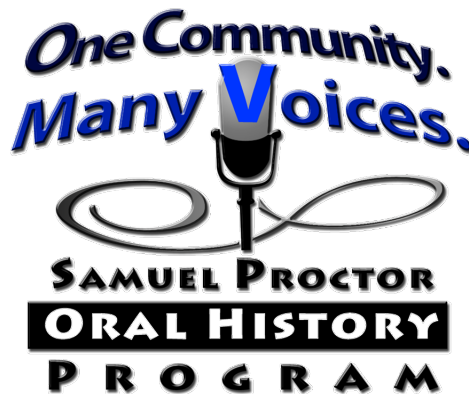


Russell James Willis

**Southeastern Indian Oral History Project
MISS CHOC-004**

Interview by:

**John K. Mahon
November 4, 1973**



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MISS CHOC 004 Russell James Willis
Southeastern Indian Oral History Project (SIOHP)
Interviewed by John K. Mahon on November 4, 1973
46 minutes | 26 pages

Abstract: Russell Willis describes his work in health education. He assists Choctaw individuals with little English in scheduling and attending medical appointments. He relates the history of this program and the training he attended in Tucson, Arizona. He speaks about his early life with his father, who was a sharecropper, and his decision to go to school to learn English. He discusses his opinions on Christianity and describes traditional Medicine Men who worked in the community. He tells a story his uncle told him about how before White men came to the land, there were plenty of wild animals to hunt that are now almost gone. He discusses how people must now purchase fishing licenses in order to fish. Finally, he recalls learning to drive.

Keywords: [Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians; Mississippi--Choctaw; Health; Oral biography]

SAMUEL PROCTOR
ORAL HISTORY
P R O G R A M
University of Florida

MISS CHOC 004

Interviewee: Russell James Willis

Interviewer: John K. Mahon

Date of Interview: November 4 ,1973

M: I'm sitting here with Mr. Russell Willis. And it's about twenty minutes of twelve of November 4. We're sitting in a part of the principal's office of Central Choctaw High School. And Mr. Willis, would you just please say your name?

W: My whole name?

M: Please.

W: Russell James Willis.

M: Russell James Willis?

W: Uh-huh. Russell James Willis. And I'm married, and I been born when it was 1940, October eleven. And I'm thirty-three years old now. And I got two kids, one boy and one girl.

M: Now Mr. Willis, which one of the settlements around here do you belong to? Like Pearl River or what? Which one of 'em?

W: I'm livin' in Red Water community.

M: I see.

W: And they're only about eighty-five families over there, and probably about— population, they could be about three hundred. But it's only eighty-five families over there—

M: Do you mean a place with all three hundred?

W: Uh-huh.

M: Has it ever had three hundred in the past?

W: Well, yeah, I believe there was, but since I started working with this, they call it community health representative you know, I've been keep the list since I started,

and I been keep the list and that's where I had it, and there's only 356 family in that community. I mean three hundred population, 356 population in that community. And eighty-five families in that community.

M: Well, now, I was just talking to Mr. Wilson and he's from your community, too, Red Water, and he's in family education, is this the same thing as you are?

W: No, he's family education, and myself, I'm health education.

M: What is it you do specifically? I mean, I don't understand your job. Tell me.

W: Well, this job I'm in, we give these old people, such as some of 'em don't understand the English and they don't understand the doctor or nurse or something like that. And we have to stand by with this Indian and just sort of between the doctor and whatever, the nurse. And take care of the list, whatever—they get the permission for get the medicine. And we just talk through our language to tell them what are they supposed be doin' that medicine. And sometime they got the diabetic and TB, or something like that, and then we refer to go to see the doctor. And some, just, you know, they got the clinic on each community, too, and they need to get a check-up or something like that and sometimes they have—they call on us some, maybe after the work hours. They want to know what seem to be the trouble, why did you have the headache all the time. And we usually sort of set up with them, talk to them, how long have you had this—dizzy, or something like that. And after we find out what seems to be troubles, we just go to the doctor, tell him we need to see the check-up for some kind of high blood pressure or something like that, you know. We're doing a different thing [inaudible 3:55] all of 'em, and sometimes we have to go on into a

welfare office or something like that, to help this family, help these peoples on welfare line or something, get the check.

M: Where do the doctors come from?

W: Well, the doctors from IHS Indian hospital, and they comin' in. They got the clinic on each community, and they come in just twice a week. And sometime, especially in my community, they comin' in Monday and Thursday.

