

Schreiber, Nick
Introduction to Public History
Prof. Mann

Oral History Testimony Transcription

Key:

1. "N" refers to Nicholas Schreiber (interviewer).
2. "M" refers to Mary Ellen Alea (interviewee).

Notes:

The interview took place on November 12, 2009 in the American Indian Studies Office in Hibbard Hall of the University of Wisconsin Eau Claire.

Transcription:

N: So for the camera can you please tell me your name?

M: My name is Mary Ellen Alea. And should I look at you or the camera?

N: You can look at the camera.

M: Look at the camera. Okay. Ya. Mary Ellen Alea is my name.

N: And your experience with the college?

M: I have...I retired two years ago, but I taught at this university for twenty-nine years. And probably...I was in both English and American Indian Studies, and I taught in the American Indian Studies program probably beginning in...oh maybe around 1990. Started here in '82 full time, and then I taught a little bit earlier part time.

N: So what can you tell us about the Council Oak?

M: One of...when I...When I hear that question, the first thing that comes to mind is the original Council Oak Tree, which was a magnificent tree on this campus. I knew the history of this tree and this place, and so I use to pay a lot of attention to that tree. And I happened to be coming into Davies Center the day that the big wind storm came up. And as I came into the building, the tree, I heard a huge crack, and I turned around, and the tree fell. So I witnessed the tree going...the original Council Oak Tree going down. And it was just an amazing, awesome, and shocking event. Subsequent to that though, I mean I was thrilled to think that they were going to replace the tree. I mean to honor that place with another oak tree, and...I wasn't one of the organizers. I didn't have an organizing role to play in that, but a supportive role. I was there for the morning sun rise service of that; I was connected with that. Runners ran in the early morning, and then we gathered at the tree and planted this tree. And there were prayers and songs. And it was really a

beautiful, beautiful morning, beautiful event.

N: Can you at all expand on your experience with the dedication ceremony?

M: Well, I've been thinking about it since this whole topic has come up again. I mean with the... issues related to the new building and the placement of that building related to the tree. And so I've been thinking about this a lot. My memories actually of the actual ceremony about that are somewhat vague. I...I remember more a feeling of it than the actual details of it. So I think if I could just talk about that.

N: The feelings, what feeling did you have?

M: The feelings of that were just really happy feelings. I mean there was...there was a seriousness about it of course, because it was a serious thing that we were doing. But there was also a joy to it. And I...and I have been... in my experience in native communities over the years, I have had a similar feeling around ceremonies and around special dedications, and so forth that there's this wonderful...there's a kind of seriousness to it. But not everything is all together serious. There's always joking, and laughter, and gentleness around it. And that's kind of how I remember that morning. It was a good morning. It was just beautiful to be there and to do that. And it was...it was such an appropriate thing to be doing. It was, it was...and for me because I had seen the original tree go down, and it was a commitment. It just felt like the right thing to be doing, to plant a new tree and to have that tradition carry on to honor that history of what had happened there. And how, and how wonderful that was on our campus, that our campus is on that spot now. I mean that of course predates our campus by a long shot. So to have our campus be located in such a special place, it just...it all just came together in a moment like that of planting that tree. I mean planting a tree is just an exercise in faith, and hope, and goodwill. So that's what it felt like.

N: So can you explain the personal significance of the tree for you?

M: Well, I kind of have been saying that I think in a way, because...because I was teaching on this campus...and my...and actually my mother grew up in northern Wisconsin. And she, her family cleared land to farm up there in Sawyer County. And actually that is traditionally of course Ojibwa land. My immigrant grandparents didn't know anything about that history when they came here. But my mother went to school with native kids up there. She had friends. And...and...and I think that for me, living in Wisconsin, I didn't grow up in Wisconsin, but living in Wisconsin now is for me in a way kind of coming home. And then with my interest in native studies, to get to be here, teaching on this campus that respects...that connection respects Ojibwa history. It adds a dimension of my being on campus with this. And that, and so the moment of seeing that tree go down, the moment of planting a new tree, and having people gather together to make kind of a promise of renewed commitment to continuing that honor and respect, meant a lot to me and actually reached back in my own family...in some ways for me.

N: So how do you think your community's opinion of the tree changed over the years?

M: I think honestly we have probably have not done nearly enough to educate the campus and the community about the significance of...of this location. This is a beautiful history. I mean this a place of making peace. This a place where people come together with different points of view with issues and hammer out resolutions. And I think that the academic endeavor includes so much of that: problem solving, critical thinking, analysis, figuring out how to go forward from a place that sometimes looks difficult to go forward from, a place where there are lots of questions and maybe fewer apparent answers at the beginning. And so I think...that is...because I, you know, was a member at that time teaching on this campus. And I have, and I love this campus. I love this institution. My husband still works here. We live in the neighborhood. We're here all the time. And I care very deeply about...about this. But so, but I think, so I think we could over years, should over the years, have done a better job of educating, reminding people about this beautiful history of this...this place, this native history of this place...but I know also there are people on campus who go and sit by that tree, who pay attention to it, who respect it. And...and actually I've been...the up side of this current issue that's come up with related to the building is...the upside is that it's an opportunity again to talk about this, to bring this history up, and to let people who are here now who, you know, have maybe driven or walked past that tree on a daily basis to look at it, to understand and think about, about a dimension to this location that is very rich and very important. And very...as I said before, very much in line with what we do here in an academic way on this campus.

N: So how do you believe the Council Oak will be viewed in the future?

M: Well I hope that we do a better job of...of helping people to know this history, and the tree represents that. The tree marks, if not the exact geographic spot, it marks the spot where something very important happened historically. And it was...and it was a kind of thing, as I said, that I think we are about on this campus. So I think if we can, you know, I think it would be wonderful when prospective students and their parents come to visit campus that they be shown that spot and have that explanation and understand...that history. And also because by doing that, we transmit that message that we care about that, that we respect that history, that we honor that, that we are traditionally an Indian country. And so I think that's one thing that I hope, and that the tree really offers...an opportunity. It does offer an opportunity. I hope we can take advantage of the opportunity, continue to in our history classes, in our literature classes. I mean any...we can incorporate the significance of this tree and this history I think from many disciplinary points of view. I think it would be lovely to think art students were coming over and sketching the tree and...or that someone would maybe compose a piece of music that would...that would be dedicated to the tree. I think there, I think in terms of the cross disciplinary...the cross-disciplinarity of our programs here, I think the tree has a role to play...the history of that, and the tree as a symbol...have a role to play. I'd love to see that expand.

N: Anything else you'd like to comment on concerning the tree?

M: I don't think so. I'm really...I'm really glad to...as I said, I think as much... sometimes as an issue like this comes up, I know that there's disagreements about what should be done and so forth, but I think healthy discussion is good. And I think also it brings forward some...the opportunity to reinforce some very deep and important values. So that's...that's very important to me.