

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR RICHARD ST. GERMAINE, Ph.D
SUBJECT: COUNCIL OAK TREE ORAL HISTORY – GRADUATE STUDENT PROJECT
COURSE: HISTORY 386/586: INTRODUCTION TO PUBLIC HISTORY
INTERVIEWER: JORDAN O'CONNELL
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O'CONNELL: The first question I have is, can you provide some basic biographical information about yourself?

ST. GERMAINE: My name is Rick St. Germaine, from Lac Courte Oreilles, a small Ojibwa reservation a hundred miles north of Eau Claire and I attended school boarding schools and out west a little bit of time and also schools up near the reservation and then went and did my undergraduate training here in at Eau Claire in the late '60s and went on to grad school, and came back home to Lac Courte Oreilles, became tribal chairman and eventually did some university work in California and Massachusetts and ended up here at Eau Claire close to home.

O'CONNELL: Sure.

ST. GERMAINE: So that is kind of my background.

O'CONNELL: Thank you. So were going to move into the topic of the Council Oak tree here at UW-Eau Claire? Can you tell me your understanding of the history of the Council Oak tree here at the university?

ST. GERMAINE: In the late '60s the tree was majestic, it, it occupied a place of its own on the campus mall, the greenery, there were no buildings around it, so it stood alone in its nice setting. I don't remember if there were any roads near the tree at all but [pause] the university was very proud of its majesty and [pause] we had the symbol of the tree on much of our letterhead and documents on which we marketed our campus and we used the majesty of the age of the tree and history and the legend of the tree [pause] in ways that marketed the campus as a place of strength, beauty and knowledge. So in that context the tree stood as a symbol. It certainly was the most gorgeous tree I have ever seen. Standing by itself it was huge, it was large, it was colorful. Throughout the summer and the fall, and even in the winter, you know, the skeletal outline of the branches were beautiful. So I love the fact we had a tree of that size as the symbol of our university. [pause] Unfortunately it was hit by lightning, the devastation of the tree, it, the lightning took off the top half of the tree, so what you had was a stack of four pancakes. [pause] On the bottom and that is kind of what of it looked like. It had a big trunk and then there were with four pancakes sitting and the whole top was gone.

O'CONNELL: Hmm.

ST. GERMAINE: Which was too bad. I was told by a janitor who apparently [pause] saw a little twister come out of the sky during a bad storm and he said he saw the whirlwind come out of the clouds and just miss the hill, over there up by Towers [Hall] and he said it swooped down and landed right on top of the tree, and he said he could just see the tree shredding, and branches and bark and pieces of wood just swirling around, picking up everything, lifting it up and throwing it out and then he said everyone was clearing for the basement but he watched in amazement as the twister lifted back up and disappeared in to the clouds.

O'CONNELL: This is the same storm that in which the tree was hit by lightning?

ST. GERMAINE: That's what I was told by a janitor.

O'CONNELL: Interesting.

ST. GERMAINE: I know what Native Americans would say about it.

O'CONNELL: I should try to find this guy and get him on video talking about this.

ST. GERMAINE: Yeah, we need an eyewitness to verify that this little twister. Indeed. He said that there were about three or four janitors who stood in this window in the window way over here by Phillips Hall.

O'CONNELL: Really?

ST. GERMAINE: And they were really looking for the bad weather because of course there were tornado warnings and...

O'CONNELL: Sure.

ST. GERMAINE: ...and they say that they saw this twister.

O'CONNELL: Wow, that would be great for our documentary.

ST. GERMAINE: It would.

O'CONNELL: Excellent, Thank you. My next question is specifically about the rededication ceremony in 1990; can you detail and describe your experience and involvement with the rededication ceremony? I know your brother Ernie played a significant role in the rededication.

