

## **Preserving and promoting the lives of Native Americans through oral histories**

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper explores the creation and preservation of the Listening to Indians Collection at the David L. Underwood Library, St. Louis Community College – Florissant Valley. The collection is a series of oral interviews from the 1970s with Native Americans.*

*Professor Samuel L. Myers conducted a series of oral interviews with leaders from Native American nations in 1975 as part of his sabbatical research. His goal was to provide Native Americans the opportunity to express their ideas and opinions to the students not only in his classroom, but people of the United States. The resulting interviews were preserved on cassette tapes and eventually transcribed.*

*The significance of the 144 interviews cannot be underestimated. They provide a glimpse into the lives of Native Americans in the 1970s. The interviewees discussed their lives on the reservations, the people's relationship with the USA Federal Government and the hopes and frustrations shared by their youth. Several of the interviewees rose to national prominence working with the federal government in efforts to preserve their heritage or improve on the lives of Native Americans.*

*The paper will discuss the effort to preserve and promote this important collection. The collection had sat dormant for more than thirty five years without any effort of arrangement or preservation. The collection is not well known outside of the College but has a national significance. Currently several librarians, students and history professors at St Louis Community College- Florissant Valley have taken an interest in preserving and marketing the collection. Librarians have begun converting the cassette tapes for digital preservation and scanning the hundreds of pages of transcripts. We share the original goal of Professor Myers in bringing a greater understanding of our Indigenous People to our nation and the world.*

**Keywords:** Native Americans, Oral Histories.

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## Introduction

The 1970s were a pivotal time in the lives of Native Americans. The United States (U.S.) as a whole was experiencing a questioning of its civil liberties, its government and its future as a nation. Native Americans were no different as they questioned their lives in the midst of the social and political upheavals of the decade. Sam Myers, M.A., professor of history at St. Louis Community College-Florissant Valley, set out in the autumn of 1975 on a journey to document the lives of the Native Americans with a semester-long sabbatical. His objective was to question both Native American leaders and other U.S. citizens on their lives and their expectations for the future. As a professor of history, his goal was to make these interviews available for the students of the college and for the generations to follow. Today we can view the interviews as a document of historical customs and traditions, as well as a record of Native Americans' expectations in the late 20th century. This paper will discuss the creation of the *Listening to Indians* collection and the David L. Underwood Library's efforts in preserving and promoting the collection.

Myers taught history at St. Louis Community College-Florissant Valley. Myers submitted his sabbatical proposal to the college administration in Oct. 1974 in the hopes of "interviewing Indians throughout much of the United States to obtain statements from Native Americans of all points of view regarding the problems they face in our society" (Myers, 1974). His goal was to enrich the understanding of his students on the American West and to promote a minority he felt had not received adequate attention in the curriculum of the campus. He proposed interviewing Native Americans in various layers of society, ranging from the corporate leaders of petroleum companies to the "militant leaders" of the American Indian Movement (AIM) (Myers).

Myers grew up in Park Rapids, Minnesota, 20 miles from the Chippewa White Earth Indian Reservation. He obtained his bachelor's degree at Bemidji State University in 1967 and received his graduate degree from Arizona State University in 1968. He began teaching at St. Louis Community College-Florissant Valley soon after receiving his graduate degree in history. His daughter, Kathleen Myers Owen, remembers her father as a man who lived to learn. On the entry page to the online research guide, she states, ". . . he had a passion for and commitment to the integrity of the individual which was evident in the respect he demonstrated for all humanity. The value he placed on human dignity was one of his highest virtues" (St. Louis Community College – Libraries, n.d.).

Myers had spent previous summers exploring the American West and meeting with some of the Native Americans he wished to interview. His proposal outlined that his intent was to visit most of the reservations of the western half of the U.S. According to the *Listening to Indians Research Guide*, Myers drew his planned itinerary on a map of the U.S. He planned to begin his journey in St. Louis, Missouri, and to wind his way north to Minnesota and then west to California. His planning included "definite" locations marked with a solid line, "hopeful" destinations with a dotted red line, and "additional visits if time and money allows" with a dotted black line. The proposed route would cover states with the largest concentration of Native American reservations.

