

September 3, 2009

Ramona Bennett (Interviewee)

Location: Ramona Bennett's property in Tacoma, Washington

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

Cheryl Milas (Puyallup Tribal Historian Researcher)

Clare Johnson (Puyallup Tribal Historian Researcher)

A (4)

(Setting up for the interview)

Cecelia: You want to say your name out loud?

Clare: Clare Johnson

Cecelia: Cecelia La Pointe-Gorman

Cheryl: I m Cheryl Milles at the historical preservation department for the Puyallup Tribe.

Ramona: Ramona Bennett...interviewee.

Cheryl: again...

Ramona: again, again and again...

Cecelia: September third....September third...2009.

Ramona: Your right (laughter).

Clare: So...I don't know...I know I have some topics I want to work with you about, I don't know if you had anything...um for the history book...you know...you know we're working on it. And the chapter I am working on now is...surrounds the "Self-Determination" and during the... "Self-determination Act" and how that helped fund the health authority and I...was ...I got some research done, I was hoping you could help me fill in some of the blanks there, because I know you were pretty active in the tribe...um...

Ramona: And the topic that Cheryl and I discussed is...Just the tribal programs, and how the tribal programs were set up...you know kind of the order they were set up in...and

what our little mechanism were for getting them set up...and so that would be on that same topic... I would cover that...tie that in. (Cheryl is setting up a camera) Cheryl is getting creative here... (Laughter) She don't need no f-in tripod...she's got a pen. Now if you guys wiggle the table...we're in real trouble...doing a Conan O'Brian. Are we there?

Clare: And another topic that I wanted to talk about...that kind of goes along with that...is like the establishment of Chief Leschi...the tribal school...after not having... not having it established before...

Ramona: Yes maim that's part of the topic too....Okay...in an earlier...(talks to Cheryl) Cheryl sit over there behind the camera because I tend to look at you, and I don't want to have Little Orphan Annie eyes...you know what I mean...you know what I am talking about? There...there she is. I talked before about my own life...before I came down to Puyallup...I was a volunteer Union 174...which is Auto freight. And I was doing community organization and um...organizing workers and my Dad had always been a Union Steward which was contradictory because he was a Republican...but ...contradiction is no problem in our lives...and my Dad was a white guy of course.

Anyway that's what I was doing and I drove my mom to a meeting. She wanted to go to a meeting. Her sister Alice had invited her...and so I drove her down here (From Seattle to Tacoma). Now in my volunteer life I was active with the "Seattle Indian Center", the "Seattle All American Indian Dance Club", [and] "The American Indian Women's Service League", and um...we had our eye on Fort Lawton. We were after Fort Lawton to set up services and programs for the Indian people. It was a [much] neglected population. We had a little church building downtown, which was the "Seattle Indian Center". And there were huge gaps in services for Indian people in Seattle, and there was

a big, big, big Indian population. So the key players...well of course Pearl Warren was the director of the Indian Center...she trained me to advocate for Native programs...and they used to call me Minnie Pearl, and my side-kick was Jeanne Thomas who was Warm Springs...Muckleshoot gal, and Bernie White bear who was a Colville Indian, and then a gal named Susie Pittman who was Eskimo gal...and Susie worked at Kinattecchatapi and they had a typewriter, and Bernie and I both worked in Auto-Freight. I worked at (not audible) , and he worked at Sea land. And so we both could type really fast, and so we wanted Fort Lawton and we knew we had to have a plan...we sat down...(attention is drawn by the beeping of a low battery in Cheryl's camera).Somebody's battery is dead... we have a slight problem...we have a little technical difficulty...(working on getting new battery)

7:55

Ramona: So anyway....we...we (laughs) we knew we had to have a plan...so we kept going out to Kinattecchatapi which was a neighborhood house community center, which was primary for Native Americans out there...at Holly Park Projects. We would go out there when we were off work...and we began typing up our plan...and with great detail about the service population...in how we would do outreach, and how we would staff it up and budgets...and we were such a creative little crew. I can't believe that we really did this...but we wrote a plan for a clinic, we wrote a plan for a treatment program, we wrote a plan for day-care, job training, culture center, on and on and on...including a school; early childhood ed. All the way through high school and an alternative educational program and housing and...oh my goodness...we had plans that could have used all of Fort Lawton...and um...this was just night after night...we were putting

together this plan. And I want you to know that this was before computers and that was even before self correcting typewriters...we were good! I mean we were cranking out clean copings of fully developed plans, and we had every single one of the programs was training and learning site...the daycare was connected to a community...this is all imaginary now, the daycare was connected to a community college, and we had an early childhood ed. program, and the students were our Indian people and the teachers were the staff from the college and the clinic...same old...same old, and even the job training was very well developed and everything...

