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Guest Speaker: Ramona Bennett (Interviewee)

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Oral History and Memory Project

My mother was Puyallup tribal member, and under our constitution- as with many of the tribes, it's descendant. My father was one-eighth Cheyenne. Which is another story entirely, but I actually grew up in an urban setting. I was a young child in Seattle, in my more formative years we were over in Bremerton. Then we returned to Seattle when I was pre-teen, and through out my life my mother had very strong attitudes. You could probably consider her racist.

Because she was very, had very supremacist attitudes about Indians, she had gone through the boarding school system, and she had the best working vocabulary-English working vocabulary of anyone I've met in my life. She had-she was good with words and she talked and she truly believed in her Indian people.

Her childhood as Puyallup was beyond traumatic, she was born in 1907. And Puyallup, as you probably know has the city of Tacoma standing on it, long with Fife, Browns Point, Dash Point, Edgewood, it's a very, some very valuable realty estates, so our tribe was hit very hard in the land-grab. My mother was a young child when that was taking place. There was something called the Cushman Act, and the Cushman Act gave the Puyallup's permission to sell their property. Now no Puyallup wanted to sell their property, but this was a federal authorization and it resulted in genocide.

Do any of you know what genocide is? Have any of you ever said the word? It's full scale genocide on the Puyallup reservation. And what happened is these Indians were declared incompetent, we couldn't read, write or speak English, and because we couldn't

read, write or speak English we were assigned guardians. And the guardians sold the land to each other, kept the money for probate fees and then removed ...the Indian people by force. And the racism was so extreme, see like all these coast Indian people we had a long house tradition, mutually protected societies, the elders knew how to do things. Little children have a lot of energy, so these little kids, they could gather things, they could pick things, they could bring things, and they could do things and the old people would teach them how to do them. (Speaking about interview arrangement) Look at me; don't look at that (screen)...

Well anyway...we didn't have nursing homes because the elders were a value. We didn't have orphanages because the children were a value. The people in the middle years harvested and built and did useful things. Everyone had a role, everyone was needed, and everyone was valued. And our societies were solid healthy societies and we matrilineal and the women were all related, closer then distantly and life was good. But they did the reservation system and the allotments, then our families had to be divided up and live on these partials of land, and it was a lose it or use it. So now you have families in isolated little cabins, totally on their own, living within is racist society.

And these men would have a few drinks and just go kick in a cabin door, rape everybody, murder the adults and throw the bodies on the railroad tracks. This was happening when my mother was a small young child. And two of her aunties were murdered that way. Her aunty Lucy and her aunty Jenny, both were killed that way when my mother was a little young girl. And to her old woman days she still cried for her auntie Jenny, who was only nineteen when she was murdered. And so this...way of life these people enjoyed was totally destructive. As a result of these land grabs of these

people selling off properties, putting them on tax roles and selling them off. Our Puyallup people found themselves homeless on our own reservation.

And the treaties provided for a means of support, for hunting and gathering and harvesting salmon, and shellfish. If you can support your family you can live with dignity. If you have no means of taking care of your family, if you're on your bloody knees in some welfare line, than you don't have dignity. And our people suffered a deprivation of fishing for ninety-years, ninety-years. That's twice the length of our medium life span.

And what happened is- we used to have traps and wheels. We had very effective ways of harvesting. They would set up these poles and it would just herd the fish into the wheels, or the fish traps, and we took what we needed. We just took what we needed. We always had, and our major fishery was the silver salmon, that was like the, that was the big...run for our people and what we had done is we burned off this prairie. Because it's a rainforest...the trees are like big round and sky high. And so we had burned off this prairie, ---Puyallup canoe-men out come home, you know the guys married out, you don't marry someone from your own village, or you'll have funny children.

So these men had married out...the women stayed. And so the men would come with their wives, in-laws, outlaws, bring their pony so they could race. And when the silver salmon come in, that was the big harvest. The guys all came home, they'd do footraces, they had gymnastics, bone-games, house races, naming, weddings, memorials, everything, everything happened when the silver salmon comes in. And so these white people were moving into the area, and some of them were traders, and some of them were farmers ...all different kinds of people. And so, our Puyallup people began inviting some

of the nicer ones, come join us-you know, come feast with us, and dance with us, and if you got a fast horse you could race it, try your luck at the bone-games,...come on over. And today that event is called the Puyallup Fair. It happens when the silver salmon comes in-still to this day- and it's called the Puyallup Fair. And if you go out to the Puyallup Fair grounds to their offices, it shows the founding fathers, and it's all these old white men...oh' well that's how it is.

