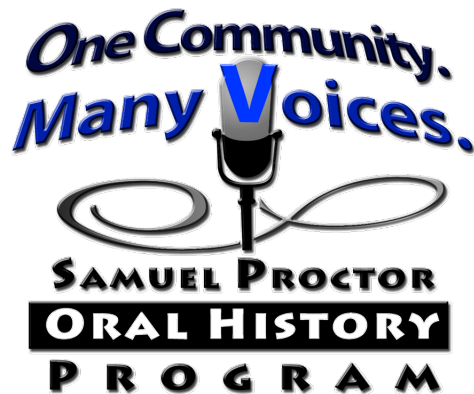


Randolph Mantooth

**Southeastern Indian Oral History Project
MISS CHOC-055**

Interview by:

**Staff of Nanih Waiya
July 16, 1974**



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MISS CHOC 055 Randolph Mantooth
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Abstract: Actor Randolph Mantooth discusses his thoughts on the current state of Indian culture and heritage. Mantooth talks about the importance of preservation and providing education for young Indians. He then goes on to discuss Indian representation in movies, stating that he believes Indians should play Indians. He talks about hurdles Indian actors face, and his thoughts on the American Indian Movement. The interview wraps with a discussion of the role that Indian fairs and festivals have in breaking down the barrier between the Indian and non-Indian.

Keywords: [Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians; Acting; Activism]

SAMUEL PROCTOR
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University of Florida

MISS CHOC 055

Interviewee: Randolph Mantooth

Interviewer: Staff of Nanih Waiya

Date of Interview: July 16, 1974

U1: Today is July 16, 1974, and we are out to interview Randolph Mantooth. And Randolph, the first question is, what do you think about heritage and culture and preserving it?

M: Well, I think it's important. But I think foremost that the heritage—well, it's here now, but it's changing, and heritage is going to be changed with different peoples. A prime example is in Los Angeles, the heritage is always there, and they come into Los Angeles, and they're exposed to other Indians and other tribes, and there's a lot of their own personal heritage that is lost because of the association with other tribes and how some things are dropped and other heritages are gathered up. It's kind of hard because the heritage, I don't think, will ever die with the Indian, if he just keeps on maintaining like he has been. For something like four hundred years, they've tried to knock it down, and the Indian has stayed and he will stay, but not without trying. They've got to try to keep the heritage and keep the culture going. Without it, there'd be a lot of people who would like very much for it all to wind up in a melting pot and come up with a up with a whole totally different tradition. I don't think it should die, and I don't think it will die. I don't think with people like I've met here today, with the Choctaw people, with the Lummi Indian in Washington, and with the Shoshone in Nevada—they're all working very hard not to let it die, and I don't think it will. I don't think they'll allow it to.

U1: What do you think about the education for the young people? Do you think it's important for them—like now—like four or five years ago, they said, older people

said, "It's not worth getting a high school education." You could get a high school—you know, when you finish high school, you get a job. And if you don't graduate from high school, you still get the same job as the high school graduates do. What do you think about the education of the young people now?

M: They're right to a certain extent. And I think it has to go beyond high school. And needless to say, without a high school education, you can't get a college education, but I think it has to go beyond high school education, has to. That's the only way anybody can compete with a non-Indian world today, 'cause they're all educated. Highly educated, and highly motivated kids, too. And I think the Indian people have to be just as educated and just as motivated as the non-Indian, otherwise they just can't compete with 'em, and they've just got to go on to college in order to successfully compete. Even if you go back to the reservation to help the reservation, a college education—you're still kind of competing with the non-Indian that surrounds the reservation, and you have to know what to do and what to say, and who to say it to, in order to get anything for the people that don't have a college education and also for the people who don't have the high school education. The old people are right. You do get the same job, whether you went to high school or not. That's not necessarily because of the education, it's because you just can't get a job. They would much rather give it a non-Indian than an Indian, as I'm sure everybody—I don't really know the situation as far as the Choctaw is concerned, and that's what I'm here for: to learn. But I do know some of the other reservations that I go to, and also some of the urban Indian that— [Phone rings] Someone want to get that? That may be

the phone. [Laughter] We're still going? Oh, I see. But that's essentially my answer to it, and I'm not really sure that my answer is right. And if someone finds out that it's wrong, I'd wish they'd be sure and give a telephone ring and tell me, 'cause I'd sure like to know. That's just my feeling on it.

U1: Okay. While we're on the young people, how do you think the young people, both non-Indian and Indian, should spend their leisure time? You know, should they spend their time on like, for instance, hobbies or what they're interested in or what the group are doing—a group or the others are doing?

M: Well, this is going to be a totally biased answer, because I don't believe anybody should be doing what—you should do exactly what you feel, as long as it's constructive. Even then, you should go ahead and do what you feel anyway, just hopefully that that person is motivated where his leisure time will be constructive to him, to his circle, which will, in effect, affect other people somehow. Just as long as it's constructive and gets him just a little bit farther along and just expands his knowledge just a little bit more. That's a real hard one to answer 'cause it's kind of a personal—and it would change for you, and it would change for whoever, and it's a real tough one to answer.

U1: A little earlier, you were talking about should Indians portray Indians in Westerns or other movies. Do you have any comments about that?