M: The Indian hospital down in Philadelphia?

W: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

M: How long's it been there?

W: That Indian hospital—I don't know much about it, but this—I been working with these Indian Tribes, and I'm just beginning to understand what these are about, and I don't know much about how long we been at this, but I noticed, somebody was mentioning about it, it was about 1939 or [19]40, somewhere that they was starting having this Indian hospital.

M: How many doctors are connected with it?

W: Well, these doctors connected with it... four doctors is in that hospital now.

M: Are any of 'em Indians?

W: No, they didn't.

M: Have the Choctaws ever produced a medical doctor?

W: No, we don't, we don't. But I got nine years, where I don't know how they're going to be able—just like this, I been going on every meeting like this. And I been talked to it at my boy now, and he's only nine years old, but he said he was going

to be a doctor or somethin', I don't know how it's gonna be, but we never had no Indian doctor in our hospital.

M: That'd be quite a triumph to get one trained and tend for his own people.

W: Yeah, that's right. The least that they could understand each other, enough for Indian and—if we had a Indian doctor, they could understand what some of these, then we won't have no CHR or something like that to work this space, you know, and just like this, if we had an Indian doctor or something like that.

M: Now this job you're in, from listening to it, I take it that you must do a little diagnostical work almost.

W: Yeah.

M: You listen to what they say and you decide sort of what's the matter with them. Have you developed a little skill in this, do you think?

W: Well, sometimes. That's why we're going to training, we went to Tucson, Arizona, to get the training done for a month. And so that's where we all see each other, at the training at Tucson, Arizona.

M: How long did they train you?

W: One month.

M: I see.

W: They trained us good of them for the health, you know.

M: Who was it trained you?

W: Our chief staff was Morris, Grant Morris. He's our chief directors down there.

M: Is he an Indian?

W: Nah, he's a White, he's a White, but they've been good to us. They gave us a little training and they started off. We got all this here travel, 'bout eight of us in the ...

M: From here?

W: Nah, yeah, all the community, we got seven community, you know, and all these seven community got to see a talk.

M: How long have you been at this work?

W: In this job I'm in, it's going to be a year and eight months.

M: Would you say that the health of Choctaw people generally pretty good?

W: Yeah. So far as I know of.

M: Are there any ailments they're particularly liable to? Any of them have more problems with—how about teeth? Very good teeth?

W: Oh, yeah, some of them. Not these—just like I said, see, this is some new family education, health education or something like this, not too long ago, you know. It just recently started. So all this, I'll say about 1956 or something like that, that's when they got these. Even the school kids, that's where they get this ... they gave it to all of these kids that are finishing high school now. So, and everything sort of changed up, and just as long as we got this new family education and health educations like this we headed on now. We can talk to these peoples and they need help or whatever they's need help or something, we just ask 'em what kind of problems they had and we just try and talk to them. And if they need to go to a dentist or something like that we just contact the dentist. And dentist examines and everything and they give us the appointment with it to bring the

next time. Whether they need a fix, then they fix, then if they don't need no fix, they need to pull them out or something like that, they just pull them teeth out.

M: Who is your employer? Whose payroll are you on?

W: The Tribe.

M: The Tribe. And are there two of you in your type of job down at Red Water?

W: On the CHR?

M: Or just you?

W: Well, mostly the two of us on that. Oh yeah, one of us on at the Red Water. I live in Red Water, but I'm working through the other community.

M: Oh. What other community are you working in?

W: Standing Pine.

M: Oh, I see.

W: That's where I'm working, but anyway, that's where in my community, one of the CHR was living over there, too. And then health educations were over there and two of us have education over there, and I'd reach workers over there—that's four of them's over there in the community and that's why I guess they transferred me over there to the Standing Pine community.

M: But you live back in Red Water?

W: Uh-huh.

M: How much of a commute is it? How much of a trip?

W: That about twelve miles away from south of Red Water.

M: Any problem with gasoline now?

W: Well, I believe it's going to be now. I believe it's going to be now. So especially with [inaudible 10:30] but anyway, if we could—see, my wife's working, she's a Head Start teacher and we take our two kids to the school over there, too, and we're both working over there.

M: You're both working in Standing Pine?

W: Uh-huh.

M: So the whole family goes every morning.

W: Yeah, the whole family is going over there every morning, even, and so we come back to the home every night. That's all we're doing.