And that's how it was, give an inch and they'd take it all over. And that's how exactly it was on that reservation. Well my mom's dad was, his real name was "Sal-a-qwab", he was Swinomish Indian and he had married My Kya (grandma). And was living down there at Puyallup, and he could read, write and speak English. Because in his very early years he was fostered by a Scotsman named Johnny L. McKinney, and he was given ---- by that white man. And so he had control of the English language, and he had great writing skills and he was a contractor, he was an architect. He brought in baseball teams, and he could play the fiddle like magic. He was a wonderful, wonderful fiddle player because that Scotsman taught him how to play the fiddle and so he was very beloved and in demand. And if the white people were having a party, they didn't want Indians around, but he was the best fiddle player, so they would have to invite him. So these Indians would get all dressed up and go to these white peoples parties. And he believed that if you did a job and you were an Indian, you should charge more because Indians do a better job. And he got the Tala (money) he made the money. He built mansions, and little office buildings and all kinds of things. And he thought everyone was going to be able to live side by side and work together. Much like Chief Leschi thought that...seventy something years earlier. But when this Cushman Act happened, and this

land grab started, he was trying to find representation for these Indians, trying to get them a lawyer. But the railroad people, the bank people, the timber people, they were all in on it...they were all corrupt. And so he's trying to get an attorney for someone one day, and the next day he's doing their funeral. And I have his little journals...he's be trying to help Bert Charlie one day with this...his property being put on the tax rolls, and the next day Bert Charlie would be murdered, he be building a coffin for him. And he died of a broken heart at forty-five. He just died, his heart exploded. His sister-in-laws had been murdered, people all around him were being murdered and he was frantic and it killed him. And just immediately after that the boarding schools came and snatched my mother, she was five. And dragged her off, and her sisters right behind her, and she was taken off the reservation for the majority of her life. After boarding school she married Jack Brown, who was Tulalip, young man. He was killed in a logging accident and they lived up Swinomish, because that was the tribe of her father. And so my mom in that boarding school system mastered all of the-they called them the domestic scientist skills,

I worked for a Jewish wholesaler in Chicago, and I had these really crazy bosses. And...one day, one of them done something, and I cursed him out in what I thought was prefect Puyallup. And he almost fainted, he was so shocked, he aghast. And I called my mother and I said, Mamma how come I speak Yiddish? I really cursed at him in his-own language. And she said when I was a little girl, I went to Saint Georges, Tulalip Indian School, and Puyallup Industrial School, and what happened at the catholic boarding school is, they used to rent us kids out. The little boys were in the agricultural sciences program and they rented them out to white farmers. And so they learned how to shovel white people cow and horse poop, and how to build white peoples fences, and how to

plant white peoples gardens and paint white peoples houses and all of those things. And the little girls learned how to wash white peoples dishes, do white peoples. And so she learned Yiddish and taught me Yiddish and Puyallup both. And so that was how-I come to curse my Jewish boss out in Yiddish.

So anyway she- my mom taught me that these white people did not know how to preserve their food. She taught me that the reason they put a bunch of spices on foods was because they didn't know how to smoke...their meats, and fishes and shellfishes. That they were used to eating rotten food, and so they put a lot of sauces on them. She taught me that, if I wanted to study savages, to study European history. She told me-now during WWII-started when I was a little tiny girl. And she told me that the Japanese people had written language while the Europeans were still swinging from tree to tree by their tails. And so she taught all these things, and so I go off to school, my mother was a nut.

