

June 9, 2009

Ramona Bennett (Interviewee)

Location: Rainbow Youth and Family Service, Tacoma, Washington.

Cecelia La Pointe-Gorman (Interviewer, University of Washington, Tacoma)

Cecelia: Hello, Hello, we are here today with Ramona Bennett and Matt Nagel, and my name is Cecelia La Pointe-Gorman. And we're at the rainbow center, the youth and child-

Ramona: Rainbow youth and family services, it's a Washington state licensed child placing agency.

Cecelia: Yes, and we're here to interview Ramona Bennett, she's a former council person of the Puyallup Tribe from 1968 to 1979.

Ramona: Yes Maim.

Cecelia: And Dynamite woman, she was an activist, and we would like to go back in history and recapture history for the coming generations and the community.

Ramona: Today our topic is going to be the Agency Tract. Within each reservation the United States Government held parcels of property that were going to used for farming and industrial purposes, medical, educational uses. In our situation here our Agency Tract went from up on McKinley hill, all the down through the Portland Ave corridor, and all of the way over to the river. So it was about 300 acres, and that property was not allotted, was not distributed among the tribal members. And of course the tribe didn't have membership roles at that time. But you know, those people known to be as Puyallup. Part of the Agency Tract was eventually given to the rail road. Well, actually two pieces of the property were given to the rail road.

And it was very-very common for the Bureau of Indian Affairs to gift parcels of Indian land for rail road use. The one piece of property is up McKinley hill and it was used a retirement center, for retired railroad workers. It was used for that purpose for many years. And when the railroad abandoned it, it should have reverted by to the tribe. Because that's federal law, but instead it was given to the city, and now it's elder's housing.

And it's quiet a big complex up on McKinley hill, there's probably at least seventy-eighty little tiny units there. And that should have been the tribes. And also is our proof is that part of McKinley hill is on reservation. See we're being denied recognition and none of our tribal members can get their homes in trust up there on McKinley hill because the government denies that was ever reservation.

4:13

But clearly it was, because it was part of our reservation that was gifted to the railroad. The other piece that was given to the railroad is where the tracks are down before. There was a sign there for many years, and it may still be there, that says reservation as you're coming down into the area that is known as the ceremonial grounds. Kind of laughingly because that's where a lot of drinking goes happens there, but that's another topic, in fact that is where we had our fisheries camp, down in that area.

Now another piece is the Agency Tract is our cemetery, as we talked about before, each tribe was put into a hat, and congress let the different denominations –religious denominations draw their fair share of Indian tribes and we were gotten by the Presbyterians, and so were the Nez Perez's, the Methodist got some, the Catholics got many. And is how we were sort of distributed out-the agency tract. Reservation means 'reserve.' The government never gave us

anything. It was our property that was reserved under federal treaty, which is recognized under international law. And so, part of the property was the industrial school, and that started out as a very big parcel.

And then as these crooked governmental agents conveyed out title to our agency tract in the end it was reduced down to about forty acres. And our cemetery was owed by the Presbyterians and then this hospital, it became known as the hospital property was originally an industrial school. The Puyallup Industrial School, it was a boarding school. The boarding school program was designed to alienate and isolate Indian children from whatever had traditionally been their beliefs and practices. And the theory was they could educate us out of being Indian. So the children were removed by force from their families. And taken off to these, that was a governmental school. And of course there were the Catholic boarding schools, which were operated independently, but also subsidized by the government.

7:55

And what I've been told, and now I know its true was because the birth records were very shaky, back then there wasn't finger printing or DNA, you had to take people at their word. We would lie about how old a child was to kept them being removed from their families. And so they took the children by how tall they were. I was told that and I believed it, but I didn't know it until one day when Freeman Lauderoute, who was well into his nineties, he was ninety-five-years of age, he ran away from niece. And Freeman Lauderoute was very cool, he...had a Puyallup grandma, a Puyallup mom and he had a dad that was Salish Kootenai, Flat-head Indian.

And I talked earlier about the devilfish and our relationship with Salish Kootenai people, and this is kind of proof of that too. This was way back in the day. This was in 1976. Freeman

Lauderoute who was then ninety-five-years-old ran away from his niece that was in Mount Lake Terrace. He caught a cab, he had a little suitcase and he said, "Take me to Ramona Bennett, she my Chairwoman, and she's going to know what to do." And so he caught a cab from Mount Lake Terrace. Here's this old man, and he a little tiny old man, and he come with his suitcase. And the cab driver brought him to, what was then The Tacoma Indian Center, which was...Hawthorne; it was the Hawthorne school which had been surplus by the Tacoma school district. And we had asked if we could use it.