Clare: What year was this going on?

Ramona: This was sixty-seven... (1967).

Clare: Okay

Ramona: Wow, that's a long time ago...anyway this is back in 1967...coming into 68. And so my mom who name was Gerhardt McKinney Brown Church asked me to drive her to a meeting...and I had just been approached by union members asking me to run for an office in the Teamster's Union, and I was pondering that because that would have been a full time job...if I were elected. But people from several different auto-freight companies came as a committee and said, "You know we like your style, and we really think we need you, and we'd like you to go on the ballot." And so I was thinking about that, and then my mom asked me to drive her to a meeting which was in the Presbyterian Church basement.

And so we got there and there was a recall...bam! You know...I been to meeting before with my mom you know...but I used to drive her...but they recalled the council

and that was Frank Wright and Jack Moses and just a whole bunch of people, you know the whole council...maybe even Jerome Matheson...but I kind of doubt it ...but maybe... its possible. But anyway they had recalled the council and um...Hattie Cross nominated me...

Clare: just at that meeting?

Ramona: Yeah! And then Toni Nelson...her daughter got up and said, "I second that nomination." And then Alice said, "Well Ramona's not enrolled." And Hattie said, "Well why she isn't enrolled?" And Alice said, "Well, because of this provision in our constitution that says, if your not born within twenty miles of the reservation you can't enrolled Puyallup." And Hattie said, "Well what's the exception?" And Alice said, "Well a permanent address on the reservation." And Hattie says, "Ramona where do you plan on being buried?" And I said, "Right out there." And she says, "Well how permanent can you get?" she says, "I make a motion that Ramona be recognized as a member the Puyallup tribe" and Toni said, "And I second that one too." And they voted...voted me in. and Hattie said, "I nominate Ramona Bennett for council," and Toni said, "I second that one again." And so my name went on the ballot...and low and behold...now mind you...they only met like once a quarter...

Clare: The council?

Ramona: Yeah, the council only met a quarter...maybe once a month...and they five dollars a meeting...they had five dollar budget a meeting for refreshments...and that's how it was...I mean it wasn't supposed to be like a whole...happening...but anyway, I got elected and um...Maisselle Bridges and Don Matheson got elected and Silas Cross

and Alice Buelber got elected and so we are now a five member council and that day...that very day...Maisselle Bridges who I sort of knew from Fort Lawton...and Janet Mc Cloud...of who I may have never met before...both asked me, "Why do you think you got elected?" And I said, well I think I got elected because I don't have any enemies. And they both said the same thing... and I don't think they were even speaking to each other at the time. They said, "Well you like to help people, and if there's anything an Indian hates is having somebody know they need help, and so your[going to] have a lot of enemies...don't worry about that" and that's probably the way it went. But I was like... the deciding vote...kind of, sort of.

Don Matheson and Maisselle Bridges both stood for the fishing rights, they had already formed the "Survival the American Indian Association," and they had already were in world war four...

Cheryl: that was something...one of our tribal members were...just going on about who started the Survival...so that's Maisselle and Don Matheson...

Ramona: Well...they aren't the only ones, they had a pretty big committee, Bruce Wilkey, Bill Pensinnol, Willy Hensly, Sandy Johnson, and those people are from the Southeast, Alaska,...I mean it was a big committee, it was...it came from something else...national youth organization...they had met.... And Hank Adams was absolutely front-and-center in all of that, and there were more people than that...I am leaving people out...because I wasn't there...they were already ongoing...they'd been at it.

17:25

I lived in a little brick house in Northeast Seattle, and I was a Teamster, and I had hardwood floors and a fireplace, and I really had a white picket fence, and I made 10,000

dollars a year, when most men were making six or seven thousand dollars a year. I was over here I was working damn good at what I did, and the Indian things that I was doing. Jeanie had dragged me into it. She knew I could sew because my mother had gone to boarding school, she needed help making outfits for the Seattle All American Indian dancers [and] I was quick, I could do flat-fell and French-seams and ah...we'd go and run around Goodwill and gather wool coats...there were wool coats back then, and we'd make the traditional wing dresses and nice breeches and bead them up and decorate them all...and you know, she was handy-dandy, [and] she taught me how to do that stuff. And I was good at it...and we dressed the Kauffman girls...you know...Patty Kauffman was one of our barbie-dolls and she was so beautiful you know. We just decorated our kids and it was fun and I loved it. Because when I was a kid, I didn't have a dress and Judy had a dress, or I thought she did. [But] I found out years later that it was Marie's dress [and] she (Judy) never had a dress either.

