

Interview with Betty Ann Whiteman

Interviewed by Ann Pflaum

Interviewed on August 3, 1999

Betty Ann Whiteman - BW

Ann Pflaum - AP

AP: This is Ann Pflaum. I am with Betty Ann Whiteman, who was a student at the university. She came down from Nett Lake and lived for her first two years with a family in Kenwood and, then, moved onto the campus. Betty Ann, the dates were about 1957 to 1961?

BW: Yes.

AP: One of the things we wanted to talk about was that you had a great affinity for physics and realized that you had studied it at Nett Lake, not formally the way one studies it in class but more informally. Could you expand on that because it's such an interesting point?

[faulty telephone recording]

BW: [no sound]

AP: Do you remember who was teaching you physics?

BW: [no sound]

AP: His name was Merle, M-e-r-l-e, Harris. He was in the General College.

You, then, also explained that, as you were in American Studies or other courses learning about American-Indians, what you were hearing in class was not what you knew from your own experience.

I want to recapitulate. Your point about the physics with Merle Harris was that you had a very exciting kind of *ah ha*, that you already had learned the principles.

BW: I didn't realize until after a while that, hey! why is this so easy? Why is this so interesting? It's because I already knew the principles.

AP: Can you give me an example or two? That will be helpful for our readers.

BW: Like centrifugal force and centripetal force. Of course, we didn't call it that, but we knew what these were, like when you swing something around. Of course, we knew too about gravity and things like that. We knew inclined plane, which we didn't call that. We called it [sounds like we-bak-wos], something is off center. If you tip something, then, it's very light.

AP: So you really felt at home. Did you tell me that you got an *A* in the course?

BW: No, that was English. The one I told you about was in Creative Writing. I got an *A* in physics.

AP: Do you remember what you wrote in Creative Writing, what your paper was on?

BW: It was a short story about Luann, a mythical girl.

AP: How do you spell the name?

BW: L-u-a-n-n.

AP: Did it have a Native American connection?

BW: Yes, this is a Native American name that I made up. It was everything a short story has to have.

AP: What would those elements be?

BW: Place, time, a story line, conclusion, introduction, all these different things.

AP: Then, we were saying that you had been asked to lead some courses in anthropology—is that right?—and that your anthropology professors were so impressed that they said, "Why don't you talk to our classes?"

BW: This was just in different classes where I was asked questions on the spot, right in class. In fact, one of the professors was in Sociology. He asked if I would do a presentation to the whole class. I had to get up in front of 250 students. I just didn't know how to do that kind of thing then—or at least I thought I didn't. But, I said, "I'm just going to say what I know. That's all I know to do." And it turned out all right.

AP: Do you remember what you were talking about?

BW: Yes, generally speaking, I was telling them a little bit about the life of a Native American and how we differ, like other students, say, going to school.

AP: Can you characterize for me some of those differences?

BW: Yes. One is that I didn't know how to take notes. I didn't realize why I didn't know how to take notes. I could see everybody else writing furiously and I was thinking, boy! I'm really stupid because I can't do that. I must be doing something wrong. It didn't occur to me till later that I don't have to take notes because I was understanding everything they said. Not only that, but I understood this further that the reason I couldn't take notes is it was taking too long. I understand things in my native language, so when I hear it in English, I translate it to my native language and, then, my brain, like, takes note of it and, then, I would have to translate it back into English again to write it down. That's why it took me so long to take notes. I realized that if I just didn't bother with taking notes, then I'd know everything that was going on—only I didn't know that right away.

AP: That's interesting. Is your native language Ojibwe?

BW: Yes.

AP: Did you formally study it at the university or there was no reason to because you knew it fluently?

BW: I knew it before even before the university knew anything about that. They were calling us Chippewa. That's why I said, "What we really need is a Department of Indian Studies." I had been a Native tutor and a Native thinker. I had an advantage over a lot of people because I also spoke English well. I could skip back and forth between the two languages [unclear] very easily.

AP: We also talked a little bit about your experience coming into a dormitory. Was that your junior year?

BW: I was in my third year

AP: Was it Comstock?

BW: Yes.

AP: What was that like? You'd been living with a family in Kenwood, you said?

BW: Yes. It was very fascinating because there were so many different people there. Of course, everybody is different and I just thought, isn't this neat? There's just such a rich culture here in this place. There were people from all over. I was next door to a young lady from California and we got along just fine. Our backgrounds were so very different, but we just got along real beautifully. Everybody else there was studying different things like nursing and they had already been out in the field and here I am, coming in cold. Again, I didn't realize that, hey! I'd been working in the field anyway all my life in many different things. [laughter] It took me awhile to realize why I did get along so well with people. The reason is my very background from my native culture.

AP: I want to be sure I heard what you said. You were wondering why you got along easily with people. Is that what you said?

BW: Yes.