We're at school, this was like-I couldn't go to kindergarten because my mom didn't work out of the home, but in first grade the teacher said, "Does anyone know, Mary had a little lamb?" And of course I knew Mary had a little lamb. Mary had a little lamb, her father shoots it dead, and now it goes to school with her between to hunks of bread." See this is the kind of stuff my mom taught me. (laughter) and so I go to school, and on the-there's a blackboard, and over the blackboard there's A is for apple, B is for ball, and I is for Indian. And I was always the only Indian besides the Indian up over the blackboard. And I loved that, because I was the only one that had my own letter. And see they abolished all that, and I work with a lot of adoptees, and the only day that they felt real is when their team, which was the braves or the warriors painted up, see how they

abolished all that which made isolated Indian feel good. So in school I always said I was Indian. And these teachers would say, "Honey, you don't have to admit that, you could pass for white." And I'd be like, oh my-gosh, why would anyone want to be white. I never could get it, but there were "No dogs or Indians Allowed" signs up still when I was a little girl. I am seventy so there were "No dogs or Indians" signs. So when I be travelling with my mother and father, I would always have that choice of going into the facility with my father, or peeing in the bushes with my mother. What do you think I did? Of course I stuck with my mother.

And so coming up now I had these really strong ideas about what had happened, and as a kid it was all John Wayne theater and so I thought that all the Indians died circling the wagons, except for a couple of families at Puyallup and one at Suquamish and one up Swinomish, the William's, the Alexis's, the Cross's, I thought those were the only survivors. Because, you know in the movies all the Indians get killed. And that's all the Indians I ever saw. And so I thought it was just these tiny, few little Indians that survived. Can you imagine how happy I was when I found out that was wrong? Right on, it was just kind of perfect.

I drove my mom to a Puyallup general meeting, I've been very active with the Seattle Indian Center, "American Indian Women's Service Leagues", and the "All American Indian Dance Club," because my mom done the domestic science program, she was a really good sewer, and so she had taught me how to sew. And so I made really good regalia and so, I was just backing these kids up, by dressing them pretty and helping them get to the pow wows. I went to the meeting....I went to this tribal meeting, and I got elected to the tribal council! Timing is everything! And I had been working with Bernie

Whitebear up Seattle. And what we would do is fight for Fort Lawton, if we got Fort Lawton. And so I typed really fast and so did Bernie. And so we had done all of the stuff for daycares, culture programs, work experience, clinics, treatment centers, schools, everything. We've written drafts on everything. So when I got elected to Puyallup Tribal council we didn't have any of those things down in Puyallup. We didn't have [anything]. We didn't have undisputed title to one acre. The Presbyterians owned our cemetery even. The state controlled the river, all the titles to all the properties had been alienated except for just a half dozen families had held onto small partials, and we hadn't had an updated roll since 1929, and it was 1968, and we have a medium life-span of forty-five years, so we were getting down to zippy de do.

What an opportunity, you can't even make a mistake when something like that happens, because everything so screwed up already. There's no way you can mess it up. And there were two people that come on council at the same time. Maisselle Bridges and Don Matheson, and they were like, after the fishing rights. And then Alice Buelber and Silas Cross were like on the land issues. So the five of us come on council at the same time, and we just decided that we'd back each other up. They'd back me up for going for services, and I'd back them up going for the land rights and fishing rights. And we were just off and running. There was nothing but opportunities to get things done. You know, I had this bumper-sticker that said, "Good leaders are hard to find, so I'm following myself." (laughter). I want you guys, I don't even think there are any Indian leaders because I never met one Indian follower. But there are ideas, and there are people that work. And it happened that in the beginning they shoved me out in front. Well, they sent



me to spy at first, because nobody knew who I was, and I don't look like an Indian. And so they would just sent me with a clipboard, and I'd be right-right there with the enemy just taking good notes and conversing nicely. And I had grown up with a fellow hostile attitude, so I wasn't uncomfortable at all.

My dad was a white man and thought minority people were pretty much so useless and worthless. But then, you know I am light skinned, and so he valued me and taught me a lot. But I grew up with those attitudes so I not uncomfortable with them at all. And it made me really effective lobbyist, because I want you to know when these Indian delegations go out and meet these big shots. Their like wanting to get their picture taken with their enemies! I'm serious! They look up to these people, and I don't, and I didn't. And so when I would meet these people, I'd be there to get something done. You know whatever it was, whatever right it was, because our healthcare and our education, all these things-these are rights. There treaty rights, their not giving us anything, they have nothing to give, they came with nothing, and we had everything. The treaties didn't give us anything.