So that's why she makes herself outfits because she never had one. I just decorated kids, and because, maybe it a little easier, less complex. So anyway that's what I was doing, cultural stuff [and] social services things.

Silas (Cross) was a *bug* on land rights, that was his area, and he just wanted help getting...the reservation back, the titles to the properties were stolen and he was on a mission, and so, the five of us come on council and I just about when that [had] happened.

[My] husband who was a white iron worker just went bonkers on me and the whole topic of Indians. And he, my little cousins-well my step grandfather Charles Celexis died. And when he died, and he was Squamish Indian, and my Kya

(Grandmother) well I don't want to get too deep into this, it's another whole story. But when my Sapa (Grandfather) who was Swinomish died here, my Kya's sisters were raped and murdered in front of their families and dragged off, and their bodies were thrown on the railroad tracks.

And you know, these white men were kicking in cabin doors and killing the adults and this...this was back in 1912 and 13. And this was the "Cushman Act". The Cushman Act was a federal act that permitted us to sell our land, but we didn't want to sell our land. In an earlier tape I said that we were assigned guardians because we were incompetent, we couldn't read, write or speak English. And so they sold the land to each other, kept the money for probate fees and it was ugly! And it was ugly and terrible. What happened is that my Kya, when her first husband died here, um these are matrilineal societies. The women stayed, the men married out.

And so all of the women are some how distantly related and the men are from other places. But my Kya broke that, because her husband had died of a broken heart from what was happening here. She [then] moved to Squamish and she married, and her husband Charles Celexis died right at that time, in the sixties. And my aunty Doris mourned and cried and flooded her lungs and she died, and... left five little daughters. She left five little daughters and the catholic children services scooped them up, got custody and control of them through the courts and took them away.

And we were close, you know, those little girls and I were close, and the Catholics took them away. Now I was a woman and they were children. My mother was the oldest in the family, she was from the Puyallup family, the Squamish family was younger and so when Doris died, those five kids went into care, and I went to court to get

custody of them, and my husband at the time just flipped about those Indians. He didn't even see them as relatives. Or he couldn't see how important they were to me. To him they were just an intrusion and an inconvenience. And I was pissed off, because [had] I paid my [own] way, and I would have paid their way. I supported the family, he made more money, but he frittered it away.

You know he traveled with his work, and he was you know big-time-Charlie and spent his money foolishly. And I was buying property and taking care of a family. To me it was none of his damn business. And so we had this great falling out, and he got

Clare: No...you're still good...

24:47

Ramona: Am I still okay? (Laughter) so anyway, I had this friend who was going to the University of Washington named Bob Satiacum. And Bob just happened to call me and said, "Hi how are you doing?" And I said, my husband is gunning for me, literally. He asked my father if he could borrow a gun and my dad loaned him an illegal gun with a twenty bullet banana-clip and he was literally gunning for me. Because I just told him to hit the trail and I don't feel like arguing with him and he needs to leave.

And he (Bob Satiacum) said, "Are you serious, is he gunning for you?" I said, I think he's hiding behind a telephone pole across the street. And he said, "Give me about forty-five minutes," and he rolled up three cars deep, and got me and my children and brought us down here to Tacoma, and so now we're in Tacoma.

And I continued to commuting to my auto-freight job, and then I realized, this whole thing isn't working, none of its working, put the house on the market, found a buyer immediately. Oh, the other thing that happened, I left my children with a baby-

sitter, the baby-sitter was Loran Holiday- Loran Thomas....Jeffry was twelve at the time. I left [the children] with a baby-sitter. I went to go by a medicine cabinet. And [when] I came back there [were] firemen running around on the roof of my house, there's this big hole where the roof should be.

My husband fired my baby-sitter, and than left. And the little kids burned the house down. And, that's why I said I was done! (Laughter) that's it, that's it! I keep forgetting that little detail.

Alice sowed me; she was in the middle of sewing me dresses when that fire happened. Because [I] remember she used to work at the cleaners and she [when] she had time she used to make beautiful clothes. And so, she had my made me like three or four dresses. You know it was a paid gig, but she had done some sewing for me.