We rented it for a buck a year and we have the building and it was our Indian Center, it was our school, it was...like the realization of a dream because we had this nice big center. And so, here comes Freeman Lauderoute with his, he had on his church shoes, those little brown shoes with the hard soles, not tennis-shoes. Freeman had a little top coat, it was probably in the middle of summer, but he had his little suitcase, he had a rope around it to hold it together. You know, what you'd expect a ninety-five-year-old tiny Indian man to do.

And he come into the center and he was looking for me, and I'd run off with Lillian, or Janice and we were journeying around, so I wasn't there. And he just asked for a chair and sat down. And he started to get kind of scared, because I wasn't coming back right away. And the staffs there starting to kind of worry about him saying, "We got this old man here waiting for Ramona, and who knows where she is?"

And so they say, "Well let's find an elder to come, and you know, kind of comfort him and make him feel a little more at home. And so, they went and got your grandpa (Cecelia's grandpa). They went and got Martin Sampson. Now Martin Sampson was really tall. And Martin Sampson was like...ninety one or ninety two. They went and got him to make this old man feel

better, well he sure made him feel better. Because, when Martin came in, Martin says, “Freeman!?” and Freeman says, “Martin!?” and they ran as good as they could and they hugged each other and they both started crying. They both were just sobbing, this old Puyallup-Salish Kootenai and this Swinomish man, well into their nineties were both in tears because, once upon a time, a long time ago, they come on the reservation (Bureau of Indian Affairs Agents) up in Swinomish and they seized this little boy, and he was like four-years-old, but he was tall. And they dragged Martin of to the government school.

And there was this little tiny guy who was like eight or nine that they hauled off the Puyallup reservation and they put them into the same place. And baby Martin was crying his little eyes out, because he was a baby and he was terrified. And Freeman was older and wiser and even knew a little bit English. And he just took his hand (Martin’s). And that was his baby, he took care of Martin, he took care of Martin, he stood right with him, because they put them in the same grade, because they were the same height. This eight-year-old and this four-year-old were the same height. Right over here, yeah, the Puyallup Industrial school, they had them babies together. And Freeman looked out for Martin, he showed him how to eat with forks, and he taught him English words, and he just took care of that baby. And then as time went by, the other kids were growing, and they started knocking Freeman around, because he was itty-bitty, tiny. And Martin was really big, and nobody pushed Freeman around, because Martin got big fast. And they were in the same grade all the way through. And so, Martin always had Freeman’s back and always took good care of him, nobody could push Freeman around because Martin was right there, front and center....you know (pushes her fists several times) you want some of this? Nobody was hurting Freeman, and so they went all the way through school together, those two, and then they lost each other because when Freeman finished, his Salish Kootenai family came

and took him. And Martin went back home to Swinomish. Lived his young years and did what he needed to do. And then... there's quite a story to that.

15:28

Martin was actually very innovative and did a lot of things that made Swinomish money. And of course families were jealous and they wanted the money. And they started shoving him and rather than fight amongst his own, he chose to just may a move. You know, be relocated, where there might be better opportunities, which in deed there were. And so, he could see that Tacoma, and Puyallup reservation was the place to be, for just being creative and just getting things done.

Now part of our treaty is healthcare. The treaty says that, "a surgeon will live among us, a teacher will live among us, that a carpenter will live a among us." You know, there are things in the treaty besides fish, shellfish and land. There some services we're entitled to. And healthcare is one of them. And so Martin led the charge for Puyallup being the location for the regional hospital, not just a local hospital, and a regional hospital. And that's how Martin came to be here in Tacoma. And that's how that reunion happened. And so, Martin and a team of about twenty people, but Martin was clearly the leader in all of the paperwork.

