Listening to Indians

BAXTER YORK, Choctaw

March 13, 1975

Pearl River Community, Mississippi

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, 63138.

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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NO. 7

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Glen Rock, New Jersey

Microfilming Corporation of America

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Sam Myers:

We're talking today with Mr. Baxter York, a Choctaw Indian, at the Pearl River Community near Philadelphia, Mississippi. Mr. York, you were once with the BIA?

Baxter York:

Yes sir.

SM: For a long time?

BY: Long time. I was ... oh, I went off to school in '23. I came back '32, and I took m'mother's place on temporary tribal council at that time. That were on temporary.

SM: So you served on the tribal council too?

BY: Yeah. That is, temporary. In five years I went and he'ped organize a Mississippi band of Choctaw Indians. That's the tribe now.

SM: Are all the seven towns in the one tribe?

BY: Yeah.

SM: The Mississippi band of the Choctaw, as distinguished from the Oklahoma band. Is that right?

BY: Remnant from the Oklahoma nation.

SM: A lot of people thought all the Choctaws went west, but you know better than that.

BY: Yeah. I'll tell you 'bout the present Choctaws we have in Mississippi. The way it was when the nation moved to Oklahoma, those want to remain in Mississippi was about 5,000 Choctaws. Of course there was pressure
on 'em, so they begin to scatter. Some of 'em run and hide; some of 'em scattered about, like a small group moved to Louisiana, some of 'em to Alabama, some to Texas.

SM: They were all supposed to be moved to Oklahoma, but the ones here sort of hid out until the pressure was off?

BY: Yes sir. Of course there was provision made in the treaty . . . it's in the Fourteenth Article of the United States Constitution, and those that want to remain could receive 640 acres of land, and where it was to be--Arkansas, Louisiana, Alabama, and so on. Although those ones that filed application, somehow or other an agent was sent down here to Meridian, or tryin' to neglect takin' applications, and so they went ahead and took some of the mixed breed. That's all. Of course they took a few of the purebloods--it worked out that way where he took most of the mixed breed, and didn't want the purebloods. So that's how come the 143 families out of 5,000 received. He took the application all right, but then the pressure was on him too, and he wouldn't write. So he began the alcoholic life; he stayed drunk most of the time; finally he tore up the application and threw it away. And according to treaty, why, he broke the treaty, and he was working for the government, so that falls on everybody, government and all. Well, ever since then they fell in the hands of the landlord--those that live 'round here--and they work under the landlord of a kind of a slavery practice, but not exactly slavery practice.

SM: Not really slaves technically, but virtually, by reason of economics?

BY: Yeah, right. They'll find you a place to live--shotgun house--and you do cheap labor, you might say. O.K., from 1900 on to 1918 government make like the Choctaws with the state. Well, they didn't have
nobody to look up to for that many years. 'Course during the war, World War I. . . .

SM: Do you remember that?

BY: Yes.

SM: May I interrupt long enough to ask when you were born?

BY: Sixty-eight years old. I imagine 1907. And they got our boys in, why then the elderly ones got together saying we lost everything, we ain't got nothin', and I don't think our boys should go because we haven't got nothin' to fight for. So Governor Bilbo, Mississippi, he was governor at that time, so the elderly got together and appoint one to go to Jackson and to report to him. So when they did, why then he, too, went to Washington with it and report that report. So then Washington office send Judge Reeves by name from Washington. Come over here and look over the place and see if that story were true. So he came over and find that it was true. So he report back sayin' it was true 'bout the Choctaws here. Then the government went ahead and sent a man by the name of Dr. McKinley to set up a agency here to begin to he'p the Choctaws. Why then, from the landlord's hands changed to government's hands then, and they say you're deep in pov­erty so if you he'p yourself, why we're goin' to try to help you get out of the poverty. 'Course there was some land left from the 143 families that. . . . They made temporary deeds in Jackson, Mississippi. Never did go to Washington with it. Made temporary deeds here, and send it to each other, and some of the whites would build homes and towns. Then Superintendent McKinley tried to take over the Indian land and put it into reservations, but it didn't happen that way. Those people that made the improvements hold on against the superintendent and, well, he report in sayin', "It ain't that kind of situation." The Congress then say that you leave them
alone, and sooner or later the government will make settlement with the Choctaws.

SM: Did they finally get around to make a settlement?