Reservations means reserve, it means reserve; it means it's ours, nobody gave us nothing. I think I had the right attitude, and so I was pushed to the front to speak and right in organize, and I am grateful and thankful for those opportunities. And I came with a pocket full of anger over what had happened to my Sapa (Grandpa), what had happened to my grand-aunts, what had happened to people, what had happened to all of our people. I came very pissed-off and I was able to channel that anger into constructive activity-and that works. So if you find yourself angry about something don't go to the bottom of a bottle, don't let your anger disable you. Channel it, use that energy, angry energy isn't

bad energy if you direct it in a good way. And so we were able to-as a council, we were able to set up an armed fishing camp to protect our fishermen. Because the United States government, which had that fiduciary responsibility, who was failing to do so. And we had already lost the fishing rights in state court, but we got them to re-open it in federal court by showing up on the news all over Europe, and all over the east coast people really looked at their televisions and thought they were watching John Wayne theater because we were Indians getting clubbed and dragged and beat up. And it was us! But they hit their phones and said, "What are you doing to those Indians? And don't they have a right to fish?" And that resulted in U.S. verses Washington which was the Boldt decision, is still being negotiated today because of the shellfish.

And we evicted the state out of the hospital building that was our property that had been illegally conveyed and was being transferred to Washington State. We took extreme actions because extreme actions were necessary. We tried every litigated and administrative process you can imagine. You know, if walking on my ears would have done it, I would have tried that, but there was nothing that we could do, except what we did. And the movement sang, "By whatever means necessary" it was a good time, because it was during the peace strikes, the Southern Christian Conference, was having the Poor Peoples Campaign, there were the Black Panthers were active, the Gray Panthers were active, it was time of social and political change. And timing is everything, we just happen to be in the right place and the right time, and able to work with coalitions and so we engaged a lot of other people in working with us, and assisting us. And the Urban League Minority Concerns Task Force, a whole bunch of religious coalitions, Jewish Anti-defamation league, there was an Asian coalition, El Central De La Rosa, you

know the Spanish speaking population, we coalesced with all of them. We didn't do anything alone; we had good help on all sides.

And we stepped up and we helped these other coalitions get things done too. And when I used to say we, my mom used to say, "You have a rat in your pocket?" Because a lot of times there wasn't anyone, but me maybe and a couple of other people-but that Indian presence lent a lot of strength to these different activities and so-that's how I come to be where I was. And those are the kinds of problems we addressed. And I did a lot of the writing for our Chief Leschi...how many of you been to our Chief Leschi school down there in Tacoma?

I did a lot of the original grant work for that, and the clinic, and the treatment program, and the work experience staff, and the daycare. Because that was my strength, was actually writing. And so the five of us on that council got a lot done, Suzette Mills later on came into to fill a term and she is my relative, and she's like a sister. And we ate a lot of tear-gas together. At one point I was looking at thirty-five years in prison for just standing up and saying the Indians have a right to life, and Indians have a right to live, and we have a right to a reasonable quality of life, and we have a right to a sense of permanence. Permanence-permanence meaning, we been here forever, we're going be here forever. Because we're seen as a passing thing; that we could be terminated, that we could be abolished, that somehow we could be just swept away and their life would be better without us.

And so just that sense of permanence and as Indian people, we need to think generationally. You know what that means-generationally?-you need to know-okay chief Leschi put down his life for his Indian people. Chief Leschi had everything. He was rich

by white standards, he had lots of horses, had a nice home, well-educated guy. But when it came right down to the crunch...he stood against the white people, they were doing a treaty that denied his people access to the salmon and the clams and the things that we need to live. He stood against them and they killed him. They murdered him. He went on trial and he was found innocent, then they re-tried him in a military court and they hung him. They killed him. And Indians come everywhere, Indians come from everywhere and they set up camps and they cried and they prayed and they sang. And they prayed that the government would change its mind, and the government murdered Chief Leschi.

And you know what, if he had it to do over again, he's do it over again because he loves you. And he knew if he didn't stand for the Indian people, that the future generations were going to have nothing. And he knew that he loved us, without ever seeing our faces-he though generationally, and that's how we have to think. That's how we have to think, we have to leave something good for the ones coming after us, because we know we love them. My Kya told me, "If you want to walk with liars and fools, cowards and thieves, be that way and you will in this world, and across the veil into the next world. If you want to walk with liars, fools, cowards, thieves, just are that way and you will, this world, next world."