We needed a decent hospital, we needed our medical care. And there were regional hospital going on all over the country. I am sure Albuquerque, New Mexico had one; I'm sure the east coast had one. But for the location for the regional hospital here, it was Washington, Oregon, Montana, Idaho, and Alaska. And this was the logical spot, because of the, we're a reservation of the location of an airport, water contact. Puyallup was clearly the most appropriate spot. And so, these guys begin lobbying for it. And there had been a boarding school and

attached to the boarding school an infirmary. And in the infirmary the doctor had a house. And was a big white house, it's been knocked down in the last thirty years, I mean it stood for a long time, it was a beautiful house. And he had his living area, and he had a parlor, and he had four big rooms up stairs that be dome size, orbig room for patients, anyway they were big rooms, big enough for three or four or five patients actually... 'wards', that's what you call them. What's wrong with you guys? There's a whole room of people ...I shouldn't have to do this (Laughter).

19:30

Anyway, this doctor was there to take care of the children and the school and the staff that was the function. Anyway, the school had been through the influenza epidemic, and you guys will just have to go on the internet and look up the influenza epidemic. It occurred in 1917, 1918 and 1919 it was still on going. It killed way more people than WWI. It was worldwide, it was a pandemic, and it was just absolutely terrible.

And my mom was born in 1907, and so my mother was ten-year-old, when this epidemic occurred. She happened to be out at Saint George's boarding school when it happened. And what they did was, when the first child died, now I am really going way off topic. When the first child died, they just rolled them in a sheet, put them on a buckboard and took them home. And imagine, there's no phones, imagine you're in your house and someone comes into the yard, and they got your baby rolled up in a sheet and your baby is dead. I mean it's catastrophic, I mean how dreadful. But they (children) kept getting sick and they kept dying. And some of the staff kept getting sick. And sometimes they'd roll them up in a sheet and take them home on the buckboard and everybody there would be dead already. This was a terrible epidemic.

And what they did, in the boarding school, they had four sections. They had a little girls section and a big girl section. These are buildings; these are barracks, their dorms, barracks, and big, cold buildings. And then they had the little boys, and they had the big boy's. And they were segregated and judge...by age. And as the kid would get sick, they already had the kid segregated, and they didn't know about contagious, and they didn't know about quarantining. I think they learned. I think they learned from the influenza epidemic what not to do.

But through the black plague and cholera and all of these things, nobody had quite had gotten that. And by 1920, I am sure they had it down. But they did take the sick children to the sick child space. And these kids, I mean imagine you're in a boarding school, you got little brothers and sisters, and you're not allowed to see them and you're not allowed to know what's going on with them.

And they have a morgue in the basement, in a least one of the buildings. It was one of the most dreadful, terrible occurrences with just mass burying. And it was like the black plague. Does everybody know what "ring-around-the-rosy-and-pocket-full-of-posy" was all about? Okay, "ring-about-the-rosy-pocket-full-of-posy-ashes-ashes-all-fall-down", you wore flowers because of the stench of dead bodies. And they were burning them. And the ashes-ashes-and-all-fall-down." This influenza was every bit as dreadful as the black plague. There were so many people that died, and were a huge trauma for all of these families. And of course the families couldn't come to see the kids and the kids could see their families. And the kids couldn't even see each other. Unless, they were sisters in the same grade or something

24:32

And so, that epidemic influenced all of the boarding schools, the government and the Catholic boarding schools. And so, the Puyallup Industrial School had a very good doctor. And they actually had a place that was set up as an infirmary. And they actually had wards, everything in place, in case, just in case. And so it wasn't a coincident that Puyallup Industrial School had this great doctor and this big building that was available.... ten year earlier all of this had happened. And so we had...this facility, and so in 1928, which is ten years after the epidemic, Martin Sampson and these twenty other people had been hard at it to get the regional hospital constructed here in Tacoma, on the Puyallup reservation. And they prevailed, they were successful. They lobbied and Charles Celexus, and I think Chester Satiacum from Duwamish, Muckleshoot, and several of them, along with Martin had done a good job. And so, everything was approved.

Now Puyallup Tribe was approached officially by the United States Government, Public Health Services Administration Indian Health to sell our property which had by then diminished down to about thirty-acres because of the highway, the freeway, and everything. And so this parcel of land had been identified as all that remained of the Agency Tract. The Puyallup people were going to vote on whether or not to sell it, and then they were going to divide the proceeds from the sale. Or there was this Puyallup Commission. And you guys can look it up in the archives; you know who they are Cheryl (Puyallup Tribal researcher).