BY: No, no, not yet.

SM: It still hasn't been really clarified?

BY: No. Well, then, he quit tryin' to take over the land, so he asked for appropriation to buy land, and they gave it to him--a small one--I forgot the name of that loan.

SM: When was this?

BY: That was back in 1918.

SM: 1918 when the loan application was made?

BY: Yeah. An'way, it's supposed to be paid back in 20 years--that kind of loan it was. So he begin to use that loan money to buy wagon, mules, food and feed for the Choctaws who move in this new home they call it, and set them up with about 40 acres apiece, but not all the Choctaws--just very few. Then they begin to start a small school, a seven school, build a small hospital . . . that's the way he start in. They begin to add some land, and begin to make improvement on the school.

SM: Do you mean the Choctaw people were doing this?

BY: Well, with the he'p of the government.

SM: The government was helping add more land and improve the schools?

BY: Yes. So it rocked on, and finally Choctaws begin to ask for high school.
SM: Excuse me, there is a young lady here who has a question.

Paula Henderson:
I'm Paula Henderson. I'm an American Field Services Exchange student from England, and my question is, when did they begin to ask for high school?

BY: In the first beginning they begin to ask for high school, but there was some red tape to it, I guess; said it wasn't enough student or somethin' that they wouldn't qualify for high school.

SM: While we're at it, we have another young student here.

PH: He's got laryngitis.

SM: He's got a bad throat today, but it's Johnny Osceola, and he's a Seminole from Florida going to school here at Pearl River.

BY: Finally, that's 1965, they went ahead and establish a high school here.

SM: Not until 1965?

BY: 1965. In the meantime--startin' from 1918--well, we had a chance to go to school somewhere else, like state of Oklahoma, Kansas, and so on. I happened to a went to school in Oklahoma.

SM: What school did you go to there?

BY: I went to boarding school called Chilocco, Oklahoma.

SM: Chilocco? Is that close to Bacone?

BY: No.
SM: Did you go to Haskell also?

BY: No, I didn't go to Haskell. Of course I visited Bacone and Haskell both.

SM: So you know the places.

BY: Took part in athletics. Played, of course, not much football, but I played quite a bit baseball and basketball.

SM: Did you know Jim Thorpe?

BY: Why it happened that I played under him.

SM: You played under his coaching?

BY: Coaching, managing.

SM: He was more of a manager of your team? Jim Thorpe, the greatest athlete in the world.

BY: Yeah, that's what I been told time and again. And he got to be pretty good friend. We walked together, ate together, and he tell me his story 'bout his life.

SM: Had he been to Sweden already then?

BY: Yes.

SM: Did he tell you about that?

BY: Yeah.
SM: How did he feel about that?

BY: Well, he feel like the people didn't treat him right.

SM: Well that's an understatement. You know his story, don't you? He practically single-handedly won the Olympics in Sweden, and then they took his medals away later.

BY: Well, way he told me that he was playin' baseball, semi-pro for some time in Pennsylvania, I think it was, and they gave him nine dollars to sleep and eat with.

SM: Expense money?

BY: Yeah. That's what penalized 'im.

SM: And they called him a pro.

BY: Yeah.

SM: And other countries practically subsidize their players completely. Did you know his daughter, Grace, by any chance?

BY: I know Gail and Shirley. Grace must've been pretty small, 'cause where I went to school those girls went there too.

SM: She's in Washington, D.C., now, studying law.

BY: And of course, he was managing the ball team by the name of Oklahoma Indians.

SM: A football team?
BY: No, baseball team. And when I'd gone in with 'im, why it was just like spring training in big league. You go into training, and if you make the team, why then you join in with 'em and go along with 'em, so that's what I done. Was playing at Tulsa, Oklahoma, and he called me and wanted to know if I wanted to try out with him, and the superintendent that I worked for said, "You go and try out. If you didn't make it, why you come back," cause I was playing with that company and workin' with them. So I took off and had spring training with Thorpe and his owner what's kind of an oil millionaire, owned the baseball team.

SM: And Jim Thorpe was the manager of it?

BY: Yeah. And it was during depression, so I had time to get out there and try out with 'em, and made the team and begin to travel with 'em all over—not all over but most of the country in the United States, and I think we end up in Portland, Maine, at end of the season, but just one year, that's all I played with 'im.

