

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN PROJECT

NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN

O. H. 237

DELORES SANTHA

Interviewed

by

Jay Toth

on

May 10, 1979

DELORES D. SANTHA

Delores is fifty-four years old. She is the only child of a Commanche father and Seneca mother. She lived on a reservation in the North. The Commanches did not accept her mother because she was of a different tribe.

On the reservation, they did not have running water, or electricity. Wood was used to heat the home, and kerosene for cooking. Delores Santha's mother would walk her to her first school which was five miles away. The school consisted of one room with a common water bucket in the corner. The school accommodated all twelve grades. Before she graduated, she had gone to sixteen different schools. The big event for the people on the reservation was to go to town to see a movie.

In 1936 her family moved to Youngstown. She was very antisocial, never admitting her heritage. She persuaded her father to do otherwise for employment.

At the age of nineteen she still was required to have a chaperone for a date. Her parents could not understand why she wanted to go on to college. She got a security job at a department store, and went to Ohio State University.

The family was very close. Her father always knew best. Her parents would sit and tell stories until late in the evening.

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INTERVIEWEE: DELORES SANTHA

INTERVIEWER: Jay Toth

SUBJECT: Reservation life and religion, Education, parents

DATE: May 10, 1979

T: This is an interview with Mrs. D. Santha for the Youngstown State University Oral History project of the American Indian by Jay Toth at the Youngstown Indian Center on May 10, 1979 at 10:15 a.m.

Can you give me your family background, and some background on yourself.

S: I'm 54 years old. I am the only child of a Commanche Indian father and a Seneca Indian mother. We lived on a reservation. It had to be in the North because the Commanches would not accept my mother. They do not mix across the color of the race line and the tribe line.

We came to Youngstown in 1936 where I was completely antisocial. I learned the best way to get along was not to admit my American Indian heritage. I was very upset with my father who had braids. Now he would be in fashion! I was able to persuade him, and of course, for his employment, he found it to his advantage to wear his hair shorter 7. He never stopped being an Indian, and neither did my mother.

We picked berries, wild plants, and that type of thing. We used to cook milkweed, the early pods. Contrary to the belief, they are delicious, but you have to cook them about three or four times changing the water. The buds taste very similar to broccoli. Those are also cooked three or four times, changed with cold water, and served with vinegar. When we got really educated, we had lemons.

As I said, I was antisocial. I went to sixteen schools before I graduated. I did have a desire, much to my parent's dismay, to go away to school. For a gal to have a chaperoned date at the age of 19 who was working, and had been going to college, seemed a little strange then. I wanted to fly the coop, but I got a job at security service for Lazarus Department Store, and I proceeded to attend Ohio State University.

There I did not lie about my heritage, but I didn't volunteer it either. One thing, in Mahoning Valley, there are so many Lebaneses, Greeks, Italians, and you name it that you fit in very nicely. No one asks questions. It never occurred to me that it would ever be an asset to be an American Indian.

My parents felt discrimination; therefore, we were very much to ourselves. We had very few close friends in high school or in college. I was too busy making a living.

I felt my father knew best. He stayed to himself. Now that he is 91, he has done a complete about change. I can't get over this little man. I was always very close to my dad, but his word was law. I used to resent that a lot. He was very intelligent, and a very wise man. He doesn't have formal schooling, but he has a sensitivity that everyone who meets him appreciates. I'm so glad thay my dad and I are close, and that he doesn't have to be a tyrant and keep me in a cage.

T: You mentioned that you came here in 1936, for what reason?

S: My father came with Rust Engineering to rebuild the Brier Hill steel mill stacks. He was a structural iron worker. I think they wanted to relocate my father, that's is how he happened to leave the tribe. He married a woman of another tribe and his father was very bitter towards him for that.

T: When you say that they were bitter, and they did not like to cross those lines . . .

S: No, that's it. It's much the same way if a Jew becomes a Gentile. That's the way the Comanches are. Other Indians, Cherokee, and many of the tribes, have inter-marriages, but not Comanches. The other Indians don't trust them. I thought what a shame. I'm sure they must have something to add, but they're very hostile. Even today they're very hostile. When you leave the reservations then go back, you are not accepted. My father left and went back, and he was not accepted.

