

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

North American Indian Project

North American Indian

O. H. 250

MELTON FLETCHER

Interviewed

by

Jay Toth

on

May 1, 1979

MELTON FLETCHER

Melton Fletcher was born February 23, 1920, in Derioder, Louisiana. His father was a teamster log hauler, who married his mother, a Choctaw Indian. As a child, he led a nomadic and poor life. His grandfather and grandmother had the greatest influence on his life. He helped feed approximately thirty people. He went to a one-room Indian school. Later he was drafted into World War II.

He came to this area with a friend. After settling down, he ceased his drinking. In 1957, he began a relocation program in Cleveland, Ohio. Frank Fisher and Paul Maleny, along with Fletcher, formed the first self-help group called the American Indian Foundation. They fought with the B.I.A. to provide benefits for native people. Melton's job was transferred to Akron and Dennis Banks took over. The foundation became the American Indian Center.

Melton Fletcher gave Russell Means support for Wounded Knee. When Melton Fletcher felt things were beginning to deteriorate, he sent word through Emeli Yellow Eagle. Melton Fletcher gathered up fifty people and took over the B.I.A. in Cleveland to work as a mediator for Wounded Knee. He feels that Wounded Knee had its benefits as well as producing problems.

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INTERVIEWEE: MELTON FLETCHER

INTERVIEWER: Jay Toth

SUBJECT: American Indian, Wounded Knee, Cleveland
Indian Center

DATE: May 1, 1979

T: This is an interview with Milton Fletcher for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program of the American Indian by Jay Toth at the Youngstown Indian Center on May 1, 1979, at 10:00 a.m.

T: Mostly your family background, start with your parents, your grandparents.

F: Yes. Well, my father was a teamster. They haul logs, then lay log woods around the reservation in Oklahoma, Louisiana. This is the way he met my mother, who is a full-blooded Choctaw Indian. Of course, this was a very nomadic life for him. Then he took my mother and they traveled around in the log camps here and there. While they were travelling around, I was born in Derioder, Louisiana. After my birth, it was the kind of haphazard life of leaving me here and there. They did leave me back on the reservation with my people, my uncles and aunts and relatives.

It was a very poor life, and as I said again a very nomadic one. Indian people were very poor. The white man during this time didn't have very much and the Indians didn't have anything.

My grandfather and my mother had the greatest influence on my life. My grandfather was a typical Indian woodsman. He taught me how to live in the swamps and the woods. We

had sometimes thirty people to feed. Out of the woods we'd kill deer, rabbit, whatever we could kill, and this fed the people. This is the way I grew up. I have never lost my Indianess. I mean, as I said before, my grandfather taught me all the Indian ways of life and these things have remained with me throughout my life.

I went into the Marine Corps, was drafted into the Marine Corps in World War II. I was honorably discharged. I came up to this area with a friend of mine that was in the service with me. I have been here ever since. I've got a job. Finally, I've settled down; I quit drinking and I have always tried to help my people financially, and tried to upgrade the Indian people.

In 1957 they started a relocation program in Cleveland, Ohio. This was through the Bureau of Indian Affairs. They brought people, Indian people, from the reservation on a so-called "program" where they can better themselves. Instead of this, they put them into the ghettos and in thirty days they would get them a job paying a dollar an hour, and in thirty days they would say you're finished, you're on your own. This left many people stranded there.

At this time I got together with two more people; one of them was named Frank Fisher, who was a Laywalk Indian. He came in from Sacramento, California. On the relocation program was another person by the name of Paul Maleny, who is a Winnebago Indian. He was from Wisconsin or Winnebago, Nebraska. We formed the first self-help group in the state of Ohio. The name of that group was The American Indian Association. It was formed in 1957. We started work to help our people and fight the Bureau of Indian Affairs to get more funding so that we could keep people out of the ghettos, move them out into the suburbs where they would have a little better life. It didn't work out. It's like anything else, the Bureau of Indian Affairs was started, there was no continuity to their program. Finally, they phased the program out.

In the meantime, I got transferred from my job in Cleveland, Ohio to Akron, Ohio. I had to leave my group. At this time Russell Means took over the remnant of my group and they continued there into what is now known as the Cleveland Indian Center. I came into Akron and I formed another group which is the American Indian Cultural Society. It was a self-help group and we tried working with the Cleveland Indian Center and Russell Means' group there, and things did not work out exactly. Russell got himself involved in the American Indian Movement, and I approved of a lot of the philosophy, but there was a lot of it that I didn't approve of.

T: Such as what?