AP: It was because, from your native culture, you had learned certain skills?

BW: Yes. I was able to translate them and understand the other people. Maybe they couldn't understand me and my native culture, but I could understand theirs. We just got along real well.

AP: Do you remember what you wore? One of the things that people look back on in the 1950s is types of clothing. Do you remember anything...?

BW: One of a kind, originally designed clothing. I had, since the age of five—this is another one of the skills that we learned—made all my own clothing all my life. In fact, I worked to get money that way for school, sewing for people.

AP: Did you do that right out of the dorm or in Kenwood?

BW: Yes, I did it in the dorm because I had my own sewing machine. I took it with me. I worked just wherever I was. I just made things; so, my clothing was like everybody else's. In fact, one time, when Matt [Stark] called me, I was over at the other place and he said, "Betty Ann, how would you like to go to banquet?" I thought, oh, no. I didn't say that, but I was thinking, oh, no, I don't have anything to wear. He said, "Do you want to?" I said, "Sure." I went downtown, got on a bus. I had about four dollars and I bought two kinds of fabric. One was a chiffon and one was a [unclear]. I hurried up and I made [unclear] sheath and, then, I made the chiffon over dress and I wore that to the banquet. Matthew was so impressed with the whole thing. He just dragged me all over telling people, "Hey! she made this dress!" [laughter] As they say, "When you're in Rome, do as the Romans do." I dressed for the occasion because I could make anything.

AP: Did you feel lonely? Did you feel exhilarated? What was your social life?

BW: I am two people. The Native person was very lonely because there was nobody anyplace. Even my good friends like Matthew and Henry Allen and Gordon Kingsley didn't understand me. I understood them. But, they were kind to me and my good friends; so it's like I was all alone but [unclear] that lived in [unclear], I had a good time. I could never revert back to my native [unclear] because nobody knew who I was. Nobody understood me. That way, I was kind of a tortured person.

AP: That would be tough, wouldn't it?

BW: Sure.

AP: Do you think that the school's understanding is better now, if you were entering as a freshman?

BW: No, unfortunately, not very much. At least, they're having a little easier time of it than we did when we first came here, a few us. We had to blaze the trail. We even did what they call, right now, the American Indian Student Association. We made it up and we called it the American Indian Student Council because we wanted to be known more as like our older people. The university helped us to do that. They allowed it, even though I was the only student at the university at times, to be a legal thing and they kept it going and, now, they're using that.

AP: Oh, wonderful.

BW: That was one of the things that we started and that we did because we felt it has to be this way. There's no reason it has to be so difficult for everybody because, hey! we live in this country, you know. We are part of it and why should we be strangers? I just speak for myself anyway: I was going to be a bridge. I was going to tell everybody and that's what I've used my life doing.

AP: You mentioned that you gave some sort of presentations in the dorm? Is that correct? You talked to your fellow students in the dorm?

BW: It wasn't a presentation so much as different things at different times. I interacted with these people and I gave them as much as I could, a verbal picture, of what it's like for us and teaching them what they wanted to know. It was my own idea that I do this because that fits in with what I told you, Ann: I'm going to teach people things. We shouldn't be strangers to each other.

AP: Were there, in the American Studies Department, people who were interested particularly in the American Indian culture? Do you remember?

BW: No. Nobody really was—but they thought they were.

AP: That's interesting. Can you tell me more about that?

BW: This is the way people did it, the way I see it. They did interviews. They asked Native people some things, but they directed the questions so the people told them what they wanted to know, not what they might tell them if they were ever given the chance. That's what I started doing when I got here with the people in Anthropology and in different places. That's why I liked General College so well because they were interested in me as an individual being, not just one of thousands. [unclear] everybody else. They liked me because I was different. I talked to people that weren't my teachers but they were my friends there. They asked me all kinds of things and I spent my whole years there teaching, in that sense.

AP: You had mentioned Gordon Kingsley and Thomas Stovall.

BW: My very, very good friends. Whenever I just couldn't make it anymore and I was so lost and said "I hate this place and I wish I could home," I'd talk to him and it would be all different in just a few minutes. [laughter]

AP: Which person was this?

BW: Gordon Kingsley. He was the director of the Counseling Bureau in General College.

AP: It's interesting. That's a wonderful string of phrases and I think that there would be a lot of students who must have had moments like that...

BW: Very [unclear].

AP: ...where they felt they couldn't make it and how lucky to have somebody like Kingsley.

BW: He's ill now. I just feel so badly for him. He did so much for everybody, not just him but others. I'm speaking of him now.

AP: I think that was the experiment in General College: they were very interested in understanding individuals and how they learned.

BW: This is why I think the university was such a great place for me. It was mostly General College and there were a few others, then, that I happened to meet, but if it would have been just the few others and not General College, I don't think I would have liked it at all. Oh, I would have stuck it out, but I wouldn't have thought it was such a great place. I feel it helped me become the most of what I could become, what I wanted to become.