## **Memoirists**

The memoirists, as Myers called his interviewees, were chosen because of their national standing or through referrals from others. In his initial proposal, several men and women of prominent national standing are listed as potential interviewees (Myers). However, several of the listed potential interviewees were not interviewed. In his quest to have a range of viewpoints, the memoirists came from all walks of life. Men, women, and children from 50 different tribes were interviewed, ranging in ages from 15 to 70.

Myers interviewed prominent national leaders, including Ada Deer, who served as the chairperson of the Menominee Restoration Committee. Deer was interviewed on Aug. 28, 1975. Her leadership of the committee was at a crucial time of the tribe's reorganization following the Menominee Restoration Act of 1973. Her interview provides a first-hand account of the period following the restoring of the reservation to the tribe by the federal government. Deer (1975) also discusses the Gresham Monastery takeover, a protest that garnered national attention.

Beginning in 1945 and through the early 1960s, the U.S. Congress enacted legislation to lessen Native Americans' dependence on the U.S. Government. One of these approaches was the dismantling, or "termination", of Indian reservations. At this time, it was believed that taking the federal reservation status away from the tribes and giving them full U.S. citizenship would promote more commerce and self-reliance. Several members of Congress at the time felt that the current system of reservations was too similar to Communism with its shared land and wealth distributions. The federal government's efforts affected 1.3 million acres of reservation lands and 12,000 people (Nesberg, 2011).

The Menominee Tribe's reservation in Wisconsin was one of the reservations terminated by the federal government and made into a state county in 1961. Neither the tribe nor the state of Wisconsin supported the transfer. However, Congress believed that the tribe's financial stability would serve as an example of the benefits of termination. In the years following the decision, the county's health, education and prosperity worsened. In 1970, Congress ceased its termination policy, and in 1973, the full recognition of the Menominee tribe was restored (Nesberg).

Deer (1975) recounted in detail during her interview details of the slow process of restoration following the decision: "the Restoration Act granted us federal recognition, granted us contracting and grant authority, gave us the right to open up the rolls again, and we have now implemented much of this. We are administering \$2,600,000 in Bureau of Indian Affairs money, plus other monies from the Indian Health Department and other governmental agencies, so at this point we're administering approximately \$4,000,000 of federal monies. This is a great departure from the past, because in the past there would be 50 to 60 BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) people here running the show. But we are starting all over with the federal government, and we're restarting in this new era of Indian self-determination. We have federal protection, but not federal domination, so we're administering the programs and the projects".

Legal actions and sometimes violent demonstrations against the government soon followed the restoration. Deer (1975) gave a primary account of her views of one demonstration that took place at Gresham Monastery in 1975. The demonstration lasted 34 days and grabbed

national media attention when the National Guard was called in to restore peace (Nesberg, 2011).

“Well, there are many points to be made in this situation. I consider it a complete exercise in futility and stupidity on everyone's part—again, I'm going to relate back to my earlier comment. People get into movements for different reasons, and even though many of us have spent years working on restoration and so on, and we've have accomplished an historic reversal of Indian policy in this country, and we've provided a demonstration of what any citizen's group can do to bring about positive social change, with an irresponsible act that appeals to the press, most of the people now think of Menominees when they think of the novitiate, when they should really be thinking about Menominees and the restoration and what we're doing” (Deer, 1975).

Not all of the interviews related stories of national interest. Many told of customs and transitions from the historic ways to the new modern life. One such memoirist, Scott Tonemah, recalled his education in a school for Native Americans in western Oklahoma in the early 1920s. Tonemah presented his thoughts on the harm this education created for students' assimilation into life outside the reservation.

“But that is the phenomena about our training—the second generation of Indian people in western Oklahoma. We may be deep in reading and the deeper academic side of life, and so forth, because we matured sooner than non-Indians. But at the same time, we never saw the worth and value of articulation. So generally speaking, throughout all of our tribes in western Oklahoma, we never took that seriously. Later it became a detriment if we wanted to go on to higher education, or if we wanted to speak in behalf of our people on abstract legal questions regarding our land claims, and so forth. We had no champions, because we just did not develop in those lines” (Tonemah, 1975).