F: Well, there was violence and destruction, condemning white people. When you live in a world like we live, where there is a linearity and so few of us, you have to learn how to live with the white man. There are too few for fighting, so I've expected this and I believe that we should retain our culture and try to upgrade ourselves in the white world where we will have education and opportunities here. Russell Means went into Wounded Knee. He came and asked me to show support for him, which I did, my group did show support. About half way through Wounded Knee, he went off on an ego trip, things were deteriorating for the people there. I advised Russell Means' group in Cleveland to get out of Wounded Knee because things were deteriorating. I sent the word through Mrs. Irma Lee Yellow Eagle. At this time, Russell Means said we were at war with the United States and we want Lamont, Montana, Nebraska, and so forth. I severed all ties with this group as far as the support was concerned.

At this point in time I gathered up fifty people and we took over the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Cleveland, Ohio in order to try to talk to the congressman, the state senators, who let our people out of Wounded Knee to go home. This thing was very tragic and the public sentiment began deteriorating and it was against the American Indians. Today, we are facing the backlash in congress and other white people on the account of the Wounded Knee affair. It would have been a fine thing if it wasn't for the way it was handled. If they would have come out when they should have, when the public sentiment was on our side, then we could have advanced further.

Now let me say one more thing about Russell Means. Russ has earned heart in history. I could care less what he does. I certainly admired him. He has done, in one way, the Indian people a lot of good because he has certainly brought out problems by doing what he did that the public was not aware of. He made them stand up and take notice, and as far as I'm concerned, Russell Means has earned his place in history if for that part. The part that I did not approve of was, like I said before, that when he went off on an ego trip, as like so many people that get power do, then he began hurting the Indian cause. In my opinion, I think that if he had not done this we would have been much further advanced today than we are. I, myself, have tried to upgrade myself as an individual because I knew that people were looking at me, judging me, and they were judging other Indian people by my actions throughout my life.

- T: What do you feel, was there anything really accomplished then from Wounded Knee?
- F: Certianly. There was a lot, as I said before, accomplished that Russell Means . . . What they did do, they made the public aware that there was a real need to solve Indian problems. There was a real need. Of course, the white people, as long as no one rocks the boat, they have a tendency to sit back and be complacent and let things go. It's all mouth, and all the words, they just give you a bunch of words and let things slide along. They don't take any action until something happens. In this case it happened. I think certainly it did a lot of good.
- T: Dennis Banks said . . .
- F: Dennis Banks, he was one of the secondary, I would say, leader in the group. Russell Means was the leader. Russell Means was a man that Indian people followed. All tribes followed this man. Had he conducted himself in the right manner, he would have been the one to keep all Indian nations tied together where they would ~~have~~ worked together and they would have really worked things out.
- T: Do you feel that anyone at this present time has those capabilities?
- F: I do not feel that anyone at this time has his, the capabilities that he had. Russell Means certainly doesn't have the capabilities at this time that he had then. Like I said, the people have actually, in the large part, turned against him for the way he has conducted his life. Of course, like I said before, you can't condemn everything. You can't hold everything against everyone. Of course, Russ, you have to take and realize that he has taken a lot of abuse on account of it too. There again, I say that he inflicted a lot of things on the Indian people and himself. There just wasn't any need for it, really.
- T: There are a lot of anti-Indian bills pending in congress, just as it brought out the longest walk last year. What type of leadership should be involved to . . .
- F: I don't think at this time. I think that the leadership that we have in the American Indians today lies within the Indian population itself, towards doing things legally. We're no longer living in the days where you can go and manhandle and tear up things like that. These things were their point in time, all right. Today, we have to go through the courts to do these things. I think the problems

that will be solved, our leadership is not in one person right at this time, it's a collective thing through all Indian people that are educated. There are attorneys and things like this to handle these. People that are sympathetic to the Indian cause help us through the courts. For example, we have a law firm here in Youngstown. They have never tried an Indian case or helped an Indian cause out in any way, but they offered their services to this group, the Miney Tribal Council, to direct the legal activities through the federal government. They offered these services free. That's a good indication right there that we have to do things properly or we're not going to get anywhere. Things will keep deteriorating. The reason there's a belligerency in congress today is on account of the backlash of the Wounded Knee thing. Through A. I. M. tearing up Washington, we still got a backlash from that when they tore up the place. They went in and it was a very destructive thing. It was unneeded, uncalled for, the paintings that were artifacts that were irreplaceable; they're destroyed. There was no need for that. These things have turned, actually turned the people against the American Indians' cause. Now this goes without saying that they're not turned against the American Indians. (Laughter)

T: Okay, you said you place a lot of emphasis on education. What was your education like when you were in school?

F: Well, I only went through the fifth grade in Indian school, and if you went to the sixth grade and could speak Choctaw, you can teach school. I was, as I said before, drafted or inducted into the Marine Corps. When I got out, I came up here with a friend of mine. I think at this point in time that after associating with him and his family there was a turning point in my life. I attended John Hayes High School at night to finish my education. I took the G. E. D. test from Dr. Peter Hampton in Akron, which I passed with a high score. This was based on a formal education, which I never had. I've always been very proud of that part. This is my background.