M: Well, now, you've got a house that's yours?

W: Yeah, I've got my own.

M: Did you build it, or did the Tribe build it, or who built it?

W: No, they didn't. This is already buildin'. I bought my own land, so ...

M: You don't live on the reservation?

W: No, unh-uh.

M: Oh, I see.

W: See, this education we had, I had a hard time. I didn't, besides this, you know. My daddy was doin' a sharecrop for the White man, and I been workin' so hard. But anyway, every time I went to the field with my daddy and pullin' them corn and pickin' the cotton or somethin' like that, and I been thinkin' all my life. And before I got married I said to myself, "This time if I do get married, and if I have my own family, I'm going to be a good husband." If I had a kid or somethin' like, I'm going to be a good father, and if I had a family I'm going to try to be leader,

good leader for my family. And if I do get married, I'm going to have my own, my house and my land. And I was tryin' to follow my future, you know. So, I got half-acre land with the house and water pump and everything. So far so good. So everything's just like I planned it before I married. I got two kids, one wife, and that's so far **the good of the family**.

M: Were you born down there at Red Water?

W: Well, I born in that Indian hospital, and I raised in Standing Pine community. But my daddy was, just like I says, he was doing the sharecrop. And so we had to movin' around, back to the Red Water and back to the Standing Pine, and other side of one grove or lane or somethin' like that, we had to move around to wherever there's some of these White people need a hand or something like that. But only one fellow I know of—we lived with him for twenty-one years—I guess he was so kind to us, and every Christmas we usually had some kinda box of oranges or apples. So, I guess that's what they're doing. I guess we loved it, we liked it or something. So we lived that—only one fellow, we lived that place twenty-one years.

M: When your daddy was living with him, how much acreage was your dad workin'?

W: Fifty acres and seventy-five acres.

M: Fifty and seventy-five?

W: Uh-huh.

M: What do you mean, he was farming both of them at the same time?

W: Well, no, they usually—some of these, my daddy was going **after** these, that fellow I was talkin' about—we lived in there twenty-one years, he only had sixty-

one acres. And finally, they cut it down the cotton crop to fifty acres, and finally it was going down to the forty acres. So, my daddy decided to move out to another fellow somewhere. He finally traded this other fellow, and that fellow give us seventy-five acres. And so, we finally move out to other fellow.

M: Is your father still living?

W: No, he didn't. He's just dead about three years ago.

M: How about your mother?

W: She's still livin'.

M: But you say your grandfather, you told me, is so very old?

W: Yeah, mmhm. That's my mother's side. He's still livin'.

M: Was Choctaw your native tongue? Mean that's what you—the language you first spoke, Choctaw?

W: Mmhm. Yeah.

M: And at what point did you pick up English as a language?

W: What point? All I know—I started off all I could say is ... 'bout that time all I could say was, "Yeah," "I know." That's all I was started to begin.

M: When was that in your life?

W: That's when I was 'bout nine or seven years old.

M: Well, did you go off to school then or what?

W: Yeah, I did. I went to the part-time, see, just like when we were living the sharecropping. I don't hardly go to school around here, not 'til I was about eighteen years old. So, about that time I was still—when I was about twelve years old to eighteen, I could just speak a little English back then. But I was not

too good then, but then anyway, I was about eighteen years old, and I decided to go out of state somewhere. I then said to myself, "I want to go to school. Then maybe I can learn more English." And I just keep on saying it. So, I finally talked to a schoolteacher in that Standing Pines school. And I just asked him if I go to school somewhere maybe I could learn some more English and learn some more school education, too, you know. So that schoolteacher was agree with me to talk to somebody, I don't know who, who was a education of the school, or somethin' like that. I don't who was he's talkin' to, but they finally fixed the papers up for me to go to Sequoyah, Oklahoma, and Tahlequah. So, they fixed it up for me and I went over there 'bout two years and stayed over there and that's where I learned some more of the English.

M: When you went there you couldn't speak much English?

W: No, unh-uh.

M: Well, did they instruct in English?

W: Yeah, they did.

M: How'd you get along?

W: I did. Everything was okay. I learned some. Actually there was a lot of Indians over there, but they were all mixed up, they got there from—

M: Every place.

W: Uh-huh. So, speak English over there. That's where I learned English, picked English up. Just like I said, that's where I just start talk the English.

M: Did you ever have to take a course that was called "English"?

W: No, unh-uh, I didn't.

M: Never did. You just picked it up by—can you write English pretty well?

W: Yeah, not too good though. Just like I said, I only going up to the ninth grade, you know, and so I'm not too good at it yet.

M: Do you read it all right?

W: Yeah, I can read it, but if it's a long word or some of those new words, a big word or something like that, I can't hardly pronounce it. But **back in the early days** took me about ... it's going to be, took me about two or three hours. But I **even** sat down and copied down some, I just sort of studied that word awhile and I finally pronounced it pretty close and make somebody come along and I just, "Pronounce this word," and then somebody: "You mean you was trying to pronounce this word?" I say, "Yeah." Then they tell me, "Education." [inaudible 18:55] just said, "It's like, just cut that word down, could you say, 'ed-u-ca-tion'?" So I finally catch on then, "Education."

M: Can you read Choctaw?

W: No, I didn't. I can't. I can't read no Choctaw. We got that Choctaw Bible, Testament, but I can't read that.

M: Is your wife Choctaw or did you marry—?

W: Yeah, mmhm.

M: You didn't pick up any other Indian languages at Tahlequah, did you?

W: No, I didn't. I didn't. All I got is Choctaw language and English is all. [Laughter] That's all I got.

M: Are you a churchgoer?

W: Church? Go to church?

M: Go to church?

W: Oh, yeah.

M: A Christian church?

W: Well, I couldn't say—that church, that could be a Christian, but now I don't call myself a Christian. [Laughter]

M: You don't? What is your church?

W: Baptist.

M: Well, they call their church, but you don't really consider yourself—?

W: [Laughter] No, unh-uh.

M: What do you consider yourself?

W: Well, I been heard on preaching, mention about it, if they call themselves a "Christian," then some of these, they said, just, "They're not a full Christian," or something like this and, then they said, if they was a good Christian, even just like—I know I run into a few of them myself, and I ain't gonna call their names. They been calling, "As far as I know of, he was a good Christian," that's what they said. But I hear they don't want to do harm. **I thought again**, "See, I was a Christian, I could love anybody, even doesn't matter what kind of man he is: colored, White, Choctaw, Mexican, whatever it is." And so, some of these people, they call themselves Christian, but they're against this Choctaw and colored and White or something like this, you know. And so, myself, I didn't do it like that, but I just feel my conscience. And one of these days I can call myself a Christian and somebody might come along and slap me, I might forget the Christian and slap them back, you know. So that's why—

M: I meant to ask you earlier while we were talking about what you do for work and the hospital and so on. Are there any Choctaw Medicine Men still? In the traditional sense?

W: I don't know what they call this, but ...

M: You know, that have native cures and herbs and things?

W: We got, let's see ... they call one, no two—they been called Medicine Men. Let's see, I was going to call his name, too, but he been dead about six years now. Willie Johnson. They call him their Medicine Man. And I seen him, too. Some of those, you know, they feel around like this and I don't know how that they tell what was hurting though. They just get those little glass or something like that and cut it. They used to suck the blood out and burn 'em, and they usually do that. But I've been saying that one of us fellow was 'bout fifty miles north from here ... Wallace, believe it was, last name is, Campbell Wallace. And he used to do that, but they're both dead now.

M: You don't know of any that are—

W: No, I don't.

M: Practicing this any longer?

W: No, sure don't. But one thing, a lot of these people was mentioned about it, but I never met it yet. He's from Oklahoma somewhere. And he sort of doctoring around in this community, but I never had meet him yet. And I don't know what's he look like and what he doing. Lot of people was talking 'bout there's a good—make the medicine or something like that. Out of grass roots or blackberry roots

and then make a medicine out of that and give them a drink. But I don't meet him yet, I just don't know what they look like.

M: Have you ever gone back to visit the Oklahoma Choctaws?

W: No, I don't.

M: They weren't around Tahlequah were they?

W: There was a few of them.

M: Choctaws?

W: Uh-huh. Few of them over there, but I never did go back over there.

M: Is there much association back and forth between the Oklahoma Choctaws and the Mississippi Choctaws that you know of?

W: Yeah, I'm sure. My daddy's side was livin' over there, but after I come back from school and I went off to other state—went to Chicago—'bout that time, my daddy was planning to help kinfolks over there. They been calling them, but I never met them, either. Just like I said, one of these doctors from Oklahoma, they could be my kinfolks, but I never met any, I just don't know what they look like. [Laughter]

M: Are you a full-blooded Choctaw so far as you know?

W: Yeah, uh-huh.

M: Have you got an Indian name or is—?

W: No, I don't. Just English.

M: "Willis" is the only name you got?

W: Uh-huh. That's all.

M: And you said, "Russell James," didn't you?

- W: Russell James Willis. And I don't know what I got the "James" in my middle name. I guess somebody just put it on.
- M: How many brothers and sisters do you have?
- W: I've got three brothers and four sisters.
- M: Oh, that's a big family. Are they still living?
- W: Yeah, all of them still living. All of them still living. One of my brothers got the car run-over 'bout seven years ago. Just laying in a bed.
- M: Oh, you told me that, I think. He was paralyzed, wasn't he?
- W: Yeah.
- M: What's the biggest Choctaw family you ever heard of? I meant to ask that to one of the fellows I talked earlier to. What's the largest number of children you ever knew of in a family?
- W: The largest children?
- M: Number of children, yeah.
- W: That's only—
- M: You've got seven, I guess, or eight in your family.
- W: Yeah, I'm trying to tell you right now. One of the Choctaws in the Standing Pine community, they got, altogether, but one of them—some of them they those lost kids though. Altogether there's twenty-one kids out of one family.
- M: By the same wife?
- W: Uh-huh.
- M: One wife?
- W: One man and one woman. Twenty-one kids.

M: Good gosh!

W: That's the largest family as I know of.

M: Have Choctaws generally had pretty good size families?

W: Those the only one I know of, that's a pretty good size. That's the largest families.

M: Yeah, certainly is.

W: And one more, but it's be the next one, the same family from this man—this Lewis family. And this is the twenty-one kids' father was brother **though**. The two families, it was his brother, and this other man, they got sixteen children. So that's all I know of. And that's the largest ones I know of.

M: Going back to your grandfather, your wife's grandfather—no, your mother's mother?

W: Mother, uh-huh.

M: You've talked to him quite a bit?

W: Mmhm.

M: And he talked to you about the past?

M: I imagine you go and see him and hopefully get him to talk.

W: Oh, yeah, I will.

M: Does he talk English or Choctaw?

W: No, I have to talk Choctaw.

M: Well, that'll be interesting. Can you remember any legends or things he's told you or anything going back into his time?

W: Well ... [Bell rings]

[Break in recording]

M: Do you remember anything that you'd call Choctaw history that he's told you or that of his life that's a different era?

W: Well, see, I think I sort of interested about this. He usually tell me ... When he was a little boy, he lost the parents, both his mother and dad. He raised with White fellow ... Conway, Mississippi somewhere. So he was up while he was about four years old, I believe it was. I'm not sure. I know he been tellin' me about it, but he was four years old, and lost the parents. So, this White fellow that they been knowin' his parents awhile, too. So, he was going to take up with them and he was going to try to raise him. But I guess my grandfather didn't understand this White fellow or else change something like that. I guess he just don't like it or something, I don't know. But he never told me about it, but he was going to stay with them, but he just walked away from them and just gone out to stay with other Choctaw. So, I told him about it, if they was to stay with those White fellow, they could learn English, not go to school. He just made bad mistake to walk away from them, he didn't learn nothin' to stay with those other Choctaws. But that time they don't have any school or anything, you know, so ... But if he'd they stayed with this White fellow they could learn some English to where they could talk. I guess just don't want to stay or something.

M: Does your grandfather understand English?

W: Just some of 'em. Just like I said while ago, when I was a little boy all I could say, "Yeah," and, "No." That's what I been said.

M: How about him? I mean your grandfather.

W: No, he's about ... I guess he could do better now.

M: Would he understand it? I mean, maybe he couldn't speak it, would he understand English pretty well?

W: Yeah, I'm sure they can. But he just can't—he wanted to, but he can't say it back to the English. I'm sure they could understand what you said, but ...

M: Yeah. Well, what kind of life, what did your grandfather do for a living? Do you have any idea?

W: Farming, as far as I know of. And he had ... before the government give a house and a piece of land, and I'm sure he was a farmer. This was all they had, these Indians over here they just had to make a livin' with the sharecrop before the government bought land and give this up, you know. All he had to do was doin' the sharecrop. Some of these, they just didn't pay enough either, you know. Just paid about fifty cents a day, quarter a day, or something like that. All that time I guess everything was low about that time though, but they just give them twenty-five cents a day ...

M: Out there at Tahlequah or any place else, did they ever offer anything that you'd call a course in Choctaw history?

W: No, I didn't.

M: Have you ever—

W: 'Bout that time, I don't know what they got over there. I just don't know what can I learn. All I wanted to learn English and writing and reading. That's what I was sort of after then. Then I got little bit, but now I got kids and I told them, "You need to learn everything," but I know they ain't going to learn everything, you know. So

they needed something where they could **prepare**, just writing and reading and spelling, that's very important. As long as they could learn that, and I'm sure they could learn—besides, I'm sure they could pick this up lot of this stuff on the way up, you know. That's what I told them. Said all they need is just learn those English and reading and spelling.

M: Just for curiosity, I'm not asking you any of these questions to embarrass you, but do you remember anything about Choctaw history? I mean is any coming down through your family? Did anybody ever tell you anything about what has happened to the Choctaw Tribe?

W: No—

M: Is there any of that stands out? Do you know the names of any distinguished Choctaw Chief out of the past, for instance?

W: No, I don't, I don't. I don't, but this is only thing I know of. I don't want to tell it, but—

M: You don't want to tell it.

W: I guess—

M: Well, don't if you don't want to.

W: Well, you going to put these things in a safe place anyway, so I might as well just tell it and then one of these days they might, just like I told my boy.

M: Might be significant history, you know.

W: So, this the only thing I know and this is not very important to me, but I believe in it, though, I believe it. This was before the White mens come over this land, and when Indian lived on this land. They had a lot of things to eat, but whenever the

White mans come over here, the buffalo is gone, the deer is gone, and the rabbit is just faded away now. They can't hardly find a rabbit now. 'Bout that time before White man come, they need to eat whatever, they need the wild meat, they usually just go on out the wood and kill 'em and eat 'em. But this time they have to buy a license to kill that wild meat, you know. So, all these Indian, especially the young Indian, they just don't want to do a lot of thing. They just said they're going to wait 'til up to sixteen years old to get their hunting license now so just—I don't know what they're going to, but I guess as long as we just follow that White fellows' steps, I guess we're just going hungry to death. That's what my daddy's uncle was been told me about this, and so if I do, if I sat down with them and they could tell me lot a more 'bout it, but, you know, he's dead though. But I been thinkin' about it all this time and—as far as I know—just like I sort of track him down sort of and thinking about it, and everything looks like it's true to me. Everything sort of shot these Indian down, but another twenty more years or something like that and these Indians, they might not have something to eat. And even this fishin' now—just like in this year. 'Bout three years ago somebody was agree with them the Indian, they don't need no fishing license to go fishin'. And now last summer the law turned around to sellin' anybody, even the kids. Sell the fishin' license to go fishin'. Even now just sittin' on top of the bank or ridin' a boat, they got to have a fishing license to catch the fish now. So I I've been thinkin' about just like my daddy uncles was tellin' me about it. Some of these young peoples, just like my boy age, they usually get a fishin' pole or something like

that, go on down fishin', and now they can't do it now. They got to have a fishin' license to go fishin'.

M: Would you say—you don't have to answer this if you don't want to, that there's a deep-seated and suppressed—is the word "suppressed" meaningful to you? Is there a deep-seated bitterness among your people toward the way they've been treated by the Whites?

W: Well ...

M: Do you detect that, or you feel it yourself and don't say it? You don't have to answer this if you don't want to. Of course, you don't have to answer anything if you don't want to.

W: Okay then, I'm sorry, but I believe I'm just going to hold up.

M: Yeah, you'd rather not say it. In another direction. In talking, just casually, I notice that the people, Indians, generally are, well, not very complimentary about the BIA, the Bureau of Indian Affairs. How do you feel about it, or do you prefer not to comment on that? That's all right if you don't want to. I just get it in little asides. Nobody ever comes out and tells you this.

W: That's another thing. I just—

M: Rather not.

W: Uh-huh, just rather not. As a matter of fact, I don't know much about that BIA anyway.

M: Yeah.

W: So I'd just rather not—

M: Your job's not connected with them at all, is it?

W: No, they don't, unh-huh.

M: Well now, in the course of your life, have you ever had any military service where you—?

W: No, I don't myself.

M: Never did. Well, before you got into this Choctaw health business what were you doing?

W: Before I got in this job?

M: Yeah.

W: I was working over at that Western Auto store eight years.

M: Where, in Philadelphia?

W: In Carthage.

M: In Carthage.

W: Mmhm. Carthage, Mississippi. And then I worked with them eight years and I had, so far I got—myself, I got good friends. Just like I said, I try to be a good guy for anybody, so I had good friends so far as I know 'em. And I been workin' over there 'bout eight years and I finally got—lifted all those heavy stuff, deep freezers and stove and refrigerators. And I finally got, almost, get on my back. And doctor pulled me off and about a week and after that I went back to the work, but I still was doing the same thing, lifting those things. I finally talked to my boss about it, and I had the same problem like that. I don't want it to happen to me again. So, I decided to find me another job. So I did. I went to Wilcox Funeral Home, and—

M: What'd you do there?

W: I was just hauling just box and equipment and stuff. Just driving flowers, hauling flowers to the cemetery or something like that.

M: Where did you learn to drive a car? An automobile. Where and how? You didn't learn that in school, did you?

W: No, I didn't.

M: How did you learn that?

W: My daddy got the old—I believe it was a [19]29 Model Ford, looks like a coupe.

M: Yeah, I remember.

W: My daddy was—they ain't got no license 'bout that time, and sometime I thinkin' about it and laughing at myself, too. My daddy's ain't got no license, they had to go to town. So, he just left that car in front of our house and so he just walked to town, 'bout thirty-five miles away. My daddy usually hauled the wood that little old car. It was before the sundown and I decided to, just like my daddy's doin', trying to haul the wood to bring it in the nighttime. So all my sisters and brothers was pushing those little jalopy or whatever it is, you know. I cranked those up and jumpin' through the little ditch and everything, and I had a lot of bumps on my head. Anyway, I guess that's a good lesson and— [Laughter]

M: You didn't wreck the car?

W: No, unh-uh, I didn't. But I run into the ditch though. I just jump over the ditch! [Laughter] So that's where I learned it. That's where I learned was, and I finally put it back.

M: You drove it back yourself?

W: Yeah, mmhm.

M: So after that you could drive pretty much?

W: Well, I got my butt soled up though, after my daddy's comin' home. I was too small then to fool with that car and even to touch that steering wheel, you know. But I had it. But I'm not any feel guilty about that. And my daddy was, he's right. I could kill my own brother or sisters on that when they had to load up and jump over the ditch, you know and—

M: Get out of your way and so on.

W: Yeah.

M: Well, your children learn to drive in school now, I think.

W: Yeah, uh-huh, they do it now.

M: When I first learned to drive, there wasn't any such thing as a driver's license in the state where I grew up, they didn't have any. Somebody gave you a car and taught you how to do it. You got out on the road and did it. Sort of like your talking about hunting licenses. So I was pretty young when I learned.

W: I believe I was about nine or eight years old 'bout that time and I—anyway, I learned it and I got good bit on my butt then. But anyway ...

M: Do you know how to take a car apart and can you fix your own car or not?

W: No, I don't.

M: I mean the engine.

W: No, I don't.

M: Not trained in it?

W: No, I don't, but some of—I'm sure, we got a new high school now—not too long ago we just built this up, too, you know. It was about 1950—no, about [19]49 or

something. About that time, and about [19]53 or [19]54, they have this high school started up. So, they got little shops going on, so I'm sure they give little mechanic training. And what they're supposed to be doing. I'm sure they give one of them now.

M: That seems like a good thing to me to do.

W: Uh-huh. One of my brother went to Idaho to get the training for the mechanic.

M: What goes on, where in Idaho would he have gone?

W: Oh ...

M: Is that some Indian school or—?

W: Yeah, some of those training school ... that's all I remember. That's about three or 'bout four years ago, I believe it was.

M: Now when you went to Tahlequah you lived in a boarding school, didn't you? You lived there?

W: Mhm. yeah.

M: How did you feel about that experience?

W: Well, I don't know, but I was lonely. Something over there, too, some of those mans over there [inaudible 45:28] charge. Some of them—I don't know, I never been in the military or anything. I don't know much about it, but some of them said, it looks like military. So 'bout four o'clock somebody come along, blow the whistle down the hall and wake up everybody, you know. But myself, I liked that—wake me up—

[End of interview]

Transcribed by: Evangeline Giaconia, April 18, 2022

Audit-edited by: Sofia Echeverry, May 12, 2022

Final edited by: Indica Mattson, July 7, 2022