SM: Well now, as long as we're speaking of athletics -- on the corner shelf over there in your room--I see, oh, one, two . . . fourteen awards for athletics. Basketball, isn't this basketball?

BY: Yeah. Basketball, baseball.

SM: And some others. Whose are those?

BY: Those are my kids.

SM: Your kids won all those?

BY: This kid that went by today—he finished high school here; he made "A" grade always.
SM: He played sports too?

BY: Yeah. Then he went to East Central, the two-year college here, Decatur, and he made "A" grade always. And one of his trophies was he was pitchin' for Decatur Junior College.

SM: Where is he now?

BY: He's one of the director here--bi-lingual.

SM: Oh, he's the director here of the bi-lingual program of the school at Pearl River? It is nice to have him around.

BY: Yeah. Well, the others take part in the local activities that they have around the athletic program--recreation program they call it that they have--basketball games, and sometimes they put on a big tournament where several teams enter--that kind where they win some trophies, and they set it up there.

SM: I notice on the wall next to the trophies there's a drum. Can you explain that to us?

BY: Choctaw drums are smaller than that one.

SM: This is not a Choctaw drum?

BY: No, it's one that they use for . . . several sit around the drum and beat the drum and sing what they call "49'ers." And it was used for that purpose.

SM: What does the term "49'ers" come from?

BY: From the tribes everywhere in United States.
SM: Forty-nine tribes? So this drum then was supposed to be usable by all of them or any of them?

BY: It's not a tribe. It's used and they call "49'er." Just any time, get together they call powwow, why then they'll use that drum in order sing, and some of 'em will dance war dance and yell like that. That's what it's for.

SM: That's a pretty old one, it looks like.

BY: Well, it's been used quite a bit.

SM: And is this a bustle back here?

BY: Yeah.

SM: Part of a costume--a dance costume?

BY: Dance costume. We have a little boy here, he's my grandson, and they started making bustle for him, and they hadn't finished it, hung it up there.

SM: What's he going to do to finish it? It looks very nice now.

BY: Well, you got to have headgear and the rest of the costume.

SM: What kind of feathers are those?

BY: These are guineas.

SM: Guinea hen feathers. And then the smaller ones in the center, they look softer.

BY: They buy them from the stores. I don't know what kind they are.
SM: And they fasten them in that circular formation and wear them on their back.

BY: Yeah.

SM: I've got a friend who has a little four-year-old boy who is a gourd dancer--Chippewa--and he wears a bustle like that.

BY: Yes. The main thing is learn how to dance a certain dance that they have, and when they have a big one, why then you participate in it, maybe you win a contest, and you don't have to be Indian to do that. Well, get back on the Choctaws that remained. Now, as I say, in 1918 the government came back to help the Choctaws. Well, they began to add on to it, finally they occupy about 18,000 acres of land--they call it reservation land--but then it's checkerboard--some individual holders, and we have about 315 acres up in Bogue Homa they call it. That's a little community.

SM: Near Sandersville?

BY: Sandersville. Somehow or 'nother, oil company had leased it, but then they wouldn't drill. All the way around they drilled for oil and find oil, but somehow or other they wouldn't drill there.

SM: On the Bogue Homa land?

BY: Yeah, right. So I don't know why they wouldn't drill--lot of the Choctaws say it's there, but they wouldn't drill, but I don't know.

SM: Well maybe they'll get to it soon.

BY: Well, the other places, this one here they call Pearl River, the largest, Bogue Chitto, another community, is the largest, and Conehatta. We have three large communities, and the rest of it is like,
well, Standing Pine, Red Water—they call that Carthage and Tucker over here, a small community.

SM: There are seven altogether, aren't there? How are things going for the Choctaw people now?

BY: Yeah. Well, I think we're movin' right along, of course, slow. 'Course, deep in poverty. I imagine you might say they build a ladder and they begin to climb up—a little over half way mebbe, they didn't get out of it, the poverty; actually haven't come out of the poverty yet.

SM: What do most of the Indians do for a living here?

BY: Most of them begin to work in the factories now. They didn't have opportunity to work with them. Factories begin to come into this country, and now they begin to go work in the factories. Some of 'em are farming, some of 'em woodwork, like pulp wood; like any other nationality, they work at everything. 'Course those that are not able, they take part in welfare, like any other nationality.