27:45

There was the Puyallup Commission of all man. Some of them were actually Puyallup. Aye (laughter) or they certainly all enrolled themselves Puyallup. And they were- I do not

believe they were elected by the members, because there was no membership role at that time. I believe they were appointed by the United States government to represent us.

And I don't know if I told you guys that how treaty time, and how that went? But the men from Boston came out and they met with our ancestors and they said, "We're here to do a treaty. Ah, send out your leaders." So all the old women went out, and they said, "No, no, your leaders!" And the old women came back and said, "I don't know what they want." And so the old men went out. And they said, "No, no your leaders!" and so they just said, "What suppose they want?" and then they said, "Well, they can't be trusted anyway" Because if you were banished...if you were bad, if you did something truly evil, and you were sent away, you went alone without your family.

And so these men from Boston clearly didn't have their families with them, so they obviously have been evil someplace else. And then our grandmas and grandpas used to call them, "Those stink white people" because they like wore wool overcoats year around, and never bathed. And they did not know about sweat lodges, and chloral fill and taking good care of themselves. They stunk and they were travelling without their families.

And that's the whole reason the Lewis and Clark taught Sacagawea along, was because they knew that if they travelled without a woman with them, they were going to be seen as evil. But, the men from Boston didn't know that. And so here they come, and they said, send out your leaders, and they rejected the old women and the old men. And so finally they sent out these young men, and they said, "Oh good, there's your leader, and now we're ready to do [business].

And then they said, "We're going to, we want to know who owns that mountain?" And the Indian said, "Who owns the mountain? That's our mother mountain! Nobody owns that

mountain! That's our mother, you can't own the mountain." And they laughed. And of course the white paper wrote a title to it.

And they got like these ski lifts up there and it's kind of like skiing down mother Mary's breasts or something (Laughter). It's absolutely offensive or something. So anyway these men from Boston they come in to make a treaty. Well the government hadn't changed a great deal, so in 1927, the government appointed these young guys to represent Puyallup. And they were young then. Meeker, Sicade and they appointed these guys to represent us.

So then all the people who thought they were Puyallup, and who were Puyallup were told to go in and register with them, and enroll with them. Because, Puyallup was going to be establishing a judgment role, and when they established that judgment role that was going to determine-we weren't told it was going to determine future membership. But we were told that it was going to [determine the] distribution of those funds. And if you could kind of think ahead, you could see that you name appearing or not appearing on those records was going to be important some place down the trail.

And so my Kya (grandmother), her name was Kathryn Jackson, she had been married to John ---McKinney. She had three children from that marriage. And then as our allotments were being stolen, and people were being murdered, including two of her sisters. She had married Charles Celexus, and she had moved to Suquamish. It wasn't really a cowardly act, but she did get out-of-dodge, and she clearly needed to because she was unprotected. Her sisters had been murdered; her husband had died, where his heart just blew up from stress from what was happening here. So she relocated over to Suquamish. But she was a Puyallup woman. And she came over here and registered herself, and she registered her three children: Gertrude, Merge and Johnny. And the Commission enrolled her and denied her children. So my mother (Gertrude)

came in, my mother at that time was roughly twenty-years-old, because, this process actually started in 1927, 1928. My mom came in and she was told to “enroll with the tribe of your father.”

Now these are matrilineal societies, hello does that make any sense? I mean that’s makes no sense whatsoever for these men. Some of whom would not have traditionally lived here, but would have married women from other villages, and they would not be here making decisions. But they had been appointed by the government to represent. So my mother was told that she her brother and her sister to enroll with the tribe of her father. And her father tribe was Swinomish, allotted Tulalip. And this tribe had nothing but problems, Puyallup had nothing but problems. We didn’t have a proverbial pot. We have been denied and deprived our fishery. Our allotments, false titles had been written for most of them. And Swinomish welcomed my mother, [and] Tulalip welcomed my mother, my mother refused, refused to enroll with either of those tribes, because she’s Puyallup.

35:37

And so, she was a Flapper, my mom was cute, with her little fringe, her little flapper shoes, and her little clinch hat that they used to wear, little spit-curls that used to go this way. She Charleston on up town and got a lawyer, and she said, “Their not going to distribute one f-in nickel until my name appears on that role.” And that’s the way it was, and she restrained them. She got injunction, and she said, “Nothing is moving until my name, and my brother and sister’s names are on the role.”