T: It must have been very hard for him.

S: It was very hard because he was very close to his mother. It was a family of thirteen boys. I guess, contrary to the belief, the boys helped in the kitchen. They helped his mother. I guess she was always having children, so there was always someone young enough to tend to.

I've asked my father, and he tells me about different pots that they made to cook in. I didn't realize that Comanches ever made their own pottery, but possibly it was because of the area. They were far enough out from the mainstream of the Comanche life.

T: You said you had lived on a reservation. How old were you when you left?

S: Eleven.

T: Can you describe the reservation? What reservation was it?

S: Reservation living, as I understand it, has improved greatly. We did not have running water. We did not have electricity. We had a wood stove for heat, and a kerosene stove to cook on with an oven on top, and an oven outdoors, but my mother wasn't geared for that. There was a living area.

Since I was an only child, which was so unusual among other Indians, I think they looked at my parents in scorn. I said that this was a Northern Indian tribe. Anyone of Indian Heritage, should they choose, can go to the reservation. There is not a lock and key on it. They don't keep you in, nor do they keep you out. I think if a lot of people [with part Indian ancestry] chose to join [the reservation], it wouldn't be appreciated [by those already on the reservation] because they feel they have the right to their privacy. You can strike up acquaintances, they're not all anti-social.

Children had to ride great distances in school buses to school. I have a recollection of my first school. The second one is difficult to remember. The first school had one room, benches, and a potbelly stove in the middle of the room. I even remember the teacher, his name was Mr. Weatherhead. It had all twelve grades in one room. It had a bucket in the corner for common drinking, outside privies, and I think there were some swings, but no paved roads.

I recall my mother walking me to school. It was five miles. She would walk five miles up, and five miles back, and five miles to get me. We did have an automobile, but my mother didn't drive. It was a 1925 or 1926 Model-T Ford. I can recall it very vividly.

Our big event of the month would be to go into town and see a movie. Everybody ate peanuts in shells, and when you walked out, you were knee deep in peanut shells. These are little things that people look at you and say you're 54. It sounds like 154.

My second school was Clarkson, I believe. I'm trying to think how long I went, maybe until the fourth grade, something like that.

T: Did you have any Indian teachers?

S: Yes, Mr. Weatherhead. I think that was probably one of my reasons for wanting an education so desperately. My parents did not encourage me. They didn't discourage me, but they didn't encourage me in any way. They thought I was going to be hurt.

T: A lot of traditional people feel that education isn't wise among Indians.

S: Yes, in the older ones this is right, and I have met a few young ones who feel this way. I am trying so desperately to tell them, but they think it's snobbery. It is not snobbery. The Lord gave us a mind, and we should use it to the utmost.

Somehow living off the land was not my idea of what I would be able to contribute to society. I feel I have contributed a very strong and a nice daughter. She has also married an Indian. I should say part. He's quarter Cherokee, but it constitutes that he is an Indian. He's from McAllister, Oklahoma. I've always said that if you can't do anything else in life, then produce good citizens one way or another. I don't mean radicals. I mean someone who has something to say, and people will stop and listen to.

T: Do you feel that the future of the American Indians is based on education?

S: Yes, whether it is academic education, vocational education, or whatever. I feel everyone should like doing what they are doing. If they want to go into medicine, that's fine. I know that everyone thinks that's too far fetched because it's too hard. Well, if you have that

attitude, then for heaven sakes don't even try it. If work frightens, you forget it.

T: The big thing right now is trying to get Indian teachers to teach the American Indian language of that particular area.

S: I don't know how you're going to do that, each tribe has their own language.

T: Right.

S: The only white language that the Comanches learned was Spanish because of the Spanish fathers. They did not learn English. I don't know how you're going to find . . .

T: For example, the Navajoes are trying to . . .

S: Yes, they are. A lot of them leave when they get out. What's the old adage? How are you going to keep them down on the farm? You go out and see all those goodies.

It frightens a lot of Indians, but it didn't frighten me. I was an old eleven. I could plan meals, bake bread, and sew my own clothes. I was a help to my mother, and I was not immature.