ST. GERMAINE: Well, you know I came back to Eau Claire in '89 from UC-Berkley and I was told that [pause] there was a dedication ceremony prior to my arrival that a Ho Chunk elder, [a] very respected elder came here for the tree planning and he prayed over the tree and the tree died. And then he came again, and this may have been '89. And it may have been the spring, I'm not exactly sure, I'm a bit

fuzzy, but I think I was at this one, and indeed he prayed over the tree and... And that one didn't make it either. [pause] Dee Sweet was the coordinator for the Native American students in '89, '90, '91 and she was adamant about getting a dedication for a tree that would really take hold and root right at the location of the original Council Oak tree. And she put together a...a gathering. I think it was April of '90, I believe, and she asked John Anderson on from Lac Courte Oreilles and my brother Ernie St. Germaine from Lac Du Flambeau to dedicate this tree. And I remember that there was also another festival going on at the same time. There was a run, which is becoming really popular on Indian reservations in Wisconsin and around the country. Tribes will hold a celebration run in which participants run some great distance and carry native feather flags or sacred tobacco or some substance and then bring this dedication, so I think my brother put something together on that and...then the culmination of the run was at this site of the old Council Oak tree and Dee Sweet was very involved. She introduced the two dedicators, John Anderson from LCO and AST. With Ernie St. Germaine from Lac du Flambeau. [pause] It seemed to me that John Anderson sang a song on a hand drum, if I remember, and talked about the symbolism in a tree and the view of native peoples about what a tree represents. Then my brother spoke afterwards and I recall him mentioning [pause] in English how important spirits are to all of us and he also seemed to describe the [pause] collegiality of people from all areas and with that he talked in Ojibwa and he did a typical prayer. I know he used tobacco to summon the spirits in the different directions and he spoke to the spirits, as is commonly done on the reservation. You invite spirits to an event and you try to instill the spirits in the people who are there and in the imagery of goodwill. And then he named these spirits, some of them. He didn't get them all.

O'CONNELL: [Laughs]

ST. GERMAINE: [Laughs]

ST. GERMAINE: There are quite a few. But I remember that when he got over to the north he was inviting spirits, if I recall now I'm trying to remember the details, but I was very proud of him for what he was doing here. He was bringing the spirits from the Indian belief system to the campus and he was dedicating that to all the students. And he was asking the tree to protect them [and] especially to take care of this campus. You know, my brother is a graduate of this university so he felt an affinity to this university. And he asked the spirits to look kindly on this campus and all the good its done. Now when that's done on a reservation we take these things very seriously.

O'CONNELL: Sure.

ST. GERMAINE: And we never destroy anything that we've ever blessed or dedicated. [pause] Now the questions remains; did we do something that was spiritual? I guess if we're welcoming spirits, we're doing something spiritual. But you know, that small tree already had a spirit. It already had a spirit. In fact all of the relatives

of the original Council Oak tree, which had a big powerful spirit, all its offspring had spirits too. I can't remember if my brother acknowledged that in his prayer. I can't remember if he asked the spirits to come and join that original spirit. But if you look at the belief system of the Ojibwa you'll have to understand that the Ojibwa believe that there are spirits in everything and everybody. And in rocks and in water and even in wood that is taken from dead tree. There would be a spirit in the new object.

O'CONNELL: My next question is...well, I was going to ask if the tree had and personal significance for you, but I think maybe a more appropriate question might be my fourth question here: has community or student opinion of the tree changed over time? [pause] You've been here on and off now for quite a while, so you've been able to sort of see and reflect on the history of the tree before and after the new tree was planted and took root.

ST. GERMAINE: In 1966 or '65 the tree really was felt by students. It had its own place... and it was big. And everybody mentioned it in welcoming people to campus. Typically they would bring people near the tree.

O'CONNELL: Sure.

ST. GERMAINE: And they described the tree. It was mentioned to new students. I remember when I came here it was instilled in us. We really, I had a sense of this tree on this campus. I felt that we were inseparable. [pause] I began hearing stories about legends of this being a tree where treaty councils, truce councils, peace councils were held because of its size. Now a few years ago I used to scoff at this notion, because of the age of the tree, for one thing, and then my understanding of the historic sites in which [pause] French traders and [pause] Ojibwa and Santee warriors came together to conduct a series of truces in the fall of each year. So I was a little skeptical at the time. I have since become more broad-minded about it. I looked at the possibilities over the course of eight years of annual truces in which significant sites along the stretch between Chippewa Falls, and maybe the ski hill down the stream. So I think that alternating sites were held, and it could have been possible that this was one or even two of those [pause] treaty councils, They weren't treaty as much as they were truce councils [pause]. Back during the time of probably 1798 through maybe 1805.