Many memoirists gave accounts of their contemporary life by discussing living in the U.S. outside of their family or the reservation. One such memoirist is Michelle Fowler of the Quinalt Tribe in Longview in Washington State. At the time, Fowler was a student in diesel engineering at Lower Columbia Community Diesel College. Fowler discussed her experiences as the first female heavy equipment operator hired in the state of Washington and as a volunteer forest fire fighter. Her interview reflects the changing status of women in society at the time.

“I just hope that it helps somebody else, women especially. I'd like to see a lot of women get off of welfare and really get out and make a drive to really . . . they just never will know how much it will make them feel better if they'd really get out and try. Really makes you feel good. Girls really need a future, and it's there for women if they really want to go after it” (Fowler, 1975).

At the conclusion of his project, Myers had visited all of the states west of the Mississippi River (except Colorado), as well as five states east of Missouri. According to a Dec. 1976 article published in *St. Louis Community College News*, he interviewed a total of 166 people. His interviews were recorded on 139 cassette tapes; some of the recordings were eventually transcribed through a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. In the same Dec. 1976 article, Raymond Stith, president of the campus, stated “I really hope that the materials will be used by a wide variety of institutions across the country as well as in this area because they graphically describe what it means to be an American Indian in

contemporary United States.” Myers hoped to create a new special problems course titled, “American Indians—History” using the interviews as a core for the course.

Myers died on May 6, 1978, three years after returning from his sabbatical. Since that time, his recordings and transcripts have been housed in the David L. Underwood Library at the St. Louis Community College-Florissant Valley campus. The transcripts have been stored in the campus archives while the tapes have been stored in various locations within the library. In 2011, Kathleen Buescher-Milligan, M.L.S., reference librarian, took a special interest in the transcripts. Through her research into the origins of the collections, the research possibilities of the collection interested other members of the library staff. The original cassette tapes have since been transferred to digital recordings for their preservation. In addition, student workers scanned the original written transcripts.

## **Collection**

Through the years, questions about the quality of the interviews and their usefulness as a classroom tool have been raised. It appears clear that the stories told by the memoirists could be used as primary research material for students or researchers. The memoirists tell not only their own life stories in the interviews, but also the stories passed to them from their parents and grandparents. Cultural aspects and traditions that might have been forgotten in the past 39 years are preserved through the stories. Further, the interviews provide a personal record of the policies of the U.S. government and their often turbulent effect on the day-to-day lives of the interviewees. Many of the memoirists became national leaders after their interviews. Ada Deer, who at the time of the interview was leading the restoration of the Menominee Tribe, rose to national prominence as the first female head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).

The library staff at St. Louis Community College-Florissant Valley has begun the task of promoting the *Listening to Indians* collection as originally envisioned by Myers. The collection has been added to the catalog of the St. Louis Community College library; each memoirist is indicated in the note field of the bibliographic record. Through the inclusion of the record with the library’s catalog, the citation is now available through the international OCLC World Catalog (World Cat). An electronic research guide that contains the history of the sabbatical project and background information on Myers, as well as the transcripts of each memoirist and related sabbatical information. It is hoped that the audio recordings will soon be made available through the online guide.

St. Louis Community College-Florissant Valley students have also found a renewed interest in the words and stories of the *Listening to Indians* memoirists. In April 2014, Richard West, Jr., CEO of the Autry National Center and the founding director of the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, visited the campus to lead the students in discussion of Native Americans. West’s father, Richard West, was interviewed by Myers on Sept. 17, 1975 in Lawrence, Kansas. During his visit, West acknowledged that he was not familiar with the collection and expressed that he was thrilled to read (and hear) the interview with his father and other Native American leaders he has known through his lifetime. The work and intent of Myers continues to shed light on the lives and stories of Native Americans today.

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