We had books, that's one thing. My mother read to me, and I'm grateful for that. She didn't think it was going to become so habit forming.

T: Can you describe for me a typical day at your household on the reservation from the time you woke up to . . .

S: Well most of mine was going to school.

T: Then on Saturday?

S: My mother was fanatic about cleaning. I remember once we moved to the shanty--it was filthy--and she got lye to clean with, and she got lye poisoning in her hands. They just swelled, and they were so terrible looking. I always remember that. When I hear people say you can't get away from roaches, "Hogwash" is all I can say. You live with dirt, or you make up your mind you're going to clean. Anyway, my mother was a fanatic. She washed--I don't think we had a second set of sheets and pillow cases--on a washboard in a large tub of water outside. She boiled the water.

I will always remember the change of seasons when the

crops were brought in. We always would get new straw in the mattresses, and your bed was all fluffy for a few days. Those horrible spokes would stick up in your back. It was absolutely hideous! Now I see my white, down bed--I've gone soft.

Cleaning, berry picking, and sometimes migrant work in the surrounding area is a terrible life. I would take being on a reservation any time over migrant work. That's when dad used the car. They would be out in the fields working and the farmers bull would get loose. It hated that car. It would take its horns and butt it all over. I would be in there screaming my head off. (Laughter) That's what I mean by that business of migrant work. I understand that it has improved considerably.

T: You mentioned you were close to your father and mother. Among the American Indians that's one of their priorities. I feel that the family is the most important thing in their unit of life. Is this due to heritage?

S: Do you ask a mother lion why she loves her cubs? It's inborn. I was very much afraid that I would not love a child. This terrified me, and I made up my mind that I wasn't going to be one of those squaws with fifty kids running around. To me that was my idea of poverty.

T: A lot of the white families say, "You're eighteen now, get out of the house." They're not very close.

S: Well, they tried to keep me there. I think there was that love. When you grew up in the Depression, it was us against the world. My mother always ran the trap lines with my father. I learned to skin and gut an animal very early. I think that was one of the fascinations my husband found in me. I never thought that would be an asset.

I remember one year, this particular season, we had a bad season for trapping, which would have brought in the money. It cost money to take your catch to the ice-house. That's a huge building almost like a silo, only it's square. It's filled with ice cut from the lake and stacked on sawdust or straw all the way to the top. Or course, I was young, so maybe it seemed like it was mammoth, but maybe it wasn't. My father got this idea to save money, he was going to fillet all of his fish, and then he was going to salt them down in a crock. Do you know it was only about five years ago that I could eat fish after that. That was so horrible! It was just terrible! You can



imagine all that salt brine. You washed it and soaked it. You washed it and soaked it, but to no avail. My father said we'll eat this. We were not going to stand in a bread line, so we ate it. It felt like we died, but we ate it.

I recall having made jerky, dried meats, with my parents. I think I like moose best of all. I didn't care for opossum. I didn't care for coon. It was fatty. The moose was absolutely delicious after it was bled and gutted.

T: Did you ever eat muskrat? I heard that is pretty good?

S: Yes, but I didn't care for it. I like rabbit, pheasant, and I love moose. My mother has a secret sauce that her mother gave to her, and I have it now, and I'm giving it to my daughter, who incidentally does like wild game. I don't care for venison because in this area they eat mountain laurel. It tends to make the meat taste no good. We would shave the strips for jerky, then my mother would use the sauce to barbeque it. She would marinate it, and they would be hung up to dry. You could travel several days on something like that. It was in a small packet. If my dad would have to go some place for work, or just look for other hunting areas-- sportsmen call it pleasure which I say is work--he would take some.

T: When you were on a reservation were there any ceremonies or anything that you attended?

S: Women didn't attend. When the young man reached his maturity, the men would take him and initiate him. It was never discussed. I knew one thing, that the poor kid had to walk, and find his way back home. Maybe they were hoping he wouldn't find it. (Laughter)

We had harvest festivals, and that type of thing where you brought your produce. It was general sharing of the time.

My mother was Protestant and my father was Catholic. Of course, when the priest or the protestant minister would come around, that was a big event also.

T: Among the American Indian, his basic culture is largely based on a very religious type of thing.

