

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

North American Indians Project

Indian Experiences

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ROBERT D. PIRNER

Interviewed

by

Jay Toth

on

December 12, 1979.

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: ROBERT PIRNER

INTERVIEWER: Jay Toth

SUBJECT: Life as an Indian, Rosebud Reservation

DATE: December 12, 1979

T: This is an interview with Robert Pirner for the Youngstown State University Project North American Indians by Jay Toth at Ravenna, Ohio on December 12, 1979 at 8:00 p.m.

Why don't you tell me about your grandparents, or as far back as you can remember anything about your family.

P: I can only remember as far back as Native Americans come from my father's side of the family. My grandmother was married to a French fur trader who sort of passed through, this is how my father was born.

T: Where was this at?

P: On the Rosebud Agency in South Dakota. My grandmother's name was Falling Star and my grandfather's name was Pirner, which is my last name, a French name. I took my grandmother's name when I was about thirteen, so that is also my Indian name.

T: Did you ever know your grandmother?

P: No.

T: How did you learn of your grandmother?

P: Well, from my father. I was raised on the reservation, and I was brought up in a pretty traditional family, a lot of the beliefs and stuff. Although, my father never talked too much about our ancestors and stuff, basically because I don't think that he knew. He was

a product of the Catholic mission schools that taught that it was better to be white and to forget about being an Indian.

T: Your mother's side?

P: Yes.

T: Why don't you describe what life was like at the reservation?

P: My family was a pretty typical reservation family. My father drank a lot, we were poor. My father worked at different times, mainly as a cowboy. He was an itinerant ranch worker. I lived in a lot of places when I was a kid. I am a product of BIA [Bureau of Indian Affairs] schools. I attended bureau schools for twelve years, which has messed up my educational growth quite a bit. I think life on the reservation is what has caused me to be really goal-oriented now. I'm the first member of my family to ever graduate from high school. Right now I am a college student and I plan on being the first member of my family to make it through college. I just feel very strongly that I need to get my act together in order to go back to the reservation and help out, rather than go back and drink, which is a pretty common way of life at home.

T: What was school like? You say that it wasn't very good.

P: BIA schools are a form, they are a place that civil servants pass through for advancement. It looks really good on your record if you spent some time on an Indian reservation because it is one of the worst places to work. Most BIA people view it as a veil of tears that you pass through on your way to somewhere else. The Bureau of Education System is just terrible, it doesn't teach you anything. In twelve years all I did was learn to read and write, and the only reason I learned that was because I wanted to.

T: You are talking about going back there and helping out, how are you planning on helping out?

P: My degree is in communications and I plan on going back and setting up, we have our own private radio station and I plan on going back and working in that, possibly in working on getting a television station together if we can get the federal money to do it. There are

people there that have the talent. . . There are many people that have the talent to do it, it is just that nobody has gotten it all together enough to do it. I hope to be able to try and tie things together.

I'm also very interested in tribal politics. Tribal politics is the thing that I am very concerned about because the tribal leadership on my home reservation has been very poor.

T: Why don't we talk about that, hear your opinions of politics there?

P: It's basically a way to get rich quick, is to be elected tribal chairman. Everyone that has passed through there has left the office a lot wealthier than when they went into it. I think that needs to change. One of the things that happens with native people is that they get an education, and in gaining that education they forget their ndianness. They go back to the reservation and use the white man's tricks that they learned in college to get rich because it is very easy to scan that money that comes in from the government because there is no control over it. I think that the money never reaches the people in the outlying districts. The money stays right with the bureaucrats. The grant money that comes in, for instance on my reservation, we get between five and seven million dollars a year in federal aid money. Yet, there are still people who don't have running water in their homes. That isn't right, the bureaucrats making sixty or seventy thousand dollars a year and at the same time their own people starving to death.

T: You say that they squander money, how do they go about squandering the money?

P: For instance, at home, we just had a tribal election, and during the campaign it came out that there was, I believe, nineteen thousand dollars in CETA [Comprehensive Employment Training Act] money that stopped with one man. The money came to him and then it just disappeared. He had the authority to sign checks with this money and he did. The checks disappeared, the cancelled checks disappeared. There is no record of what happened to the money, it's just nineteen thousand dollars that went into the blue. I think that is one of the big weaknesses in tribal leadership, that it is viewed as a way to get rich quick. An easy thing to do to make a lot of money in a hurry is to go back and get involved in tribal politics and to do this thing. I hope to be able to change that. I don't know if I can

or not, but there are several of my friends that feel the same way. If we can change things on our own reservation then maybe it will be able to spread. I'm pretty idealistic about what is going to happen. I don't ever think I will fall into the trap of getting rich quick in tribal politics, but right now that's the way it is.

T: How old are you?

