealism? Practical idealism?

PW: Self sacrifice, whatever. It's just too late.

SM: One of the Indian leaders said it's a return to tribalism that we need--people would help each other more. Do you think that would work?

PW: Yes. Seeing that all the other people that exist are on an equal level with you. Realizing that if you have something and they don't, something is wrong, something's very wrong. And I don't know, I can kinda see, just working with the tribal government, you have a hard time remembering that there's really tribal members out there. I could imagine if you were in politics in Washington, that you'd really get just caught up and involved in just the politics.
SM: Potomac fever they call it.

PW: Yeah. I can understand how it works, I really can.

SM: It's a little depressing to think of it that way, isn't it?

PW: It's depressing, but life's depressing, I mean, generally speaking.

SM: You're not very optimistic?

PW: I am optimistic.

SM: Are you?

PW: Of course. I'm still alive. I'm not just completely depressive about the whole thing. I really believe that there's some kind of enlightened state that human beings are capable of attaining.

SM: Penney, our tape is running out. Thank you for your time today.