Well after the house burned down, that's all the clothes I had, because everything we owned burned. We had, I had good insurance. I was so disgusted, so anyway to say we had problems in our marriage would be an understatement. So anyway, so here I am, I live in Tacoma, and I am on the council, this has already occurred.

And so, now I got time. And my husband Clyde Bill always says, "Timing is everything." And you know one of the reasons I came down here to Puyallup is [there] we're [were]climbing fences, climbing the bluff, we're running through gates, we're typing all night, trying to do, do...something good for the Seattle Native population.

And when I drove my mommy down here, it was to see what my own tribe had or didn't have. And when I got down here I found out we had no land, no control over our rivers. The Presbyterians owned our bones. There was no health care. We had no educational services. We had a broken typewriter. We had a broken filing cabinet. The

Bureau of Indian Affairs controlled all our records. And we had not had an updated enrollment since 1929. And what do you see that as? I saw it as an opportunity, there is so much to do, and how could you go wrong?

So anyway, I just hit the ground running. I told those guys, I got your back, I've got your back, you know whatever we need to do with land, whatever we need to do with fishing, I am there, I am on it, but I wanted to do services. That's what I can do, I'm good at that stuff, and that's what I want to do. So I just started to looking around, we had no space, we didn't have an office, we had no staff.

30:20

And so, up in Seattle, working with Bernie and Jeanie and Susie and all of those guys. We have been working with the Asian population, and we were working with the Black Workers Coalitions, we were working with the Peace Strike people, and we were working with a lot of coalitions. So I went up to Urban League, up hilltop and I just went in and I introduced myself to Tom Dixon and I said, hello my name is Ramona Bennett. And we're going to organize the Puyallup tribe, or reorganize the Puyallup tribe. And we're going to work on recognition of our treaty rights. And we have no office, we have no support -anything. And I need a base to work from. And he said, "Well hello Ramona Bennett," he said, "there's your desk. There's your phone. There's your copy machine. There's your secretary. I don't even know if they had facsimile machines back then, but he said, "Just use it as long as you need to."

Clair: Now was this about the same time in 1967, or was this a little bit later?

Ramona: This was sixty-eight. I was elected to council in sixty-eight. I was elected in June, and my life in Seattle unraveled just immediately thereafter. And then these people

were saying, "Does that mean that you're not going to run for the Union?" and yea, that is probably exactly what it means.

Well, anyway I set up my little desk there as headquarters. And I knew very little about the Bureau of Indian Affairs because, and Indian health, because in an urban setting it's more like [the] United Good Neighbors, and different foundations, and possibly city or county shares and stuff like that. Its different, a whole different funding base.

And so I just started calling around to different tribes and different places. And that back when all call that you made were like long distance. And is that okay? And Urban League said, "Go on ahead and do what you have to do." And so I found out where all of the head-quarters for things were, and just started telling them , you know we're going to be filing applications for this and that, and we need to get this and that going, and just started getting [the] wheels moving.

One of the first things I was able to achieve is there was this little silver trailer that they used to use for dental. Do you remember that? (Yes from interviewers) There's was this little silver trailer. See, when Cecelia's grandfather (Martin J. Sampson) and that committee lobbied for the hospital, it was supposed to guarantee us the most modern up-to date medical services of any Indians in this whole region: Alaska, Montana, Idaho, and Washington, Oregon. We were supposed to have the primo medical services and we had been reduced to nothing!

So I called Indian Health and told them, healthcare is a treaty right and we want our treaty right, we want our healthcare! And they said, "We can send the dental trailer." And so that was the first breakthrough.

Clair: Is that when they only came once a year or like a mobile...

Ramona: No, it just came in a few weeks, and I found out that the only family that was registered as an on reservation family for healthcare was the Wright family. They were the only... eleven people on their healthcare service population. And I said, well there's way more than eleven of us! And we need healthcare.

I just started rattling cages and...letting the Bureau of Indian Affairs know that we had governmental tasks that we needed to perform. And I asked the Presbyterians, now sometime have gone by, and the Bureau didn't recognize the elections, because they liked the Wrights, the Frank Wright government. And so they didn't recognize us, and so us- and okay, here we go with Self-Determination. In 1969 I went back, and I was a little old for this, because I was in my late-twenties. But I went back to the National Indian used workshop. And this is in 1969 and it's right in the middle of the peace strikes. And there's a lot going on nationally, the poor people campaign happened the year before, there were peace strikes. Vietnam was raging, and all these young Indian people had come to Washington D.C. for these trainings and this workshop. And a bunch of them went to see Bob Hope. Now Bob Hope and Bing Crosby paid a lot of money to fight Indian rights. We always think that maybe Bing Crosby who grew up here in Tacoma must have been flirting around with some Indian girl that shut him down, because he had great hate for Indians. [He] and Bob Hope spent a lot of money fighting Indian rights.