SM: Well, do you think there's been any progress made in the last 10 or 20 years?

BY: Well quite a bit, but not like it ought to be.

SM: They still have a ways to go?

BY: Right. Reason for that, it was the people—they left . . . where they lived. Segregation was pretty strong around where . . . you cain't hardly make a go of it until you git situated anyway, where you git ahold of it and git goin'.
SM: What more can you add that will help our people understand the whole situation about the Choctaws?

BY: Well, one addition I like to put in because it happened recently. My understanding 'bout the Choctaw Indians and the treaties. And the treaty's supposed to stand up, because the Choctaws themselves didn't make it—the government won . . . made it and everything, even the land that they received, provision called for, supposed to be non-taxable. And my understandin' was the Indians—not only Choctaws, but Indians all over the United States—is supposed to be non-taxable people. But right recently they tried to organize employment organization here to build homes for the Choctaws—they call it Choctaw Development Organization, I think. That's the one that they start in to build homes, and recently state of Mississippi tryin' to put a sales tax on what they buy. And furthermore, they said there was no Choctaw here, that there was no tribe here. My understanding was back in '45 when we all were organizing under the Reorganization Act, that happened in 1934.

SM: Yes, the act was passed then.

BY: Yeah.

SM: And you began to participate in it in 1945.

BY: Right. We were organized in 1945. The oil company come in here and leased some of our land, and there was $40,000 involved. I was a temporary member of the council at that time, so, since you weren't organized, you were considered individual, who's gonna receive this money? Well, first at hand I didn't know how to answer that. But it happened that m'brother was BIA man from Oklahoma. He came here and visit. Well, we talked about it, and he said the tribes over there were organized, and they put their money in the tribal treasury,
and it looked like they're doin' pretty good, so why don't you propose that? So I went ahead and proposed that. Well, it seemed like the others went along with it, so we went ahead and organized. That's when I know what Judge Reeves told me, because he's the one that told me that 1916 he came over here and looked at the place, and the state would stake out what's true. So when he went back, why they sent the agency down here.

SM: In 1945, then, these communities were recognized as organized tribes. Is it all one tribe or seven different tribes?

BY: One tribe.

SM: With seven different locations?

BY: Yeah. They were remnant from the one nation at one time, but the government, accordin' to treaty, divide them up, so many of 'em went to Oklahoma, some of 'em went to Texas, Louisiana, everywhere else.

SM: Theoretically there weren't supposed to have been any Choctaws left here, but there were, and so finally then, in 1945, the government recognized this fact as a state of existence?

BY: Yeah. That's what I come to now. That when we organized, I understood that Congress recognized the organization and so they organized--the President ordered the Executive Order--when they organized. I don't think the state of Mississippi has the right to say that there's no Choctaws here, no tribe, they should pay tax just like any other citizen in Mississippi. Although I know why he said that; he took it that Choctaws received that 640 acres at the time that they supposed to receive; then they should become citizen of the state, and six month after they received. But none of 'em received; that why the treaty has been broken right there. I don't know how you go at
it in order to make that up. And that's what he followed—thinking that the Choctaws had received, and become citizen of state where they could pay tax just like any other citizen in the state.

SM: Do you have any figures in mind about the average annual income of the Choctaw people compared to the rest of the state?

BY: Well, majority of Choctaws are not making over $300 to about $1,000 a year. A group among the Choctaws now has climb up to twelve, fifteen, I think the chairman himself making $25,000 a year.

SM: That's not too bad. Is he paid that by the tribe or by the government?

BY: Government.

SM: Now I'd like to ask these two young people a question or two. We have Paula Henderson here from England. You're an exchange student going to school here at the Pearl River Community. How did that come about, Paula?

PH: Well, I applied through American Field Services to spend eight months in America, and I ended up here. They didn't ask me where I wanted to go, just gave me an interview, and I filled in lots of pieces of paper, and I thought I would end up in the northeastern states.

SM: Northeastern, and here you are in the southern states.

PH: And I've got a family of three Baptist missionaries offered to have me, and I got placed here, in the end. I work as part-time teacher's aide as well.

SM: So you work as a teacher's aide and as a student at the high school. What kind of an experience would you say it is?
PH: It's fantastic, it really is. Completely different. But as well as that, the non-Indian way of life down here is very different to back home, very different. You know the Southern Baptist thing--how it seems to affect everybody's life--I don't know, it's just different, very, very different. Both ways of life are very, very different.