P: I'm 23.

T: Did you graduate from high school?

P: Yes.

T: What got you to come out here?

P: I was in the military and when I got out I came to Ohio. There is a whole long story connected with it that I wound up here, but I've been living in Ohio for about a year and a half, although I spent the summer at home this year.

T: What did you find the summer to be like back home?

P: Pretty upsetting. A lot of my friends have become reservation Indians, which means they have no purpose in their life other than drinking. There's nothing there, there's no self-esteem, there is no pride, it's just to get to the bars and drink. It hurts me to see people that I grew up with, they are falling into the same trap that our parents did, and I'm not going to do it.

T: Let's take a couple steps back. You're on the Rosebud Reservation, are you a descendent of Lacoda? Back to the reservation, as far as housing, do you get housing projects, roads?

P: Okay, the housing projects are another rip off. The houses we have, there are three separate housing programs that were done under the Johnson administration. The worst ones are called transitionals. They were built for a cost of \$3400 to the contractor, for which he received \$10,000 a home. Now that's not much of a house. There were two other projects, one was called Mutual Self-Help, which was pretty good because you helped build your own home. They gave you the stuff and the guidance to do it. Those turned out pretty good. There was another project called the Sioux 400, where 400 homes were built, and they are death traps.

If they catch on fire they burn in ten minutes. A lot of people have died in Sioux 400's because they were shoddily-built government contracts. I wasn't pleased at all with the way the government handled that. Yet, even with those housing projects you still have people who are living in tar paper shacks, that are living in abandoned cars. The poverty and the feeling of helplessness, of being trapped, that's the kind of environment.

T: Back to housing now, what was a typical house like as far as the housing projects, what does it look like?

P: Okay, it's a two-bedroom, one-story house. It's like suburban tract housing, but a lot cheaper version. It's very poorly built, poor insulation. In some houses you will see cracks an inch or two wide in the walls. They were a get rich quick scam for some bureaucrat and some contractor. I have a very cynical view of the whole thing because . . .

T: Who were the contractors that built the housing?

P: I couldn't tell you.

T: What about transportation throughout the reservation?

P: Most people have a junk car that doesn't run really well. There is a pretty good road system. In the 1960's, when there was a lot of money around, we had a pretty good road system built. All the roads are going bad right now.

T: Can you add numbers to the roads?

P: You mean like Route 43?

T: Yes.

P: US 18 runs right through the middle of the reservation, everything else is just roads. A lot of the outlying districts are still only reachable by dirt roads.

T: Do you have a national newspaper?

P: From time to time one starts up and dies out. There is also a newspaper that is done on the reservation but it's not a native newspaper. It's called the Tod County Tribune and the editor is white and it is aimed toward the white community. It doesn't cover native news very much. It's a small-town newspaper because

there is a town right in the middle of the reservation where all the BIA people live and where the school-teachers live; it's a white community in the midst of the reservation and the newspaper is aimed at that target.

T: What are some of the articles that they discuss?

P: It's a small, weekly newspaper, articles such as what is happening in the city government. A lot of social columns like who visited who on Sunday afternoon, that sort of newspaper.

T: What about the health care?

P: You mean health service? I don't think that it is very good. Anybody that can afford to go down into Nebraska to go to the white people's doctors does. The Indian Health Services has a lot of problems. It's getting better, I really sincerely feel that it is improving, and I realize that things take time, but it still is not very good. If I lived there I would go down into Nebraska and I would go off the reservation for medical care, if there was any way that I could afford it.

T: What about the white-red relationship?

P: It's not good. It's touchy and the activism among the native people in the past few years has caused a lot of white people to be very uneasy, and rightfully so. The relationship, it's shaky. There are a lot of fights in taverns and some places of business; it is very difficult for a native person to get served, typical racist activity. The same thing with a black person that would go through the south.

T: What about any current issues or anything like that?

P: We just won a court case against the federal government, taking the federal government to court for the Treaty of 1868, which gave the seven Sioux nations all the land from the Missouri River and South Dakota west to the eastern part of the Rockies, which includes things like Rapid City, South Dakota, Mount Rushmore, the Black Hills. The government turned around and the Supreme Court awarded us one hundred and four million dollars, which isn't what we asked for, we asked for the land back. To further add to this, the BIA came back and said, "Well the United Sioux Tribes ripped off ninety some million on 638's. Are you familiar with 638's, the self-help things that Nixon did? They said, "You ripped off all this money on 638's so we're just going to take this out of the one hundred and four million," which we didn't want in the first

place. We sent a delegation to Washington this summer and we're not recognized by Carter at all. None of his people would speak to them and none of his people would have anything to do with them. They tried to set up an appointment and nobody wanted anything to do with them. I think that is the biggest political problem that is facing the Sioux tribes right now, is the Black Hills money.

