

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

North American Indians

Personal Experience

O.H. 993

JAMES B. KING

Interviewed

by

Jay Toth

on

September 7, 1979

JAMES KING

Bée Dityõ which means "wool shirt" in Navajo, or "the man with the furry shirt", is well known among Indian artists of the Southwest. Three of his recent works are "Pinon Pickers", "Her Collection" and "Coming Out". Other works can be found at Tanner's Indian Arts of Scottsdale, Arizona, La Jolla, California and Gallup, New Mexico.

Born and raised in Shiprock, New Mexico, he first showed his desire in art by painting live chickens with different colors with house paint. After high school, he enrolled at a commercial art school in Salt Lake City, Utah, where he trained in graphic art for two years. He then free-lanced for local business.

Culture shock finally took its stand with all its side effects, like mutton-hunger, authentic fry-bread fried in mutton fat, open rangeland, the soothing surroundings of natural plants and mountains that sit in the distance and most of all to be able to function more at ease with his own people.

Despite the scarcity of jobs with his skills, he felt the important thing was being back with his family and among his people. While concentrating more on Indian art painting, he enrolled at Navajo Community College with the Agricultural Program, and upon completion went to work for the Navajo Agricultural Products Industry.

Finally the opportunity to paint full time happened. Within two years King had placed among the best in some of the top New Mexico Art Shows, including features in some New Mexico and Arizona magazines. He said, "I believe that the moment of truth isn't when you receive the best of show awards, it isn't when you sell one painting for an amount you made, or when your worst art critic pats you on the back, but when you feel you have done your best."

Like anyone who feels good about what he is doing, James does many other things like quarter-mile auto racing, camping, fishing and photography, and holds a brown belt in karate. He adds, "I'm looking forward to the Boston Marathon this year." One of his current favorite pastimes is taking pictures and doing his own darkroom developing, some of which he is doing for NCC-Shiprock campus, partly as a learning experience.

When James feels like expressing himself the best way he knows how, one can find him in the studio within his

home, by following the aroma of turpentine and paint, three miles north of Shiprock 550 and 66 junction.

"27½ and going on 28," he stressed when asked about his age, then continued, "My work is like any other business, I have my ups and downs. When I first started, sometimes I had Mother Hubbard's cupboards, and I felt like going back to working for wages. Looking back now, I've realized that patience is very important. I used to want to go somewhere, didn't know exactly where but just to be going. Now you can lock me up in a small room and as long as I have paint, canvas, maybe some food...believe me, I'll survive, oh! and a pair of barbells."

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INTERVIEWEE: JAMES B. KING
INTERVIEWER: Jay Toth
SUBJECT: North American Indians
DATE: September 7, 1979

T: This is an interview with James King for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the North American Indian, by Jay Toth, at Shiprock, New Mexico, on September 7, 1979, at 12:30 p.m.

The first thing I want to ask you is to discuss your family past and background?

K: What do you mean by that?

T: Let's start with your grandparents where they lived and what you remember of them?

K: On my mother's side...Let's see now...

T: Their names?

K: Yes, my grandmother's name is Nellie Heti Tom, and my grandfather's name was Jim Tom. In Navajo he was called...I don't remember, but they call him wolf's penis. He got that name because I guess when he was younger in his teenage years he used to catch wolves and some wild dogs and catch them on horses. He took them home, and he castrated them, and he collected the penises. He did this as a hobby as something to do. He is a deserter. There is a trail between our mountain and the sleeping mountain. There is a trail and we used that trail. The animals used that trail; the deer use it, and some bears use it. Mostly wolves run right along through his land, this piece of land there. That is where he used to catch the wolves and castrate them. He got the name castrating wolves. A lot of crazy names