And so these Indians really went to see Bob Hope and as they should have they got tear-gassed as innocent by-standers. And we know better than to be innocent by-standers. Allison Bridges, who is Allison Gottfriedson and Merge Matheson, also was Merge Big-man. and [I] don't know what her current last name is, and [I] had driven back in my little volts wagon to this event.

And I took off, I went off on a little side journey. And I heard these women singing, and I just followed the sounds of their voices. And the women would come up the sidewalk singing, and they were going to the Welfare Office, they were all black women, and they we're singing "We will over come", or "the people united will never be defeated," or whatever it was they were singing.

They would start singing way down the avenue, and they would walk on up, and they get right up the doors of the welfare office, and these pigs would come and beat them so hard that they were breaking bones. And these women were being beat down and thrown into Paddy-wagons. And then another bunch would come, and this had been going on all day, and they were getting arrested, and they were getting beat and getting arrested. But they kept coming and I said, what's the issue?

And what had happened is, all educational funding had been cut by the District of Columbia and all educational funding for welfare parents, [who] needed to breakout of ignorance and poverty.

And so they just kept coming. Cohen is the guy's last name. Hank (Adams) would know what his first name was. I went into Cohen's office and said what I had seen, and he was the one running the workshop. And his wife was a black woman [and] the organizer for that strike, for that action.

And it was all they could do, you know? If all that you have is your body, and that is all you have to put up, then that's what you have to put up. So these women so desperately wanted to educate their way out of their situation. And they stood for that. And you can not believe the blood, I mean you can not believe how hard those pigs were

hitting them, and they didn't cry out, they didn't scream, they didn't back up, they just kept coming.

And I went and got Merge and Allison, and said, you've got to see this, you've really got to see this. And so they came and they watched too. And it was settled, and the money was reinstated. Because there were cameras everywhere, and people all over the world saw how desperately these women wanted to get out of that trap.

And if you've never been back to Washington D.C., just go up those side streets, you can't believe what a third-world ghetto these poor people live in, it's so violent, and so crowded. I mean its like, if you saw "slum dog millionaire" is one step over from that. So we were back in our hotel that nigh, like Clyde says, "Timing is everything," and I had made so many calls to the Bureau of Indian Affairs for protection for our fishermen.

42:15

When our fisherman would be out there fishing, they had vigilantes, they had game wardens, they had fishery pigs, they'd [were] getting beat up, it was ugly, and it was awful! You know, the way our fishermen were treated [was] like thieves, their children would watch them being dragged off by these cops Oh it was nasty.

We were there at the hotel (In Washington, DC) and we had radio on maybe, or a television. And President Nixon made a speech, and part of the speech was, "We have so failed in our fiduciary responsibilities for the protection of Indian rights. And there is such waste in the delivery of Indian services. And I have determined the Indians would be better off if they did it themselves." And we just looked at each other, and said, we're going to have to do it ourselves.

And so we established our fishing camp, it must have been in seventy (1970) because we came straight back from Washington D.C. and when I got back I talked to Bob (Satiacum). And we talked about setting up a fishing camp of witnesses.

You know, a camp for people to do some kind of security and stand [as]witness, and so Bob and myself, and Danny and Vicki and my son Eric...went over across the river, over by what's called Brando's Landing. Because, as you guys know, Marlon Brando had come out earlier with Bob, here [for] a demonstration.

We went over there, and it's just in the afternoon, and we build a little fire, a little fire about this big, a little tiny-tiny little fire. Now we had talked on the phone when we made our plan to get together. We set up this itty-bitty little-bon-fire and we're all just kind of standing around, and maybe Lisa, maybe Bob's daughter Lisa was there too. Maybe even Kara, I m not sure, but I know Danny was there.

And then here comes four motorcycle cops, four cop cars, and a fire engine and they came and they put out our bonfire. Hello? How did they know we were going to get together? Tapped phones perhaps? I certainly didn't tell anyone and I know Bob didn't.

Cheryl: There were a lot of tap phones back in those days...

END SESSION