S: Yes. My parents were very religious. When I graduated from college, I became so intelligent and so self-sufficient that I turned my back on the Lord. Now I

see how wrong I had been. I had this image of the white man's society because I saw people going to church and gazing around. They couldn't wait to get out of the door. I figured well then, why go. I'm not putting any one religion down, but I mean this was my attitude. I'm too educated now. I've joined the white world. I don't have to go.

T: Don't you feel that Christianity is a white man's religion?

S: No, I do not. No, many people would have the newer generation Indian believe that, but that is not true.

T: Would you still attend the mid-winter ceremonies of the Senecas in New York?

S: Yes, as long as their Christians, you better believe I would go.

I believe they found writings in caves. They believed in one God, one supreme being. They believed in a little baby that was the child of God, but they couldn't quite understand that. That was before any white man ever touched the soil. I think religion will be the salvation of the Indian. I don't care what religion, as . . .

T: We hear that when the missionaries come, and they see the Indian ceremonies, they say, "Oh this is the work of the devil," like the mid-winter ceremonies.

S: It's not. As I said before, and I reiterate, the Indians' salvation is to know the Lord. I am not talking about some fanatic! I've seen healings, and I couldn't explain it! I decided to shut my mouth because I did have a big mouth about telling my daughter where she could go to church, and where she could go to a university. Surprisingly enough, because I am self-centered about this, I'm paying. It was going to be my way. I didn't shut up. There were many Indians at Oral Robert's University, that's where my daughter graduated. They were not all becoming missionaries, some of them were becoming ordained ministers.

T: Do they still practice . . .

S: A lot of that ceremony is not heathen, and it is not antichrist!

T: The thing the white are trying to say is that they never mentioned Jesus Christ.

- S: Well, they heard about a baby. They didn't know it was Jesus Christ. Many of them are becoming Christians, but no one is trying to convert them. You don't convert someone. You can tell them about it, and they can go their own way, whether it is Catholicism, Baptists, or whatever.
- T: For example, when I go out to the reservation, and attend the ceremonies, I get a lot of flak from the people here. They say you should go to church here, and that is nothing there.
- S: That is more or less the same when you go to see the Hungarians, or the Lebanese, or the Italian folk festivals, and so forth. Good heavens, the Romans crucified Christ. The Roman soldiers were the last . . . We don't turn down going to one of their doings. I enjoy going to a folk festival.
- T: Is there any particular subject that you think should be elaborated on?
- S: No, I probably can't think of anything. When we're through here, I will remember a dozen things. Just remember, my father was a devout Catholic. When he was an infant they tattooed--how hideous--the infant of Prague and Jesus on his chest. As he grew, that grew. It's still there, 91 years later. My father believes in the Holy Spirit, and he is a very devout man. He was not aware of how I changed, but he knows I'm involved in that type of thing now.
- T: How did you feel about such incidents as Wounded Knee and "The Longest Walk?"
- S: Over "The Longest Walk," I can feel bad. Wounded Knee I cannot sympathize with even though our own prophet was involved with that. They watch an Indian very closely; we're exactly as a black or an oriental. You can't leave garbage piled up in your home, or dishes in your sink. We have to walk longer, and we have to walk taller than anyone else to prove ourselves. By the same token we're proving to ourselves. I did not like the laboratory that was smashed to pieces at Wounded Knee. I still have the pictures, and I was absolutely very bitter.
- T: Did you play an part . . . How did you acquire these pictures? Were you there?
- S: No. It was in Life magazine.
- T: Oh, okay.

S: I was taught to respect law and order. I didn't always agree with it, but I was taught to respect it. I did not like when my boss said I was at Wounded Knee. I thought, well don't brag about it. Of course, a lot of people don't remember what happened. I had an Indian just a few days ago say to me that the government should provide us with the land, and give it to the Indians. Now I was horrified, absolutely horrified. I worked for the property that I have, with two jobs as a matter of fact. If they were going to divide up the land it should have been from our ancestors, not from the people that worked, and bought this land now. If you want something then you have to go out and work for it.

T: But don't you feel that our ancestors were cheated for what they had?

S: Undoubtedly, they were cheated, but you know you can't make water run up stream. You cannot do that.