were given to people. They would give them names by whatever somebody sees in them doing. If they see them doing something more than once, that is where they get their name. I got my name from my grandfather. I used to dress up in real warm clothes. I had these woolen pants and this woolen shirt. Most of my clothes were made of wool. I used to dress up in the summer sun in the heat. They said it is hard for them to take it off as they used to do. He gave me the name woolen shirt. He gave that to me in Navajo. I use that for my painting. I sign Bée Dityō to my painting; I don't sign James King, because there are a lot of the English names especially in art. I don't really know my grandmother's. I only know her Navajo name. She does a lot of rug weaving. She still does that. She is about eighty years old. She did a lot of things herself just to keep her going. In her younger days she used to run wild horses. That is what she told me. They usually stretch the truth a little bit. She said that she used to swim across the San Juan River with wet wool, you know? That is how she says she keeps her fitness. They called her Heti Tom. She is still living down the fork about two miles west of the exit road. My grandfather was a police. During the Varning Clapezan, he was one of the guards who set up road blocks somewhere out towards Kaya watching for them to be pestered. We used to bootleg. When he was alive, he used to tell me a lot of this. They made moonshine from corn and whatever kind of thing they could squeeze in drinks for. We got a car, our real first panel car. It was a real good car. It was one of our luxuries; it was a luxury. He was gun slinging in a cup. He started trading, buying soda pops from these traders. Then he sells them to these Indians at squaw dances and sheep groups wherever all these Indians get together. They sold them there for a much better price. He started to do good in trading. He started to settle down and started trading flowers and canned goods with other relatives. So my grandmother says that my grandfather didn't bother trading. He never told me about trading art. He said they were doing pretty good work. My fellow Navajos call him Mi Chum. If you mention that name, they will just start laughing.

T: Do you remember any stories that they told you?

K: My grandfather?

T: Or your grandmother.

K: Most of the stories that I knew are told in the winter. I can't tell you just now at this time. Most of the far-fetched stories would be good. He told them in the winter on a cool winter where we were sitting by the fire, and he was on the couch telling them just jokes and stuff like that. I don't really know much. I paint what I have seen and what we drew. About fifty percent of them are from my grandmother and grandfather.

T: Where did you go to high school?

K: I went to Shiprock High School in Shiprock.

I was here most of my life except for about four years. I went to Hubbit Mission and Gallup Submission School. I guess my father put me there to keep me out of his hair. I learned a lot of things there. Some of them are still with me. It is a small town two miles east of Gallup, New Mexico. It is not a town; it is a community.

T: Were your experiences good or bad?

K: There?

T: Yes.

K: They were alright. I learned a lot of things like mountain climbing. I did other things besides school. After high school I took off for...Well, during high school I couldn't decide whether to go into the army or just be free for maybe five years or so of this and carry on with my friends and run around and try to be happy or go up to another university or college. Boy, I hated school then. In my high school years I didn't want anything to do with school. Right after graduation, the day after the graduation three of my friends got in an accident and all of them died. It didn't bother me. During July or August another one died, another best friend. These are my best friends I am talking about. He died in another car accident. All of these were because of liquor. They were drinking. I was with them. We used to go out and have a good time and booze up. We thought we had a good time. Then in September another--this was a best friend, he was like a brother--he died in another accident because of beer. He was boozing on it. One of his friends died. Then I just couldn't take this any more; I couldn't hang around here. I didn't have any friends. I just had time, good time. I didn't have a girlfriend or anything like that or anything to worry about. Then I started thinking