SM: Have you noticed that, Mr. York? I saw you nodding your head in agreement, that it makes a difference.

BY: Well, the reason why I'm that way was on the background of the thing. When you were blocked out from education by dominant group--you haven't had a chance to go to school; you haven't had a chance to participate in town; even in law the state didn't give you no protection ... why you would too, you'd agree.

SM: You had something like that in mind, plus other characteristics as well?

PH: It's very different.

SM: Very different than England, and very different than the New England or northeastern states that you thought of going to. Then there's Johnny over here. Johnny Osceola. Named after the famous Seminole chief? Are you part of his same family?

Johnny Osceola:
People down here say that.

SM: He's a very famous man. How did you happen to come to this school?

JO: Well, I didn't like public school. Down there they don't have any Indian schools.

SM: No Indian schools in Florida so you came over here?
JO: I used to go to an Oklahoma school in 1968 and 1969.

SM: Mr. York went to Oklahoma too for a while.

JO: I went to Seneca-Wyndotte, Oklahoma.

SM: Was that in Wyndotte, Oklahoma?

JO: It was close to Wyndotte.

SM: That's the name of an Indian tribe too, isn't it?

JO: I think so. It's a little town in Oklahoma.

SM: Then now you're in school here and the reason why you're here today is that you have an oral history project that you're carrying out yourself at your school, and so you had talked to Mr. York before, and you're back talking to him again, and finishing the project as it were so that you can get the wisdom of his experiences on tape too.

PH: We put it in the school magazine.

SM: Transcribe it all then? Mine will stay on tape, so far as I know. We have a listening library where students charge out the tapes and listen to them, and we use them in classrooms too. What else can you think of to wind our interview up, Mr. York?

BY: Well, I'm gonna try to go over... There were nine treaties, but the most important one, I say, would be the 1820 Treaty, which cut off Mississippi land west of Mississippi in order to trade for Oklahoma land, and that's when the Choctaws begin to move to Oklahoma. The next one is Dancin' Rabbit Treaty.

SM: When was that?
BY: That was 1830. That's when government didn't have no land to trade. But you might say they just took over by force or tricky ways of gettin' land. That's when they give away all their land they had, and that's where that Fourteenth Article come in, that provision was made where they could get 640 acres, just like they would in Oklahoma, and live in Mississippi--those who want to remain--and that's what they didn't get. And that's where the situation lies. All right, they begin to move the Choctaws away then, and it was pretty bad. That's why they call their removal Tears Trail, Trail of Tears. I read some of the stories where some people moved in a boat, some of 'em ride horses, some of 'em walk, sometimes without any clothes, and a lot of Choctaws didn't get to destination and so on, and lot of 'em died.

SM: That was a pretty bad time.

BY: So I say that, even though these Choctaws here today has came long ways without anything--without land or nothin'--they must be sumpin' behind this that people don't realize too much.

SM: Well, maybe we can help to bring some of these things you said to the attention of more people.

BY: So all along, it's been many years now--150 years or more--why they come through their rough treatment, I'd say, that any human being could receive, but at the same time, seems like it don't affect them any.

SM: They're still getting along, thriving and increasing?

BY: Right.

SM: Now do you have many more Choctaws here now than were here in the 1830's?
BY: Well no, we only have about 4,000 on the roll now.

SM: But there were only about 500 left after the removal, weren't there?

BY: No, there was about 5,000.

SM: Oh, I understood they all went west except about 500.

BY: No. The pressure got so hard on 'em till they scattered, not only remain in Mississippi, but remain in Louisiana, some of 'em remain in Texas, Arkansas, Alabama.

SM: I see. So all of those total around 5,000 then.

BY: There's one thing I wanted to say. There's got to be a leader that knows what their needs are, and they got to lead the Choctaw Tribe here the way the tribe wanted, but if they take the other way and follow the tricky ones, they won't accomplish anything.

SM: It won't work. Well then, I guess we'll just end by thanking you very much for your time and for your help, and we hope that things can get better.

BY: I hope so.

SM: They have been getting a little better lately, you said?

BY: Yeah, it's improving all the time.

SM: That's good. Thanks very much, and we hope we have a chance to talk with you again some time.