T: Are there any natural resources that are up there, like coal or anything?

P: Every once in a while there is a big, oil rumor, but nobody has drilled any wells yet. Other than that there are no resources. It's pretty barren land.

T: Do you get a lot of tourism, Custer's last stand or whatever nearby?

P: The Rosebud Reservation is where Custer's last stand took place, but there are a lot of tourists that pass through there. It hasn't been as prevalent in the past few years. We had a BIA superintendent who was really into promoting tourism for a few years when I was young. There was a lot of tourism, but it has slacked off in the past, probably, ten years or so. There is a lot of potential for tourism. I think that could be one of the major industries on the reservation. It would provide a lot of jobs if somebody was willing to promote it, because there are a lot of things that could be done. It's really a beautiful country and it's too rough for industry and you can't run cattle on it. There are a lot of unemployed people that could be put into tourism support kind of stuff.

T: There are also a lot of pros and cons from tourism.

P: It's really not that good because it sort of perpetrates the stereotype. For one thing, the idea of let's go out to the reservation and look at the Indians for a week, that's one of the problems that I have with it. It's one of the possibilities that is open in giving native people jobs, and industry that would be needed to be operated, rather than the CETA type programs that sort of just hand out money. I think that something needs to be done to perpetrate . . .

T: What you're looking for is self-help?

P: Something to perpetrate a sense of self-worth.



T: Since you're into politics, this recent article with Iran and the symbolic war, how do you feel about that, "Youngstown Indians saying we cause war against Iran."

P: I'm not too sure how I feel because I haven't been discharged from the military yet, and I don't want to go back. If a war starts I'm not too excited about going. I think that America is hung up on the idea of national honor, and we're going to find ourselves in the same trap that the French were in before they got involved in Vietnam. The idea of national pride is important, but not at the expense of thousands of lives. I think that is really important, that we get those people out of there as soon as possible, but on the other hand I don't really know if it is worth sending thousands of young men over there to die.

T: What do you feel about the symbolic part of the presence on the Indian centers?

P: I think it's good that the Indian centers are acting independently of the United States government. I really don't know if the symbolic gestures are nice, but they don't mean anything, at least to me. It's good that they're not recognizing the government, but big deal. I'm sure Khomeini is not very upset that the Youngstown Indian Center has declared war.

T: Since your major is communications, some time ago there was a television program with a man, I can't remember his name, but it was an Indian program that was removed from program, do you recall it?

P: No, I don't remember anything at all about it.

T: I can't recall the names of the people or the name of the program.

P: I can't remember anything about it. My stuff with communications and broadcasting, I'm oriented more towards journalism than I am towards entertainment type stuff. I'm really not very impressed with the quality of entertainment programming so I really don't pay that much attention to it.

T: Journalism, you found, starting on one of those papers?

P: Possibly. We talked about it this summer. We're at the point right now where a friend of mine is getting involved in tribal politics and in another five years he will be in a position to run for chairman the way things look now. We spend a lot of time . . .

T: His name is what?

P: Howard Valundren.

T: He's about how old?

P: Twenty-five, twenty-six.

T: Where does he stand as far as the reservation, as far as politics, and what is his position now?

P: Pretty much the same as mine, to eliminate the rip offs, to bring help back to the people that really can't help themselves in a white society, who haven't been assimilated and who don't want to be assimilated, and to allow them to live and to have a sense of dignity.

T: Does he hold any political office at this time?

P: Yes, he works in the tribal treasurer's office. He is an auditor. He works in the treasurer's office, but he doesn't work for the treasurer; he's there to watch over what is happening.

T: His name is again?

P: Howard Valundren. His father was a tribal chairman in the 1960's. His father served on Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon's Indian Commissions.

T: His name was?

P: Kado Valundren. As far as political alliances go, they are friends with Bob Burnett. I don't know if you have heard of him. He wrote The Torture of Americans. Burnett was also an ex-tribal chairman and he still has a lot of clout. I can see an alliance coming out of the reservation.

T: He stands pretty good as far as people are concerned?

P: Yes.

T: So when is election up?

P: We just had one in October so it will be two years.

T: You have one every two years than?

P: Yes.

T: What are the limitations of office?

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P: None.

T: Does your tribal chairman have an assistant?

P: No, we have a tribal council with one representative from each of the twenty-three districts, and the chairman runs the council meetings.

T: How are your districts divided up?

P: Geographically, there are twenty-three districts scattered over about 200 miles.

T: In other words, rivers and mountains and that type of thing?

P: Yes, fence lines, big cottonwood trees.

T: So your councilmen are determined by the population or . . .

P: No, there is one from each district.

T: No matter what the population is?

P: Yes.

END OF INTERVIEW