seriously about what I should do. I told myself, "I'm going to get out of here, out of Shiprock." I know I will be going again pretty soon. I really don't have anything around here. That is when teachers told me I was good in art and that I had a talent in art. I started thinking about what they said. I thought about that for a while. Now it finally got to my head that I should go work on that since that is supposed to be my talent. Then I just said, "I'll do it. I'll go to an art school." I went to B.I.E.L. and signed up. They tested me, and I was okay. They gave me what to get ready and then they shipped me off to Salt Lake. They gave me a choice between Chicago and Salt Lake and Los Angeles. I had some friends who were living in Los Angeles. I didn't want to go there because I didn't want to get involved in partying and drinking and be a big drop-out. Salt Lake was my choice because I didn't know anybody there. The city was supposed to be a Mormon city and not much crazy things were supposed to be happening there. But there was a mistake. I took off for there, and I went to Utah Technical College on Ridgewood Road there in Salt Region. I started off pretty good. We did real nice program there. It was pretty fast. We had art show every semester, and I won ribbons. I won most of my ribbons in the class. I really like what I was doing there. I did that for two years. Then in two years I graduated from there in the commercial art department. I stayed there in Salt Lake for about just a half a year. I freelanced for people. I worked for anybody, for people who wanted somebody to do a sign or a mural painting or design a postcard. My wife was supporting me all through this. I mean I didn't have a wife when I was going to school. But after high school and close to Salt Lake Technical College here close to my graduating there, I met the girl who is my wife now. She became my wife right after my graduation. We stayed there, and she supported me. She worked at this manor. I couldn't make the ends meet there because of the rent and the food and the high cost of living in the city. We struggled there for about three to four months. We sort of got lonely for dough and fried bread and resolution mutton stew...We just put everything out then. I couldn't find a job around here in my field in commercial art. Farmington wasn't big enough. They send most of their art illustration jobs for certain magazines and stuff to over 290 miles southeast of here. There were a few sign painter, maybe, a few type setters for magazines or newspapers, local newspapers; that is about it. So I just started painting and selling. I got into oils and acrylic and water coloring and stenciling. I did this during commercial art, but you have to come up with a good sketch in a certain time. They give you about a half a day or maybe thirty minutes or thirty-five minutes to come up with

a good sketch for a certain illustration in a fashion magazine or a fashion newspaper where they are advertising clothes. I just sort of worked on it more, put in more details and sort of got that experience in art from that and switched it over to my fine art. I started selling them. I started selling the first one at about \$15 on up to \$100. People started coming over saying paint my baby's photograph there. I did them mostly for purpose. I didn't have anything else to do besides sitting home and taking care of our girl there. We had a kid by then. This was in 1975 I think. it was either 1974 or 1975. My wife was the only one working again. She was working at the hospital. I was a freeloader. I guess I still am. I try to paint. I did this, and finally got a job in a plant near Shiprock. People from Mountain View, California ran that I guess until the war ended. They didn't need more components for the missile heads and stuff like that. They were doing dials and memories for computers. A lot of Indians were working, about eighty percent I would say. It was a big old plant. In 1975 that plant was doing pretty good. It started going down then. The whole shift I think it was--I'm not sure--but the whole shift was laid off. You couldn't find a good job around here. There are not enough jobs here on the reservations. The shift was laid off, and the Indian people heard about this, people from the American Indian movement or somebody told them. One morning we woke up with her job closed and the Indian flag right in front of the American flag upside down. My father and mother were working. People started wondering where and they started asking questions. I guess that is because the Indians were laid off. They held it at the plant there for about four days I think. You could see the guards there with the guns. I guess you have seen pictures of that.

T: Yes, I remember that.

K: The plant people, the heads of the plant turned around and aim for shutting down the plant. They said that the plant was going down because there weren't any more components. It was more the Americans. They didn't tell their story like they heard it. Instead, the whole thing was blamed on the makeup in the work.

T: You were supporting the Indians?

K: At that time. Right now I'm not really.

T: Any type?

K: I guess I really look down because I did it. I mostly did wrong. I don't know. I can't really blame them. Maybe the CIA or the FBI or somebody started screaming. They have all kinds of set-ups to put certain groups down. The group that has gone down with the Indians. It is hard to explain it. If you saw...The news media did turn around and said who was at fault. The thing that went on the news. I heard recordings of the natural communication with the federal agency then. When you read it in the newspapers, it is a little different story. That is how it was I think with Fairchild. That happened. Fairchild shut down; it is still shut down. There is nothing but tumbleweeds there. I couldn't go back to work there. So I started painting again. I painted my country resolution. I painted what the angry would want me to paint. Partrator, a sales manager that buys my work, said, "Put a chitty there and a boss in there. Put a sun sitting there." So I started doing this. I saw these, but there was a dumb thing I saw all the time. So then I started painting still art. I put stories into my still art. I put flags in there, rugs, palm leaves, paintings, and maybe a little of Peyote buttons or what was in the Peyote church. It came out with a good story quite a few times.