Now as I said before, I was a steward for many years for Pacific Manner-Mountain Express and for Allstate Freight Line. The people, the drivers there, elected me to this position of being a steward and as time went along, then I got myself elected into the Teamsters Local Twenty-fourth as business manager. I have continually tried to bring myself up so that people would say there is one Indian that is really trying. As I said before, the direction that they look at me, they see all Indians.

I had been in public life for awhile. A person in my position then, he actually is more cautious. If he wants to help his people, it's how he conducts his life. This is what I'm saying, Russel Means should have done that.

- T: What I would like to know is during your education at the Indian school, what is a typical day at the Indian School? What was it like?
- D: Well, in the school that I went to they handled all the classes in one room. Then it was just a matter of the teacher laying out each one's work for them, really.
- T: How many students were there then?
- F: I suppose in this little school that I went to there were about forty.
- T: Was the teacher white?
- F: The teacher was black.
- T: Spoke English?
- F: Spoke English, and Choctaw too. In fact, in those days they didn't have too many Indian teachers. They were all white people.
- T: Do you feel that you were forced into . . .
- F: Let me put an emphasis on this. They didn't teach Choctaw, but they had to be able to speak the language in order to get to the students to teach them English. (Laughter)
- T: Where was the school located? What reservation?
- F: It was in Hugo, Oklahoma where I went to school.
- T: This seems to have made an influence on your life.
- F: Now this goes without saying. I attended school, also public schools in other areas.
- T: What was your experience in public schools?
- F: Very bad. I was the only Indian there and I was sort of foreign looking, as you can look at me now. I was even darker when I was young. Of course, Mexicans and Indians and black people were not really welcomed anyplace that they went. However, I did attend the white school, but it was certainly a lot of abuse.
- T: Such as what?

F: Well, such as "pepper belly," "Mexican," or "Indian." Children can be really cruel if they want to. I went through that. However, I'm going to say this, that many times I've had my teachers in the public schools scold the students for doing such things, but they did it anyhow. The scar still remains.

T: What about your experiences in the service?

F: Well, I was never a real hero. I always tried to look after myself. You can see, I came back all in one piece. I was honorably discharged from the service so it's something that I'm very proud of, but I wouldn't want to do over again. Let's put it like that.

T: What do you see in the future for Indian people?

F: Indian people, I see a long, hard road ahead. I'm inclined to believe that the American people, the politicians themselves, I say this with all reluctance, I am firmly convinced that they want to screw the Indian people. They've been trying it for hundreds of years and it's coming to pass because you can see I'm next. All the Indian people that you see are mixed. They're getting more mixed. What the government wants to do and what the congressmen keep trying to do is to pass laws that acutally just screw the people, put them out and say you're nothing. You know, in other words, if they do this, you get mixed up so much you can't claim you're black. I mean, like the black people, they keep being black, but Indians, they can't keep being Indian unless they retain their culture and things like this, you see. This is what your big problem is right now. It seems to be that the government or the politicians, and I'm not sure what they seem to want to sweep under the rug, they don't realize that you have problems with Indian people. I'll give you an example, when fund raising for legitimate groups, Indian people need help. You do have phoney groups, a lot of them getting a hold of federal funding. I could personally name you things and organizations that are actually phoney. I mean people that get a hold of an Indian organization and are more Indian than anything, just to get the control of the funds. When you start trying to raise money . . . I'll give you an example, we had a disaster out on the Navaho reservation one time. I got a call in to our group in Akron asking if we could help. I got out on my bended knee practically and begged for fifty cents. People just didn't want to turn, we have missionaries out there.

T: How do you feel about the church groups there . . .