When they, when 550 pigs were pointing guns at us, when we were in that armed fishing camp, you think I ran? You think I cried? Oh Hell no! I could have been shot! You think I want to spend eternity with cowards? In other words I was afraid to be afraid. Think about that. It's an odd concept, but that's how it was. I-but no way am I going to run, I wouldn't cry, I wouldn't back down, you can't, you could get killed on the spot and then where would you be? Just in eternity with all these cowards-who wants to be that

way? And so you know, if you think generationally, and what my Kia said, you're going to be okay. I feel okay. Its stuff about ethics, its stuff about how you think...

Lillian Ortiz told me, "A lot of these Indians that are learning these languages, they might as well be parrots or tape-recorders, because their learning words, but their really not learning how to think." So try to learn how to think...what does being Indian really mean to you? Is it all about courage, and honesty, is it all about compassion? What is it all about? Try to think that way. Try to think how your ancestors thought, and than the words could make good sense. Okay we've got...we've got about seven minutes. Do we have seven good questions out there; I will do them in twenty-five words or less.

**Anonymous:** After being through all those experiences, how does it feel to be speaking at a tribal college?

**Ramona:** You know I didn't think- you know people asked me, "How does it feel to see your great grandchildren enjoying the programs that you worked to establish? They ask me that. I go; I expected to be killed in Puyallup camp. I expected to be killed in the hospital. I didn't think I was going to be anywhere talking to anyone. I truly thought we were going to be killed there. And that's the truth. But I really believe in education, I believe education for is a life time process, it doesn't stop at eight-years, twelve-years-sixteen-years. For Indian people it's a life long process. And I remember Ella O'Keno and Tillie Cavanaugh, they were in their eighties, and they were taking computer classes. Because learning is a life long process for us; and we need to be able to walk in both worlds. We need to do our. They did a study on drug and alcohol use, and what they found is that, if you believe that your parents were competent in the white world, you

know held a good job, had a good education, then you'd be likely to use drugs. If you felt like your parents were successful in a Indian world, you know, went to pow wows, did those different things, then you'd be more likely to use alcohol. But if you felt that your parents were competent in both worlds, you more likely to be more recreational chemically free.

That's an odd thought, isn't it? But if you felt like your parents were still solidly Indian, but could survive in that white world, that you be a lot less likely to have problems. And so, that's thinking generationally...if you keep your Indian ways and then learn all of these white people's skills, than maybe your future family will be less problematic. So I'm proud of all of you guys. I really believe that you've got to be able to walk in that world. They also did a study, when families stop being Indian. And do you know what they found? They stop being Indian when they have no drum. The drum is the heart beat of our people and if you go into a home, and the people are all brown and there is no drum anywhere, there gone. Good-bye, sorry...

**(Student):** you talk about your tribe being matrilineal verses how it is today, we have tribal councils, and it's not the old way where we used to....

**Ramona:** A lot has changed in our tribe; today we have just two women on council. And actually I was the first chairwoman to make it into the National Chair-mans Association, really! I got delegated...where out of time. It's a good story. I got right after Puyallup camp, right after all of that. I got sent to a Tribal Chair-mans Association meeting, and I go there, and they denied me my credentials, they said, "It's a Chair-mans Association, and you'll have to wait in the lobby with the chairmen's wives." And I said, All hell no! My people have been shit on, shot at, dragged, gassed [and] I am looking at thirty-five

years in prison. Our tribe, my people have fought their way out of the ashes and you are not telling my people who they can delegate. Give me my credentials right now! And they did. They did, and I went and told this story at an A --- meeting, which is a national meeting of Indian women, Indian organization, and I go in, and right from the get they have upon this big flip board, they have, these men are deciding on what our important resources are.

You know, timber, minerals, water, bah bah-bah, and I raised my hand and said, Mr. Chairman, three-hundred people turn around because it's a woman's voice. I said, children! Our children are our most important natural resource and our children are being removed from our reservation by these different social work organizations, and religious organizations. And everybody just shocked. So a Pima man said, "Well, we don't have a problem" and [I asked] where are you from? And he told me. ----in this little remote town of Rainier, children are being raised by a white family that adopted him through some agency. And he said, "Really?" and then this Sioux guys says, "Don't feel bad honey, let me buy you a drink." What? And Joe De la Cruz and Elmer Selvia, Phillip Martin.