T: While I am thinking about it, if you come to Youngstown where I live there is a Butler Museum. It has the largest collection of Indian art in the United States. You probably possibly put on a show there.

K: Yes. I could. Are you really familiar with Indian art paintings and stuff like that?

T: A little.

K: I think the buyers don't become familiar. I think buyers should understand Indian art before they buy it. They should enjoy it more and I think they will if they do understand what is in the story, not because it is pretty or it is different. Then I started painting. I did that painting babysitting and painting. This was in 1975 or 1976. I started working for this one farming company. They called me up in Farmington there for industrial work. I became a mechanic and I switched over to a soil technician. I was in the technical sort of soil measuring things in neutrons and stuff like that. We were getting technical. I really liked it. I learned things there that we did besides riding a

tractor. During 1977 in the spring there I really liked what I was doing there. I was painting on the side at home. I read in the newspaper that there was a western artist coming into Farmington and he was supposed to be really good. He was supposed to be the best in the world. I was familiar with western artists. They were supposed to be the greatest, the best artists in the United States. Their work was high quality stuff. This guy was one of them. So my wife and I...I had a painting finished then sitting on the easel ready to sell. I said, "Let's get that painting down there and see what he says about it." So we got it down there. He was down there at this one place in Farmington at this small arts school. I took the painting in there, and I introduced myself. I said that I was a struggling artist not knowing anything about the art world. He was the painting and studied it. He said, "Now if that painting was in Ellensburg in Washington in the Westland Art Show there, I would have given you the best of show," that is the highest award. I started getting really--throwing my head around. He said, "No kidding. I'm not pulling your leg or anything like that. I'm not doing this just because you are here." He said, "If that painting was there, I would have given you the best of show." He was a judge during it; he was a major judge of the paintings.

T: What was the name of the painting?

K: The painting I had then?

T: Yes.

K: It was a still art. I don't know if it had a name or not.

T: You sold it?

K: I sold it. I was really happy. I felt like I was walking on water. I felt big for a while. We were just sitting there and talking. I guess there were some art collectors there during the day. There happened to be one called Tanner. Tanners are well-known on the reservation for real fine nice high quality Indian art. Tanners are the best-known art dealers. They handle fine art on the reservation, real high quality stuff. One of them happened to be there and he just wanted to talk to me afterwards because he had heard about me. I had been in Indian art shows or fairs or galleries. I guess my work was pretty good for them. Then one of the

guys who came to my house gave me his phone number. I went up there that Sunday. We talked about the art world and that my stuff was real high quality and that he wanted to handle me. He sort of said something about me going under a contract for five years to paint for him and he would pay me about \$500 a month. Now that was good money then. \$500 was how much I used to make a month. I could do it in two weeks. He offered me \$1,000 a month. Did I say \$500?

T: You said \$500.