O'CONNELL: Was it that the tree wasn't old enough?

ST. GERMAINE: I felt as though in 1800 that tree would have been fairly small.

O'CONNELL: Sure.

ST. GERMAINE: It would have been a normal tree.

O'CONNELL: Right.

ST. GERMAINE: But I don't know enough about the topography. I'm more concerned about Little Niagara. I think Little Niagara is a very prominent feature along the river and I think it's likely that the Ojibwa and the Santee chose Little Niagara for that reason. I would see them parking their canoes here by Little Niagara drinking their water and then walking upstream a ways and then finding an opening to which they would hold their [*inaudible*]. I would have no proof, but knowing the, knowing the Indian mind they would look for things like Little Niagara.

O'CONNELL: Sure.

ST. GERMAINE: Also there is a bluff. There are some really nice escarpment at this site so this would serve as a pretty prominent place.

O'CONNELL: You've mentioned the tree having personal significance for you. You said you felt it when you were a student on this campus. Would you like to elaborate on that or speak to that at all?

ST. GERMAINE: Umm, I know, I knew some Indian students, some Ho Chunk students who used to stop at the tree. They ran along the drive over here.

O'CONNELL: Putnam Drive.

ST. GERMAINE: And they would stop at the tree and leave their tobacco offerings there. So as I mentioned the tree was huge, it was very special. We all felt that way about it. I wasn't so sure about the replacement trees. I never really felt an affinity with them the way I did about the original. But I talked to my brother about it, and explained how I felt and he changed my mind. He changed my mind. He told me about this tree the child being the child of the original. And it has grown very fast. In twenty, nineteen years of time it has gotten very big.

O'CONNELL: Sure.

ST. GERMAINE: And he told me some other things about the tree that he wants to keep secret about it.

O'CONNELL: Okay.

ST. GERMAINE: And [pause] I won't say much more about that. But when he told me these other things then I understood much better [pause]. One drawback is the fact that it's going to be dwarfed by huge buildings. And if it is, if the University system chooses to save the tree, it will be dwarfed, and in that sense it will also be hidden. And I guess there's nothing wrong with that. Some of the best trees in northern Wisconsin are hidden.

O'CONNELL: Hmm.

ST. GERMAINE: Very well, in some places of the forest. So that's okay.

O'CONNELL: The only remaining question I have is a question concerning your perspective of the future of the tree. And you could take this to the current debate about the expansion of the Davies Center or whatever, but it could go beyond that as well. So if you'd like to speculate about the future of the tree.

ST. GERMAINE: I am a person who's torn between the idea of the separation of church and state. On one hand I believe that every object on this campus has a spirit. So somebody could say you know, this campus is in bad condition because we haven't separated church and state. In the Ojibwa belief there's spirituality in everything here. And that's the way I feel about it. And to pick out a tree, one little tree, and say that that needs to be removed [pause] because it was a spiritual dedication is laughable to the Ojibwa because [pause] everything here is spiritual. Everything here on this campus. Even the bricks are spiritual. But if the broader campus believes that the tree should be removed, then the Ojibwa would need to have a ceremony to do something about the tree before it's destroyed. We'll have to take care of it before that happens.

O'CONNELL: Is there anything else you'd like to say about the tree? That's it for my questions.

ST. GERMAINE: It's hard to understand the Ojibwa way of thinking.

O'CONNELL: Sure.

ST. GERMAINE: It's difficult to understand it, but, but when I go one hundred miles north of here, nobody has trouble with what I'm saying. Everybody up there understands. And that's the way they feel about things. But in a setting like Eau Claire, it's difficult to understand this. But I travel back and forth. I go back and forth from Eau Claire, and I teach in Eau Claire in the week and I go back there on the weekend. So I have this appreciation, and I think it's nice if a university can bridge some of those differences in our beliefs and our ways of life. And even share some of that on this campus. So that's it.

O'CONNELL: Thank you very much.