- F: I don't like missionaries to be very honest with you. A missionary is a forerunner of disaster to Indian people or to any native group.
- T: The American Indian culture is a basic and very religious type of culture.
- F: That is correct. The government, they know this. If we all get assimilated out here completely, this has destroyed your Indianess right there. There are no more Indians. Then you just keep going and get more mixed and mixed and mixed, and there's nothing left. I think, in effect, this is what they're fighting. They say we don't want any more Indians. I think that they realize that as long as an Indian is here, he's going to keep fighting. Indian people have never been conquered, and they won't be conquered. I'm a mixed Indian, but I'll still fight. I'll fight for the rest of my people and I hope that I live long enough to see some fruitful accomplishments from this fight, which I doubt very seriously.
- T: So you're saying that the Indian's more of a cultural than a biological . . .
- F: That's correct. Their entire life is based on getting along with nature, living in harmony with nature, the things that the earth lives in harmony with, the earth and the things in the earth, keeping things on an even keel, and their religious structure in this area. People just want to destroy this, and why I'll never know. I think it's the most beautiful thing to live in this manner, but instead of this, I think the white people are bent on destroying the earth. There is a destructive thing. I'm a few years on myself, but when I was a child myself I could lay down in the woods and springs and drink. I could go to the Mississippi River and take a drink of water right out of the Mississippi. Any river, you could swim or drink; the water was clear and pure. It's just when I look what they've done to the earth in my day and time, they're bent on destroyihng this place. Your earth is like a honeycomb. When you pick all the honey out of the comb then you've got nothing left. This is what's happening now. They're destroying; they're bent on destruction. Your scientists are working against nature itself. My opinion is that we were put here, that there was a balance on earth. The Great Master intended it that so many be born, so many die. The strongest survive and the weak just die off. This was the balance of nature we had. The scientists are bent on turning this thing around. They want you to outlive your youthfulness; they want, you know, to keep you living here.

Naturally, the more people that live, now this seems hard to say but I'm going to say it, the more lifeline things you use upon the earth. In addition to this, the coal mining industry, they're just raping the land, the oil industry. I think that all these things are put here on this earth for all people, and this includes the Indian people, that we're here to use. Instead of this, you have corporates that have--and this might sound to you like a facist or communist, which I'm not, I deplore these groups, but I think that these black-like things are put here for all people and should no corporation, no corporation get where they can strangle you and strangle the little man by bringing the prices of these things out of your reach. Only the rich can afford them.

T: That's a very Indian part in which all things are cooperative.

F: Right. This is correct. The corporations, they've got these large corporations. Our politicians could care less for gasoline. They could care less if it went up to ten dollars a gallon, twenty, because the public is paying their transportation and they could care less. They sit up there and pass laws; they let the oil corporation get away with keeping these things and it just isn't right. The people, the poor people, should own a part. They just don't have a fair shake. That's my opinion. (Laughter)

T: As I was speaking before about the religious part of the American Indian which makes up the basic foundation, how do you feel as far as the influence of Christianity on you?

F: I think, and this is my opinion, that of course I'm not going to dispute the white man's Bible. I'm not going to dispute it at all. The Indian people, they know that there's one supreme being. The people that I know, their religion teaches them that there has to be a supreme being. If you just watch the flowers and the trees and the animals around you, you would know this yourself. You wouldn't have to have a Bible to teach you this. All the other fundamental parts of the Bible that I know very little of, and because I was raised in a different manner . . . As I said, I was raised with nature itself. I knew that there was a supreme being. I'll give you an example of something that maybe you won't like to hear, but there was a young minister that went out on the reservation out in New Mexico. A friend of mine, he came back to Cleveland. A friend of mine said, "Fletcher, there's a young minister out here, Widcliff, he just came back from the reservation. He's spent two whole years out there and I'd like for you to meet him." With this we went over to his house to have coffee and we began talking. He was talking about the evil that was going on out there. I said, "Evil?" He said, "Yes, there's evil." I said, "Give me an example." He said, "Well, the rain dance." You know,

for an example. "It's the working of the devil." Well, there was a picture up there of the supposed Christ. I said, "Who's that picture?" He said, "Are you crazy or something, that's the All Mighty." I said, "No, I don't know it. Did you ever see him?" He said, "Well, you don't even talk with sense, Fletcher. Everybody knows that." I said, "No, I don't know it because I never have seen him and I doubt if you have." That's the same way that the Indian people do that when they have these dances or that, they look at the sun or the moon. It's just an object like that picture. They know there's a supreme being up there that controls it. They use this like you would that picture. I said, "You can't prove that picture was Christ by me." This give you an example of their religion, that they use objective things of nature to pray, you might say, through to the supreme being.

T: You had mentioned one time that you hoped to bring the Indianess back that is lost for leaving the reservation. This centers on who's going to do this.

F: I think that we've going a long way towards this. I think that you sit here in this chair yourself, and you've seen this organization open up here in Youngstown. You've seen the membership expand, you know what happened to the Miami Indians. We have those Indians organized; they have their own tribal council, their chief now. We're in the process in Washington, D.C., of getting them recognized. We have had correspondence from the governor's office in the state of Ohio and we're pretty well assured of getting recognition from them. Along this, we are working with the Miami Indians in Indiana. Now there are over three thousand there. We are trying. I think that you can see this is a very fruitful Indian center, that we're trying to bring all Indian people together in unity. The Miamis are just a start because you know here in this organization we have all different tribes. Now we have some people here certainly that I would cast stones as being an Indian, because you know yourself that we have many Indians involved in the Indian center. That, you cannot deny.

T: Okay. I wish you luck and thank you.

F: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW