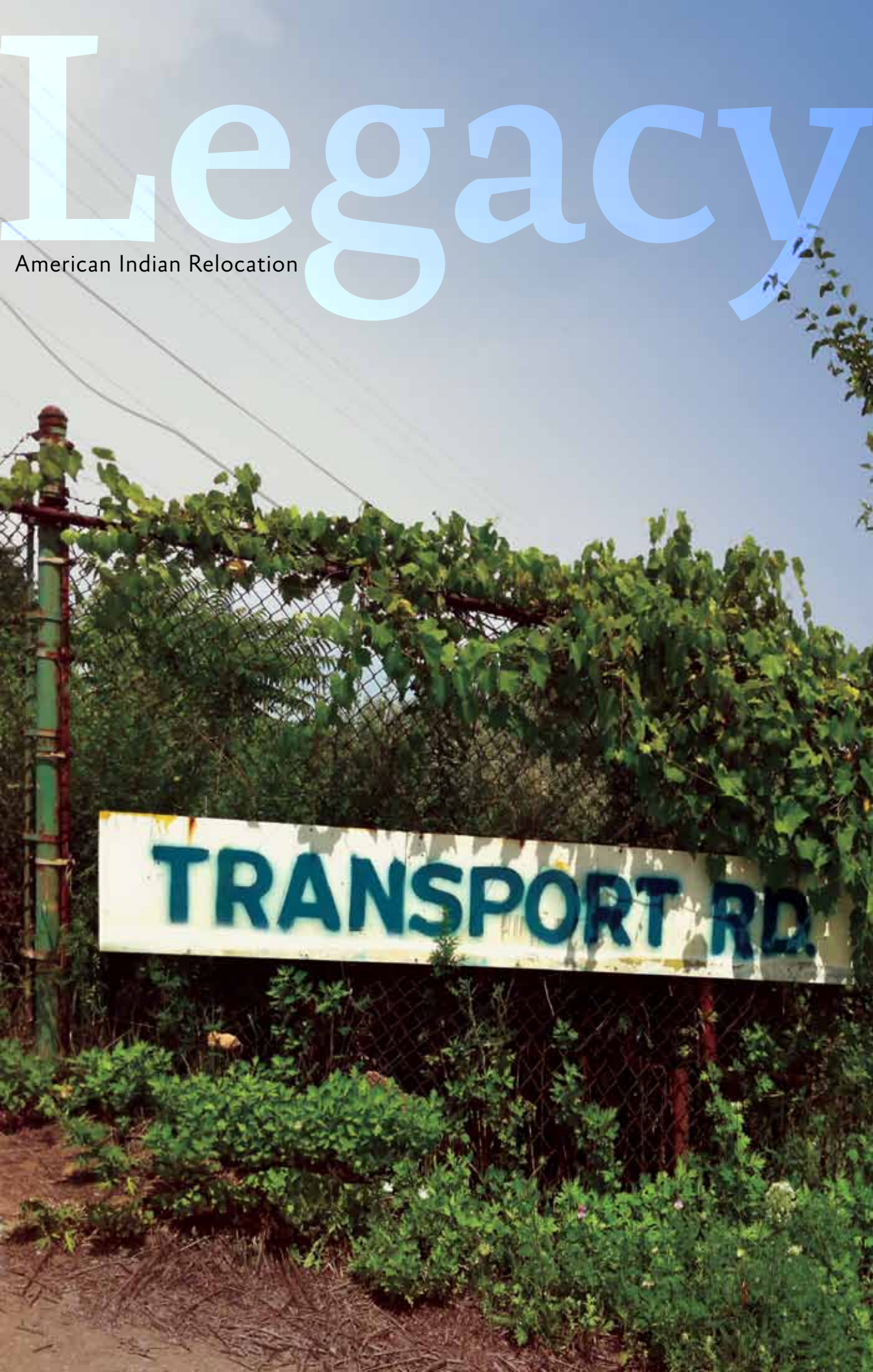
Legacy

American Indian Relocation



Sally's Story

The following is a transcript of a conversation with Sally Gayton and her daughter, Marjorie Sanchez Meade. They are Ponca who came to Cleveland from Ponca City, Oklahoma, in 1966. They participated in the Bureau of Indian Affairs Relocation Program.

Marjorie brought us together on August 15, 2011 at The American Indian Education Center in Parma, Ohio, where this conversation took place.

-Mari Hulick

Relocation was a voluntary program. Why did you decide to join it?

We came from a small town. There was a lot of prejudice, and there was no jobs. You couldn't work anyplace, you couldn't live anyplace. You got married, it was you lived with your husband's family or you lived with your family, and I didn't like it. I thought, "If we could get away from here, that would be better."

You could choose your city in the Relocation Program, where did you decide to go?

At first we chose Denver. But they said there was a big flood up in there, and a lot of the housing had been destroyed. They said they wouldn't be able to find a place large enough for our family. At the time there was 8 kids.

We had a really good counselor. At first he sent my husband to school. He studied auto body. I wanted to go too, but they wouldn't let me. They said they could only afford to train the breadwinner in the family. I loved upholstering, and I wanted to take upholstering, but they wouldn't let me. So, they sent us to a small town – Okmulgee, Oklahoma. A little college town (Oklahoma State Tech) where we lived and we were there for 18 months for him to finish the auto body.

How was it living there? Was it like the small town you came from?

It wasn't too bad. Except that they kind of treated us like we were little kids. We had a counselor and the counselor was working with us like we were little kids. You know, "You can't buy this, you can't buy that. This is your grocery money, you have to spend this on groceries." It was like a budget they set up for us and that's all we were allowed to spend. The apartments were like a barracks. You could live in the whole place for a year and never go out. They had their own grocery store and everything inside of it. You went to get the check at one window, cashed it, go to the next window, paid your rent (I think we paid 11 dollars a week for it), go to the next one and your counselor would tell you what to do with the rest of your check.

That is very controlled.

And you weren't supposed to buy anything unless you had his approval.

Did anyone try to buy anything that they didn't have the counselor's approval for?

(laughs) I did that all the time. My daughter needed a pair of glasses. And so instead of going to the counselor and saying, "Look, she needs a pair of glasses." I went ahead and just bought them.

Did you get in trouble for that?

Well, they hollered at me, but I didn't pay any attention. And I think the biggest thing was I bought a car. If you were on campus without a car, you were not allowed to have a car until you finished. And I had some money that I didn't tell them about. So I used that money and I bought a car. They told me that I'd have to return the car or they'd kick my husband out of school. I took the car back to the dealer and told them to hold it for a while. I told them that I would come back to get it. So they held it for me until we got out of school. And then I went back and picked the car up.

You had 8 kids at this point, how many rooms did you live in?

Five rooms.

“They told me that I’d have to return the car or they’d kick my husband out of school.”

What was the age range of your children?

I think at the time it was from a year to 10, 11 years old. All were real small.

Marjorie, do you remember living there?

No. I was about 3 or 4 at the time. I just remember moving to Cleveland, later on.

What happened after your husband finished school?

When he finished school, down in Okmulgee, they put us under a different agency. We were in the Eastern Area, but they put us under the Muskogee Agency instead of our regular Pawnee Agency. When my husband finished school, there was graduation. They set up interviews for everybody who had finished school. You go in there and you apply for Relocation. You go in there, you have your interview and you sign the paper. “Ok, we’ll send you here”, “you go over there”, “you can go to California”, or “you can go to Dallas or San Francisco or Chicago or someplace”. I wanted to go to Denver. So when my time came up I said “I want to go to Denver”. and they said, “No, you can’t go.”

Why Denver?

We had some friends up there. I didn’t know what the town was like, but there were some people that we knew. Some people were up there that we knew so we wanted to go up there too. And he told me, “You can’t go. So we’ll send you to Dallas or we’ll send you to… I think it was San Jose. I can’t remember. It was one of those little towns. And I said, “No, that ‘s too far from home. I don’t want to go there.”

“We can send you to Anadarko Oklahoma.”

“No, that’s too close to home.” (laughs) We get to Anadarko, we start going home every weekend or every other weekend and eventually we’re gonna end up right back at home.

So they said, “We’ll send you to Dallas”, and I said, “I don’t’ want to go to Dallas. I got relatives down there. My brother’s down there” I didn’t want to go there because I felt like that if we got down there, I might be depending too much on him for help. So I didn’t want to go there. I just wanted to be on my own.

So he said, “Well, if you won’t go where we tell you to go, there’s nothing for you that we can do.

I said, “Well good. I’m going to my own agency and I’m going to Denver.”

I went back to my agency and talked to the man that I knew from before, and he said, “Well, we can’t send you to Denver because there would be no housing for you there. Just wait a while.” And one day he showed up and said, “Hey, they have an opening in Cleveland. You want to go up there?” So I said, “Yeah, I’ll go up there. Just get us away from here.”

Tell me about the move to Cleveland.

My husband came up first. They wouldn’t let me come until the baby was born, so I came later after the baby was born.

So, that was number 9?

Yes. And then after the baby was born, I came up here in my 1960 Chevy station wagon with all the kids. The only thing that we had was what we could stuff inside of the

station wagon. I didn't know at the time that if you wanted to put stuff on the side, they would ship them for you. They didn't tell us they could ship some things. So we just had the few clothes we could get into the car. We left at 7:00 in the morning. We got in Cleveland at 10:00 the next morning. I drove all night, all day and all night.

How did you feel when you got into Cleveland?

Kind of scared. The only time I got really shaky and scared was when we hit St. Louis right at rush hour. I didn't know anything about rush hour. The only time we'd seen a rush hour was when maybe 4 cars together went through the reservation. We got into St. Louis and we pulled into a gas station to get some gas. I was looking at the traffic and I said, "Oh my god, what did I get myself into?" Them cars were going back and forth. It looked like they were going 50, 60 miles an hour. I thought, I got to get into that and drive? So I sat there for a while, watching them. I told the kids, "sit down and hang on, because we're gonna get into that traffic."

So, we passed through St. Louis, and kept on going. It was after dark, I don't remember what time, but it was after dark and we was driving with the lights on. I was the only car on the road. And the kids were all sleeping. And all of a sudden, this car came up. I had never thought about it 'til the lady from the BIA came by and gave me a check. And she said, "Get some money orders because you might get robbed." Well, back there, nobody robs you. You don't get robbed or anything. So I never thought of being robbed before then. But all of a sudden, this car comes up from behind me and passes us and he pulls back, and gets behind us, and starts blinking his lights. I thought, "Oh my god, are we going to get robbed?

"If you won't go where we tell you to go, there's nothing for you that we can do."

I could see the lights of a town, but I had no idea how far it was. And the car looked like a pretty new car, I didn't think I could outrun him, so I kept on driving. Then he'd pull up beside me and honked his horn and then fall back behind us. He must have done that for maybe 3, 4 miles. I took my wallet out of my purse and I handed it to my oldest daughter and I told her, "Hang on to this. Hide it someplace. I'm going to see what this man wants." So I pulled over and I stopped. And he pulled up behind us. I rolled my window down this much (gestures about 4 inches), and he came over by the car, and said, "Lady I'm not trying to scare you or anything," he said. "You don't have a bit of tail lights back there." (laughs) He said, "I almost hit you when I was coming up. I didn't see you until the last minute" So I told him, "Thank you, and when I get to the next town I'll make sure I get some lights."

So, you arrived in Cleveland, and you moved into the Cedar Housing Projects. What was that like?

I'm 75 now, so in 1966 I don't remember how old I was…. Let's see, I was 29, close to 30. All this was new. We moved into the Central Projects on Cedar. We had a nice 4-bedroom apartment that they gave us. It was a lot bigger than the other places.

When they were first built they were supposed to be pretty nice, and they were new, then, weren't they?

They were pretty nice on the inside. There were a lot of Indians when we first got there. They were from all over. They were from Oklahoma, Mississippi, South Carolina, North Carolina, South Dakota, North Dakota, Nebraska, they were from all over.

Did you feel a community right away, or was it something you had to build once you got here?

It was fine. The biggest thing I felt was learning my way around. It wasn't really a shock. (laughs) I just made up my mind that when I left, that I was going to stay. That no matter what I had to do or what I had to go through, that I was leaving and I was going to stay where they sent me. And I think that helped me a lot. This was what I wanted and this was why I came up here. So, whatever goes on here I've got to find a way to deal with it.

They didn't send you to school in Oklahoma. But did you get any training when you came up here to Cleveland?

(Marjorie) She trained herself.

I worked as a power sewing machine operator for a while. My husband never worked. When we came up here he started drinking more. He got into a fight. He got hit in the head with a brick and he had to have…. brain surgery. And after that his personality… just changed. He started drinking more, lost his job. That was when I went to work.

And how soon after you moved here did that happen?

About a year after we were here. Then he went back to Oklahoma, then he came back, then he went back to Oklahoma, see when was it….1975, that last time he left. Never came back. I think he thought that if he went back, that I was going to give up and follow him. Instead I said "Hooray!" (laughs)

He had a drinking problem. That's why we called it quits. But for a while I think he brainwashed me. He always told me, "You can't get along without me. You need me."

"I just made up my mind that when I left, that I was going to stay."

Men do that.

I was buying the groceries, paying the rent. And he was telling me, "You can't make it without me." I believed that one for quite a while. All of a sudden I thought, "I'm the one that 's paying all the bills and everything." So I bought him a one-way ticket and he went back to Oklahoma. And then I got one job and then went to something better. Everything changed for us. I started making more money than what I was making before. We were able to do a lot of things we weren't able to do before.

So, you were a single mother with how many children?

I had 10 with him and one from an earlier marriage.

Raising 11 kids by yourself… can you talk about that? Did you enlist the kids to help out?

Oh, they helped out. I didn't have to enlist them. They all just sort of pitched in, and helped each other. More or less raised each other while I was working.

Marjorie, do you remember these things, when you first moved in, do you remember what it felt like?

It was noisy, it was different. The hospital was down the street, a lot of ambulances went by. I had fun, but I missed the quiet. Where my uncle lived was on a farm; (to Sally) Uncle Everett's farm, where we could just climb a tree and get fruit. Up here, we had to walk to the store. We had to walk to the "Save More". It was different.

Sally, how did you get your first job?

I just went and put in for it. I just told them, "I know that. I can do that".

"This is a white man's world and you've got to learn how to live in it"

I worked as a power sewing machine operator. I remember when I went down to apply for it, they were advertising for a zipper setter. I'd seen it in the paper for a while so I went down there and I applied for it. And they were all happy that I came in there. They had these, I think they were crepe dresses with that stretch. So the first one I put the zipper in was about like that (shows about 20 inches) and the zipper was about that long (shows about 10 inches) so I couldn't fit it in. So I told them, "Every one works different. If you can show me how you want this put in then I can get it in." So they showed me how I was supposed to put it in, and I did it.

One time was enough?

Yes. I was able to do it after that. I was there about 9 months.

And what did you do after that?

When they opened the Cleveland American Indian Center I worked there. That was about '69, '70, when they opened up. I worked with Irma Yelloweagle. It was nice. It was fun.

When I first started working there I was helping the Indians when they came into Cleveland, helping them find a place, helping them get furniture, helping them enroll their kids in school. Taking them, showing them where the grocery stores were, showing them how to catch the bus and everything.

Wasn't that supposed to be the responsibility of the Bureau of Indian Affairs?

But they didn't do that. (laughs) They didn't show us any of those things.

You had to figure it out for yourself?

Yeah. I had a car, so I didn't have to ride the bus.

How did the Center start?

Before it started we used to have these dances at the Methodist Church on 30th. We had these gatherings every Saturday. The preacher let us use the basement and have a dance down there. The women would bring potluck and all the Indians of different tribes, they would all gather, visiting and dancing. We'd be singing and everything, the kids playing around and everything. This was down there every Saturday night. And from the dances, that was how the Indian Center got started.

Where was it first located?

It was located in a church on Church Avenue. They were in the basement. Irma was down there, so I started working down there. At first it was volunteer.

This is a paid position now, right Marjorie? (uh-huh) When you got here, did you mix with people other than American Indians?

M – In the projects it was mixed nationalities. We mixed with everybody. We were like, uh , our house was like the United Nations. All kinds of people coming in.

S – And the kids, it didn't matter the color of their skin. If they liked somebody, that person was their friend. The kids didn't say, "Hey, you're black, you can't be my friend", or something like that. They were friends with everybody. And eventually, they all ended up at my house. (laughs) All kinds of kids used to hang around and play with the kids.

When did you move out of the projects?

1970 I think it was. The kids started getting into high school. They had to go down to 40th and there were all these guys along the way, they were drinking, and they would chase the girls when they walked by. So we moved out of there so they wouldn't have to go through that.

Where did you move to?

West side. The first place we moved to was over on 44th and Baily.

M – It was nice, it was upstairs. School was good.

S – School was right across the street from us. We lived there about 5 years. Then we moved to Whitman Avenue, still on the West side, but it was a single house. We were there for a long time. Then we moved to 50th, stayed there for about a year. Then to 44th and we were there for about 4 years, and then I bought the house that we're living in now. 1744 W. 48th. I bought the house from Habitat.

I have been in that place 20 years. I don't like to move.

But you did move a lot (laughs) And were you at the Indian Center all this time?

No. After the Indian Center, I worked at the Bureau of Indian Affairs. I worked for them for 5 years. My title was Employment Assistance Aide. When they had the Indians coming up on Relocation or the kids coming up to school, I had to find them a place to live, I'd get them settled, and I'd set up a budget for them until they could help themselves. For the students, the girls were put up at the YWCA and the boys were set up at the men's Y.

My last job, I worked for the City of Cleveland for 17 years. I was program coordinator for the Ohio Home Winterization Program here in Cleveland. Run by the state.

You really worked your way up from putting in zippers.

S – I started out as a receptionist.

M – She taught herself how to type on my typewriter.

And then I worked up to boss. I was going to go out for inspector. Inspect people's houses. I passed everything, but I could not pass the furnace. Inspecting the furnace. I had to inspect the furnace. It's the only thing I couldn't pass. I was scared to light the pilot. (laughs)

After all you've done, you're afraid to light a little pilot? (laughs)

I took it three times, and all three times I failed it (laughs) They would show you all the parts of the furnace, they would take them all apart - show you this one does this, this one does that, and they'd put it back in the furnace, go find it. I couldn't find it. I just couldn't pass the furnace.

I used to be able to clean my own furnace, but I was afraid to clean someone else's.

You probably knew that yours wasn't going to blow up.

Yes. I'd tell it "Don't' do that", so it didn't do that.

That was one job I really enjoyed. I could help a lot of people.

"The BIA had to cut the program out because they were finding out too many things about them."

It sounds like you really enjoy helping people.

I do enjoy helping them.

Is there still a Relocation Program going on?

No. They closed that long time ago. They always say that they closed it because there were a lot of them that had gone to school, gone to college, and they were finding out all of these things that the BIA was supposed to be doing that they weren't doing. They started taking them to court. So the BIA had to cut the program out because they were finding out too many things about them.

I think that the main idea behind the program was that if you take the Indians off of the Reservation, put them in the city, they were going to mingle with other different nationalities. And then if they marry into different nationalities, eventually, you're going to loose the bloodline.

Do you think that has happened?

Yes. It happened in my own family.

It seems like with the growth of Casinos that some tribes are staying together. (nods) What do you think of the Casinos? I'm always curious to hear what Indians think of them.

I love those Casinos.

With the growth of them, it seems like there is an economic base on the reservation now. For people to stay on the reservation and actually stay connected. Is that sort of reversing the Relocation effects?

No. The Relocation was going on long before the casinos came in. The bloodline is really thinning out. They've lowered the blood requirements of many tribes. Our tribe used to require you to be a fourth Ponca. Now they've dropped it down to an eighth, because the tribe was getting so small. Some of my grandkids can't even make it because my oldest daughter, her father was a Sioux, so she wasn't a full-blooded Ponca. And when we came to Cleveland, she married a Puerto Rican. And she had kids, but her kids couldn't make the roll because they didn't have enough blood. And my mother was the one doing the roll.

What about other grandkids, did others make the roll?

Yes. They made the roll, their kids are going to make the roll, but their kids won't. That's going to be the end.

If you could say anything about Relocation, what would you say about it?

I don't think that there was enough counseling. Not enough investigation into what they could do. When we came to Cleveland, people didn't even know what an Indian was. A lot of them had never even seen an Indian before. The counselors that they had at the BIA didn't know anything about Indians. They didn't know our culture, didn't know how we lived or how we did anything. They really didn't know what to do for us.

It always struck me as so strange, that the Bureau of Indian Affairs was so white (laughs)

They were always white until they had, I don't remember what year it was, but they had this Indian Preference. That

if there was an opening, they had to hire an Indian over someone who was White. That put a lot of Indians in the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Because when I worked for them, my boss, he came up through Relocation, went to school, got a degree. He went back home, and came back as the Director of the BIA here in Cleveland.

Did that make a big difference, when you started seeing more Indians in the Bureau?

I think it did. With both of us being Indian, we were able to do more for them. Spending more time trying to help them and if they had problems, we could work with them.

But there were some kids that came up to go to school. Some Navajo came up to school, and to me, there was never no counseling back home. There wasn't anything that they had down there. They sent these girls up here to be executive secretaries, enrolled in college for executive secretary courses. But to do that, you need to take certain things in high school. They were never told what to take before they came here. They never had the things that you have to have to make executive secretary. And they just went down, down, so by the time they graduated, they wound up as clerk typists.

Then they turn around and say, "That's the BIA's fault" But, I guess it was both of their faults. They didn't have the kind of training that they should have had in high school. If they had been told before they put in for it, "This is what you need to do before you take the Executive Secretary Training program, this is what you have to know before you take this." But none of them were told. And, a lot of them had never left home before.

I know there was this one, they never should have sent that girl out here. She was scared. She didn't want to go on the street. She was scared of people. Scared to meet people, scared to ride the bus, scared to talk to anybody. If she wasn't with the other two girls that she knew, she was just lost. They ended up sending her back home. She enrolled in school for about a month, but they ended up sending her back home because she just couldn't handle it.

Is that why so many people went back home? They were not prepared well, and so they couldn't handle it?

For some, yes. But, some used it as a plaything. "I can go to Cleveland. Stay up there and work for a while." And as soon as they got into trouble, they'd just go home. It was just like a vacation. There used to be a lot of Indians around here. Not so much now. They never stay.

To me, if they do something and they fail, they have family to back them up. "Hey, I'm out of a job, so I can run back to my folks. I don't have to try and find another job to help myself. I can just run to my folks and my folks will take care of me." That's what it was with a lot of people.

But you're different. You said, "I'm going to do this, no matter what." Why did you make that commitment?

I was raised completely different. When I was raised my father told us that "This is a white man's world and you've got to learn how to live in it" I grew up hearing that all the time. And from the time we were able to walk, he made us work. I remember we had to get up before the sun came up, we had to get up and work in the garden. That's why I don't have a garden today. I hate them. Out there early in the morning, half asleep, cleaning the bugs off the potatoes. They never used chemicals. I'll never have a garden. I have never had a garden.

But you also learned what commitment was.

Yes. And when I was 16, I went to boarding school for a year. I had an English teacher that was always talking. Now, it was all Indians. Nothing but Indians, and I used to see books, and I'd hear people talking and I'd think, "There's got to be something that's better than this. Something different, someplace." And then my English teacher would talk about how you can finish school and you can do this, and you can go travel here, and they had these things up there, and she'd show us all different pictures of all different things.

I said, "One of these days, I'm going to go see that. One of these days I'm going to go do that." And that was always in my mind that I was not going to spend the rest of my life living with nothing but Indians. So I guess that was part of my commitment to stay here.

Have you traveled to other places?

I been to Utah, South Carolina, Virginia, I been up in Canada. And then we travel back and forth to Oklahoma. When I was working, I'd get a week off every 6 months, throw all the kids in the car and drive back to Oklahoma.

M – It was a long drive. We mostly traveled at night.

S – You don't have to feed them if you travel at night. They'd get sleepy around 8:00, I'd say, "Ok, we're going to leave". I'd make a bed for them in the station wagon, put some water in there. Throw them in there, let them go to sleep, and next thing — we're in Oklahoma.

M – We're going back this Saturday. We'll be there a little over a week.

S – We're visiting my sister. I haven't been back too much since my mother passed away. About 1995.

Do you have cousins back there?

M – Yes. Lots of cousins there. No other relatives here, they're all back there.

"One of these days, I'm going to go see that. One of these days I'm going to go do that.

Are you taking any grandchildren?

S – One girl. There's too many to take all of them. 25 grand kids. 21 great grand kids. And there's one, two... two more coming in November. So I'm taking a week off.

M – No kids. (laughs) The one we're taking is 7 so she's ok.

S – I've had her since she was a baby. That's my baby.

What are you going to do on your vacation?

S – Casino. I sit in that casino all day long.

M – Her sister lives right across the street.

S – I'm going to stay with her because she lives right across the street .

Do you win?

I take enough money to get inside, buy me a pop, and that's it. I win. Just little bitty amounts, but I usually make a little money. I love it.

Designed by Mari Hulick
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The Rustbelt Legacy Project