Then all these other families heard what my mom did and joined with her suit. They joined into her restraining order. And that’s how we got the McCloud’s, the William’s, there’s a whole bunch of them. My mother doubled our tribe. I m serious, she doubled the tribe. There

were so many people that had been denied, that were so upset, um my mother doubled the tribe with her lawsuit. Right on mom!

37:04

She was so stubborn, and she was so cute. You could just see a lawyer going, “Oh, can I help you” (laughter). It was during prohibition and it was a good time. It was a good time to be a cute Indian woman. So anyway, she took on the Commission, seven men, think about it. This is 1927 and 1928, men rule, when did women get to vote in America? What year was that? Come on you guys. I shouldn’t have to do all- well, it was during the time when women were down-trodden. It was a time when minority women were especially down-trodden.

And here these seven men were appointed by the United States government to represent the Puyallup tribe, you know, who did she think she was? She just kicked their butts. So in the end the Commission had to enroll all of them, or they weren’t going to get the money, and they needed the money. You know buy that model-T. Buy that model-A, you know, cool clothes, whatever people wanted back then. And so, my mother and her brother and her sister were added to the role. And when everybody else went out and bought cool clothes, and they bought cars, my mother and her brother and sister bought that piano that’s in the next room. The three of them put their money together and they bought a piano. And they all played piano. And I bet that’s the only thing left out of the 1929 judgment settlement, besides Chief Leschi’s tomb stone, of which you can walk around to the back of it, and read it. It says, “Judicially murdered, this monument erected by the people, he sacrificed his life to serve.” And it was in 1929. Okay Cheryl.

Cheryl: Can you tell me if there’s any document out there that you know about, that we can find that show reservation in 1929?

Ramona: I know that if you find that railroad grant, that originally, if you find the Bureau grant that gave that piece of property to the railroad, I beat you a cookie it says, "Agency tract." And so many people have said they were going to go that and no one has. So maybe you'll be the one that will do it.

Cheryl: I'll give it a shot.

Ramona: Okay, so anyway, it was agreed that a property was going to be sold. There was that conveyance to the, from the United States Government Bureau of Indian Affairs fiduciary responsibility to the Puyallup tribe. It was conveyed to Public Health Service Indian Health, that there was a congressional approval of dollars to compensate the Puyallup. Now the Puyallup's weren't just doing this to get a few bucks in their hands. That hospital was going to guarantee that we had the most up-to-date, modern medical services of any Indians, anywhere, conveniently located on our reservation and we were going to have jobs, and we were going to have training for jobs.

And in an area like Tacoma, which was John Wayne Theater revisited. Signs still said, "No Dogs or Indians Allowed" everywhere. Just historically, or even in contemporary times, no Indians on the police force, the fire department, just one teacher in the whole Tacoma school district worked for many years, and that was Ramona Hawthorne, and that was Meeker's daughter.

There were just no jobs and we were completely denied our treaty rights to fish, and so we had no means of support. And so the jobs that would flow from an Indian health facility were most desperately and urgently needed. Because if you think about tribes in similar circumstances to us, most of them fair about like Duwamish, there was nothing. They were abrogated, they were

terminated, and they were abolished. They were not recognized, they weren't established. The "Indian Reorganization Act" missed them entirely.¹

They were relocated, but the Puyallup had some how managed to remain right here. Yet, we were hopeless on our own reservation, and we had no means of support. And the treaty had guaranteed our ability to support ourselves. Because if you're on your bloody knees in a Welfare line, you can not live with any kind of self respect! And so that's where we were, we were desperate, and these twenty or so men led by Martin Sampson were working on getting this hospital established here, I mean that was a total life-saver for us.

That was what made the difference between our survivals. Because we were homeless, our properties, bad titles had been written to them, they been put on tax roles, and the true allottees had been murdered, we were in a hard situation. And this hospital was going to be our life's blood. It was going to be a source of arm- it was going to keep us alive. Okay we're going to end this section. Now that we got the hospital, I'll lose it in the next section.

Cecelia: Thank you, good history.

END OF SESSION

¹ "(June 18, 1934), measure enacted by the U.S. Congress, aimed at decreasing federal control of American Indian affairs and increasing Indian self-government and responsibility."
"<<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/285946/Indian-Reorganization-Act>>."