K: \$500 every two weeks or that is \$1,000 a month. He said that he would give me \$1,000 a month. I'm used to making \$500. I said, "Yes." I just fell for it. We set it up where all he had to do was pay me for every two weeks no matter if I had a painting or not. We did that for about almost a year. During that time I was painting for him. I went to the feeling of having to be forced to paint for somebody, and I wasn't used to this. I just painted whenever I felt like it and did what I wanted to do. I just walked around in those beautiful buildings. I just lost the feeling; I started losing the feeling for my work there. The quality started going down. It was because of the feeling that I was forced to paint to try to come up with a painting that cost at least \$1,500. It was a major painting during that time in 1977. In 1978 I just quit. I said that I couldn't do it any more. He understood. He began to lose money also because the cost was going down back then. I just stopped. He was pretty good about this, and we just stopped doing this. Another guy called Joe Tanner came along. That was his brother; Bob Tanner was the first guy; Joe Tanner was the guy who came along. Right after the contract...After we said there was nothing more, then I told him that I wanted to paint for me only and try somehow to get money from that. By that time I wanted to go back to work because when I was under contract he and I used to travel a lot to Scottsdale and different cities. I saw the prices on the paintings that were much poor quality than mine, and they were selling. I thought I can't go back. I will just continue working for myself without a contract. So I got out of that and came up with a good painting. One painting I thought was good Tanner saw. He fell for it. He said, "That is the best painting in my life." The feeling was there; I wasn't forced to paint it. That painting won the best of show at New Mexico State Fair, and it made the Arizona Highway September issue of 1978. That was because of the feeling that I was free; I wasn't forced to paint it in a month

or two days or something. From then on I just painted. Joe said, "I'll handle your work. I'll advertise your work in the newspaper and magazine. I'll get it through galleries, and I'll have it framed." So we started doing that. It came out pretty good. My art started selling; it started going up again. Right now I don't have any major paintings in any galleries because they are all sold to smaller ones. That is my story then up until 1979.

T: That one with the little girl, I really like that.

K: That one in there?

T: Yes. It is outstanding.

K: She was going to do something for us. She is the next door neighbor's girl. They call her Sissy.

T: So what do you see in the future for yourself?

K: I want to do what I did best and what I like. I don't consider playing, you know playing as you grow up you know how you feel different towards it as you do from work. As an art student I just get carried away. Sometimes I paint until morning. I start painting in 7:00 in the evening and stay there until 8:00 in the next day, until my back starts hurting. I don't paint sometimes at all for a month. I didn't paint the whole month on June and July. I didn't touch the easel. I just went fishing and camping. I went down to Apple Creek quite a few times. I just had a good time out there. I just stayed away. After I came back I did a good painting that I think is going to win the best of show in the Al Creek District in 1979. The people down there said, "I think he won the best of show two years in a row." That was after the two months when I came back, bouncing. I think the future is going to be...Naturally if you are successful making money, people naturally put you in as a celebrity...I really hate that. I want to be just how I am. I think then I just want to keep away from getting in a kind of standard way.

T: You are very close to your parents. You were saying that you have a chance to go to Switzerland?

K: Yes I have a chance to go to Switzerland with my parents in September.

T: You want them to go?

K: I want them to go before they do because I know I will probably travel to Switzerland or here again in my life, and my parents right now don't have that much chance because they are old. I want them to see since their eyes are still good. I want them to touch a Swiss girl. I hope it is going to happen. This would be something great for them.

T: Your mother makes rugs, right?

K: Yes, she is a weaver. She has different styles of rugs. The best she does is the two green wool rug. That brings her more money. She is not in it for the money; she is just into it to do something, but that brings the most money. Have you seen one?

T: I haven't seen one completed.

K: This one in her room that big one...

T: Your father was a former medicine man?

K: Yes, he was a medicine man, and he did sand paintings on the side too. Sand Sun painting was his second hobby. I guess he made money from that. He was a silversmith then. The smell from the gas there started getting to his lungs there, and he quit that. He was doing pretty good silver. He made a lot of belts and bracelets and like that. He was a very good designer.

T: I really like your dad. Your dad is a very pleasant person.

K: Yes, he is softened type. Then he went back to his sand painting for a while. Then he just couldn't do it any more because he was a diabetic.

T: What do you see for the future for the Navajo people?

K: I think Navajo people...Right now people come from the east and the west and everywhere else, and they say, "Oh, this is beautiful country. Look at the Indian there." They don't see the hardships there. Our reservation is sitting there. All around us things are progressing, and we are sitting there. We don't like...I really don't care for progress myself. It is going to backfire one of these days. There are already revolutions and stuff like that. We don't have that problem. We scatter into parts sometimes and do other things.