T: You were saying something about you thought these other people were weird attending other . . .

S: Oh yes, they went to Quaker prayer meetings, and they were involved with this and that. They preached, you're going to hell if you do this, and hell if you do that. I'll tell you, the little kids were sitting on the bench kicking their feet. They don't much care when they hear that. I realize there were missionaries because my father had his own beliefs and the beliefs of his parents. They were just very rooted in religion. They believed that everything that was given to us was from mother earth and Christ had sent it. When the crops would go bad, they believed that we were being punished. I guess that was white people who think like that. They did love the Lord.

T: What would you say stands in the future for an American Indian?

S: It depends, Jay, on what we can do about educating or giving them vocational guidance, something that they will be happy doing because they're going to be the ones who want to prime the earth.

They love to practice ecology, and they love the outdoors. It will be very difficult. I always remember my father saying an Indian would never last in a steel mill. I guess that's true. His own daughter worked in one for twenty years, but I had a nice plush office. My dad did say that they couldn't stand to be confined. I think that a person like that should have a vocational aptitude

test. Now let's face it, they cannot go back and live on the reservation, and do nothing, or wait for a dole from the government, or try to farm a bit of land because not all Indians were farmers. Plains Indians were not. My mother's people were farmers.

I don't think that we should teach our children something of their heritage so they would know from what they came. They shouldn't have to worry about neighbor kids calling them, and asking them to play cowboys and Indians, saying you're going to be the Indian, and bang you're dead, that type of thing. I heard that too many times. You do have to educate the young.

T: Don't you feel that a lot of the American Indian history has not come out?

S: Very definitely. Indians are very guarded. There are stories, and things that I wouldn't repeat because I learned from my father, and they're a very private thing. If you're going to remain an Indian you have to know some of that, and you don't bury your soul.

T: . . . events at the time the nation was being developed. Do you know what I'm saying?

S: Yes, I do. We don't need to know the roots. We don't need bitterness.

T: Don't you feel that instead of having a great George Washington picture hanging on the school wall, that there should be more elaborate then . . .

S: We can't very well take down the father of our country. We would have to take him off the dollar bill too, wouldn't we?

T: What I'm trying to say is . . .

S: Yes, I understand. Yes, I understand what you are saying. In order to keep us living in harmony, we can't push our ways on the white man, and we can't have the white man push his ways on us.

T: But don't you feel for him to realize that that it has to be realized what is on the other side of the fence?

S: The Indians? What do you mean by that?

T: The whites have always said that our way is the best way. For example, you go into the university, and you sit in history class, and they'll say American Indians did this

and that. They'll [the students] sit there, and say, "Well, I never knew that."

S: That's right. This sort of thing has to come out. I think, you as a young man, what you are doing is making a documentation. I don't know how much it will change history that a little girl thought such and such. Everyone has a story today, I don't care what ethnic group you come from. Everyone has lived, and everyone has a story. When you see a little old man walking down the street, you think he knows nothing you know, but he has lived and seen many things that you haven't.

I'm glad that my father's mind is good, and he can recall many things. I'm surprised that he is telling stories that I hadn't heard before. I know that he and mother would sit by an oil lamp, and he would talk far into the night. I can remember that they were extremely close. Just to know that he knows all these things . . . I used to think, I heard that, I don't want to hear it. (Laughter) Haven't you said that about your parents? There will come a time when you will be so fortunate, and realize that you heard that story, and it will trigger something else, and you will pass it on to your child.

But you're right. The Indian has--they referred to them as savages--had a culture, not the white mans' culture. Anyone that could make a buckskin suit with what goes into that [has a culture].

T: You mean as far as a projectile point, which you call an arrowhead, the skill that goes into it is craftsmanship?

S: My father is still making a flint one. He made a silver one for my husband for his neck. He is still so tremendously gifted with those hands. When I think of my father having worked on a section gang all those years . . . He was such a talented artist, and he couldn't sell his leatherwork or his carvings. I thought many times that we almost starved in the Depression. My father was a gifted, talented artist, and I'm so glad that he has continued to do these things. Some day I will probably donate them to our Indian institute. It would be appreciated.

END OF INTERVIEW