AP: Are there books that you remember from some of your courses that meant a lot to you?

BW: No.

AP: So, it's more the people then?

BW: Not anything really meant very much to me. Like I said, even though I was so fascinated with physics, it wasn't that I was learning such a lot there, it was that the teacher was so good. He knew how to show us things. Then, when I would translate it into my culture, I realized I already knew that from, like I say, a different perspective. It was kind of like being home again. So, I value very greatly what I did learn in General College, even if it was learning that I already knew. It was still very worthwhile to go there.

AP: Tell me a little bit about how you got to know Matt Stark.

BW: I don't recall when I first saw him, but I think this is how it happened. For some reason—I don't even know how that happened—I got to know Dr. Henry Allen, who was the [unclear] coordinator because he knew some students that had gone up on a visit to Nett Lake. He was working with these students with [unclear] and things like that. I don't know he found out I was in town, but he called me up at my residence and he wanted to know me. That's how I got to know him before I went to school. Then, he would talk about Matt and, of course, I didn't know who Matt was

and it turned out to be Matt Stark. They were both on the Governor's Human Rights Commission and they worked together at the university. They were just so willing. It's kind of like they were marking time at the starting gate and they were both ready to go, but they didn't have anybody to go with. They met me and they said, "This is what we need. We're going to go fight for Native rights." And this is what we did since the first year I was here.

AP: What were some of the projects? You were mentioning the Native rights issues.

BW: We informed people. We told them, "This is the way it is and not this way. Just because it says this in a book, if that's wrong... It's like this." We worked on different programs like getting money or insisting we need money for help with both scholarships and loans and working on trying to get students to come down for orientation trips. We [unclear] we had to get students and these fellows helped us do it. They worked with the university and the Governor's Human Rights Commission.

We were able to do a lot of things and one of them, like I said, was the American Indian Student Council. We made that and the university allowed us to make it a legal thing. They did all the money for us. If we ever had any money—they would just pay all the bills—we'd give the money to them.

AP: Were there other Native American students on the council?

BW: One, most of the time. At times, there was one other young lady but, like I say, sometimes, I was the only one. In order to have a legal council, I was the only one, but they still allowed it to be a university activity.

AP: That must have been a little bit unusual to be the only one. Were there non-Native students?

BW: No. What we did was they allowed students from other colleges to have some of the positions there. The university allowed that even though I think their rules say you're all supposed to belong to the university.

AP: Oh, I see. You combined with other Native students from other colleges.

BW: And they let us do it.

AP: Oh, great.

BW: There's a lot of things at the university that were done that was of great service to us and our people. Once I knew these things, I used just all the energy that I had to do whatever we could and start some things, get them going.

AP: Did you find that the administration was supportive? It sounds like you did.

BW: I think they may not have been because they didn't know but they happened to have these two powerful people from the Governor's Human Rights Commission that they were already paying a salary to.

AP: So, that really helped move things along?

BW: They were the initiators and, also, they were part of the staff; so, they didn't really have to do a whole lot of talking to somebody else because they already had their positions. They already had their acceptance as good people.

AP: You were mentioning earlier also that the three of you—Allen, Stark, and you—helped nudge the creation of the American Indians Studies Department?

BW: Oh, no, that was just me.

AP: That was just you?

BW: Yes.

AP: Who did you nudge?

BW: I don't know, specifically, how it went because I wasn't in that part of it. I only was pushing them. One of the main people was Dorothy Sheldon. I'd talk with her. She was the one that used to say, "Oh! Betty Ann! come with me." She was just so friendly and all. She wasn't my teacher, but I spent a lot of time with her and she asked me a lot of things and, of course, I was willing to tell anybody who wanted to listen. She is one of the main powers behind the present Indian Studies; but, that's what I told her, too, that they really needed a Department of Indian Studies.

AP: So, Dorothy Sheldon was one of the people that helped create...?

BW: One of the ones and Norman Moen was the General College dean... he, too. I don't really know who else. I just know of these two other people who had something to do with it. I didn't know that part of it. I just came in again. I got finished with school and I had my son to take care of. Then, they called me again when they got bogged down and then they said, "We need help," so I went and taught.

AP: Do you remember approximately what year you went in and taught, then?

BW: It would be 1973.

AP: So, you had graduated in about 1961; so, that's quite a long time later, isn't it?

BW: Yes.

AP: I see. Had the university seemed to you to change between 1961 when you graduated and 1973 when you went back?

BW: Not that I could tell, no. It was all familiar to me. It was something I could do easily, like I didn't have to become reacquainted or anything like that. It was just something that I knew. The only difference, then, that I could tell was there seemed to be a greater awareness of the people there, that we need something else. We don't know it all like they had thought they did. I tried my best to stir everybody up there and I think I did. I was a loudmouth. [laughter]

AP: That is very helpful insight. Do you remember when you were a student at, say, Comstock, would you have your meals at Comstock?