T: I see you have one right not too far down here.

K: Yes, Kulgol mine, but it could have been worse I think.

T: So you are pretty satisfied with McDonald.

K: Maybe sixty percent; I can't really say fully if I agree with him.

T: Using the example as far as Navajo people have half the coal in the United States on the reservation, there is a chance it might get screwed up. To use the example as the Allegheny Reservation just for one little dam, half the reservation would be covered with water. They lost out to the Anglos in Pittsburgh, and there is a chance that possibly would happen to the Navajos, but as we were talking about the Navajos or the leaders involved.

K: They would look up to the Navajos.

T: What do you think will happen that gets to be a crisis when the country outside of your boundaries is going to want what you have?

K: I think...See, the government has been doing this along. They are going to come in with fancy words and promises, and I think we are not going to get the deal we are looking for. Something is going to happen, and we are going to lose out again. Hopefully not, I hope not. I hope we live not to see this. I think we should consider ourselves as American, yes, but we should be able to support ourselves so that we don't have to sell out to the other people. I respect the American flag. I had one in the van. Did you see that?

T: No.

K: It is not upside down either. I think the tribe is in good school. McDonald says it won't happen; I hope not.

T: Well, you have a couple hundred years experience.

K: 400 years.

T: Yes.

K: Yes.

T: Well, at least for the Navajos.

K: Yes. People go to school to learn how to talk good. They sound real good. They twist words a little bit and put things in there. That is why naturally anybody falls for it.

T: Right.

K: This might happen. I fell for that one time. This guy said, "Do me a painting, a big painting, and I will give you \$600." I can sell it for about \$4,000. We were just talking dollars and cents. I said, "Okay, for \$1,000." Then I backed out afterwards. I said that I couldn't do it. I don't know what happened to him. That guy was a traitor. That is a true story there. The Navajos are going towards progress. You hear the song in the background. That is a song out of there. Almost all the people around here in blue jeans, Wranglers. Now the Indians songs are turned into Anglo words. It is getting to where the English words are getting in here. I guess people understand it. A lot of things are going. What do you think?

T: To my belief--and this is off the record, I feel you need to keep your identity. You need to progress some to maintain your strength and so on.

K: Yes, for things like that. Progress enough to support ourselves.

T: I was just up to the extended care facility up there. I run a nursing home. That is where my expertise is. I was going to go up and give them some advice because what they are using is all for money to run a place. They should be able to run it by itself on its own. On the outside people look at Indian projects as though the Indians can't do things on their own and that they need help.

K: The federal system?

T: To use this as an example they run the thing just as if it was a nursing home outside the reservation. You could have a very good one. They are gaining \$4 to \$6 a day, and I am gaining \$31 a day. My facility is really better on its own making a profit and they are not. It is a matter of putting the right people in the right places with the right knowhow.

K: This is true. Modern favoritism ruins the whole progress.

T: Now they want \$250 extra money to run the facility. I said, "You can get yourself out of doing it. You have got the facility down there; operate it." I gave a few pointers on what to do. They said that they had a lot of change in administrators and stuff. I sent them a letter and said that I would be coming out and that if they needed help, I could help them, but they never sent anything back. That is the way I feel. I mean you need to be self-supporting.

K: Yes, that is what I am looking forward to. We have been doing that for two years now. I don't have anyone forcing me to do anything or to paint anything. It is going up slowly and surely.

T: Do you have anything you want to add?

K: I wish I were a lot younger. One thing that I really look forward to is technology there. See, right now we are using a satellite in space with NASA to try to get our photography of our land. One of these days I guess we will. We will be able to shoot up there in the space shuttle and look at the view from up there down. Maybe I will change my view on some things.

T: Have you ever been up in a plane?

K: Just once. I sort of made a formal thing out of it. Well, I would like to see something from space out there.