BW: Yes, we ate right in the communal dining room.

AP: Did they have formals and dances and stuff like that?

BW: No, we just had visiting places and things like that. They didn't have anything like that right in the dorm that I'm aware of anyway.

AP: We talked a little bit that you were interested in judo. Did you say you were interested in judo?

BW: Yes, yes, I was.

AP: Was that through Physical Education?

BW: No, this was on my own. I was taking the two majors so I sneaked my time in whenever I could. This was just my own personal interest. I didn't have it as an interest with something else like Phy Ed. It was my own thing.

AP: Your two majors were?

BW: Sociology and anthropology.

AP: Again, the faculty that you remember most were in General College?

BW: Yes. One was Dr. Eldon Johnson who was a very great guy in Anthropology. He was the one who asked me to write with him.

AP: And you turned him down, right?

BW: No, I didn't turn him down; I just didn't say yes or no. I was thinking about it. I finally had decided really that I don't think I can because it's all set up. He's got the credibility and I don't.

AP: So, you just let him go on his own way?

BW: I don't mean anything against him. I mean the whole educational system, how it's set up. It's all staff, you know. He's got the credibility and I don't.

AP: Was he willing to listen to your thoughts and ideas or you were afraid maybe he wasn't willing to listen?

BW: I wasn't worried about him. I just meant the way that educational system is set up [unclear] their own and I thought this wouldn't give me any credibility. He's a Ph.D. and [unclear] and I'm just a Native student. Who's going to want to listen to me? I didn't dig around in the earth and I don't have anything to show, just what I knew from our people. That's why I was always [unclear] we needed a Department of Indian Studies. We needed information from these people, not from somebody [unclear] up and taking all the credit for [unclear] know and, then, they're wrong most of the time.

AP: That makes sense.

BW: He was a wise person. He listened. He liked to talk to me and ask me questions. He was the only one that ever called us... He did say, "Ojibwe", but at least he wanted it to be correct. [laughter] It is Ojibwe, but [unclear]. He would never call us Chippewa.

AP: That was a widespread mistake, wasn't it?

BW: Yes.

AP: When did it get corrected, do you think?

BW: Even the Department of Indian Studies let one man call me when they got bogged down and he had five reasons why they were going to call it Conversations with Chippewa. I said, "It can't be that." "Oh, no!" he said, "We know all those arguments and that's what we've decided upon." I said, "Then, you're wrong." I told him why and he wouldn't listen. The last reason that he gave me—one was because it's conventional—the number five reason, is because it's legal. I said, "Legal or not, it's wrong. If you're going to tell me to teach and from the first word to lie about it, get yourself a different teacher because I can't do that." So, he got mad and swore at me over the phone. He said, "Get in there and do it any blankety-blank way you want to then."

AP: Oh, dear!

BW: Yes, he was swearing at me over the phone. So, I said, "Well, I'll do that, but don't tell me how to teach Ojibwe. You don't even know how to say it." This is the thing I had been doing all along at the university, insisting that this is the way it is. Like if a professor would ask me, "How do you know?" and I would say, "Because it's my language that they're trying to speak." So, he'd ask me, "How is it, then?" I'd tell them and they would say, "I'll teach it that way from now on."

AP: That must have been quite a learning experience. Your role in helping the department was in the early 1970s then?

BW: Officially, yes; but, before that, like I said, I was loudmouth and I just insisted while I was going to the university.

AP: You really had two stages of interaction then: sort of 1957 to 1961 and, then, the early 1970s?

BW: Yes, [unclear] later.

AP: That's right. This has been extremely helpful.

Betty Ann, can I jot down your address? I want to be sure I've got that correct.

BW: Yes. It's 6812 Thirty-Fourth Avenue North, 55427-2223.

AP: What I'd like to do, if that's okay, is send you a human subjects permission form, which would, if you signed it, give me permission to have this tape transcribed.

BW: Oh, okay.

AP: Absolutely. Then, it will go in the archives for students who are interested in your experience. I think we should maybe end this tape with your sense that, to your knowledge, you were one of the first Native Americans to graduate from the university, in at least a very long time?

BW: Yes.

AP: There may have been earlier ones but...?

BW: As far as we know, put it that way.

AP: Yes. I appreciate your time. I will send you the notice and I wish you the very best.

BW: I appreciate being included in this; because, I feel very strongly that we have to get along together. I am not going to accept somebody telling me how to live and how to think. This is what I believe. I am really grateful that the people at the university [unclear] and they have acted on what they believed in. Thank you.

AP: Thank you. Very good. Take care. Bye.

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[End of the Interview]

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Betty Whiteman Interview