M: Yeah, I do. First off—and I think you're asking it because of past movies, and that again is a hard one, because I believe Indians should portray Indians. I don't believe they should be doing it with a White script though, because a non-Indian does not know, nor is he really trying—nine times out of ten—trying to find out

what it is—the Indian mind, the Indian way of life. He doesn't know, and he really shouldn't be allowed. Unless he does know, he really shouldn't be allowed to write scripts about Indians, because invariably it's going to be wrong. Whether it's detrimental or not, that's not the question. It's going to be wrong in a lot of ways, and I do believe that an Indian should play an Indian in a Western if it's truthful, and if it's telling both sides of it. There was a lot of things that were happening, and we only got one side of it. John Wayne's side, and it's not right. When you see the old films and you see Indians being knocked off their horse by a two-shotgun blast by John Wayne, that's telling a rather surface side of it and, at that, not even a truthful side of it. I think that there was indeed a movie—I didn't think that it was possible for a non-Indian film company to do a good film on the Indian until I saw—and even then it wasn't really a non-Indian film crew, it was pretty well mixed. I saw *I Will Fight No More Forever* about Chief Joseph, and that was incredible, and it told the Indian side of it. And it—I thought it was incredible. Indians played Indians, and it was a Western, but it was unlike any other Western that you've ever seen. It was about the Indian, and we need more Indian writers. We've got to have them to tell that side of it. We can't go on any further. Another thing is we're having a particular problem in Los Angeles or in Hollywood. We're having a particular problem because the studios and, by and large, the producers want to do stories on television about the Indian, but they're afraid. They're oversensitive. They're having the same problems with Blacks and with Chicanos and—but they're particularly afraid of the Indian's attitude. And they say, "Well, we can't do a show about Indians because we don't really know, and we don't

really have Indian writers, and da-da-da-da-da-da,” and they go on and go on. And I ask them, “Well, why don’t you just have Indians playing human beings?” I mean, they’re—they do exist. They don’t have to be Indian—I mean, there are Indians who drive trucks. There are Indians who are interns in hospitals. There are Indian firemen. Why don’t we just play them as humans? We don’t have to necessarily play them as an Indian, as such, and all of a sudden make a big script about it. It serves two purposes: it exposes the non-Indian, seeing that indeed they do fill certain roles in society, and it also serves another purpose, which I strongly feel about. It gives them experience in front of the camera, and it gives them the opportunity to get in front of the camera and to act. And then, when a real movie comes along about the Indian, their biggest complaint is, “Well, we have to hire Sal Mineo,” or, “We have to hire a Chicano to play an Indian part because there are no good Indian actors.” Well, the reason why there are no good Indian actors is because they don’t have an opportunity to do anything, because everybody’s afraid of hiring an Indian because they think that for some reason he isn’t in this society. They think that he has to play an Indian. Well, he’s a human. We all know, we all see him all over society. We see them filling all kinds of roles, but you don’t see it on TV and that’s supposed to be the gauge of—pardon the pun—that’s supposed to be the gauge of what society is all about. It’s what you see on TV. Well, that’s a hell of a gauge, because Indians don’t exist as far as television is concerned, unless they’re “Indian,” talking about Indian problems. Which has its place, but first comes first. First, you get jobs for them. Let them become experienced, and then, when that movie does come

along, they don't have to hire Sal Mineo and they don't have to hire a Chicano. They've got Indians that have had experience in front of the camera and acting experience. And right now, it's a vast wasteland out there. We had a part to find for an Indian, and nobody had the experience to do it, which I found really hard to believe. And then later on talking to a lot of the Indian leaders in Los Angeles, they said, "In a way, they're right." And the reason why is because nobody gives them any jobs. That was a long answer. [Laughter]

U1: Do you meet any, you know, many Indians—Indian actors?

M: Mostly, I meet Indians who are trying to be actors, and it's a tough road for 'em, real tough. Now see, if you're of mixed blood, then you can go in, you know, because they accept you then. If you're full blood, for some reason, they stand back away from you. I had it very easy. You know, they look at my last name and I—you know, in a lot of ways I don't look Indian and so they see Mantooth. Well, they like the idea that I'm Indian but look White. They like that. I want to see the day comes when the Indian can come in and be what he is, and they're not afraid of it. That's—hopefully won't be too long away, but I have a feeling it—things are hard to change, especially people's attitudes and prejudices. They're really hard to change, and hopefully maybe I can have a little something to do with changing it if I can. [Laughter] Boy, that's good. Then, I won't be acting just for me, then I'll be doing something that I feel is good. I meet a lot of Indians who are good, really good, but still find it really hard to find a job. Eddie Little Sky, a Sioux from South Dakota, he's been in this business, boy, about three-quarters of my life, and he's good, but still, I make a heck of a lot more money at the business than

he does. And it just doesn't seem fair that he's been at it for as long as he has, and I've been at it a relatively short period of time and I outgross him, income-wise. And God only knows, he needs it, he's got kids to feed. Did you happen to watch the movie *I Will Fight No More Forever*, a television movie?

U1: I missed that.

M: I wish you could've seen it, because it was about ninety-seven percent Indian, and when they tell me that they can't make an Indian movie because there aren't enough Indian actors, I refer them to that movie. Because when they see that, when everybody sees that, their minds are gonna change. Because it happened, and it was probably one of the best television movies I've ever seen on television. And I didn't think it was possible. I felt, myself, that that was the same caliber as feature films. And I think that everybody, every Indian, should see it. Because it really—it should make everybody feel, the minute the movie's over, like they'd walk out the door and say, "I can do it. I can do it."

U1: Have you heard of this Indian—let's see, Indian thing, AIM?

M: Mmhm.

U1: Do you have any comments about that? I mean, it's ...

M: Yeah. [Laughter] And it's a legitimate question. It's something that I've been dealing with in my own mind, and I have comments about it, but I'm not really sure my mind is really made up. I believe that everything has a purpose, including AIM. I have a lot of friends that are AIM members, and we have round and round about it. It's really hard, it's like the Black problem in Los Angeles. I really believe that without the riots, I don't think that the Blacks would have

progressed as far as they have now. Now that's really bad to say, it's really unfortunate, but I believe that it's the truth. I think that you just have to have that radical end, and you have to have that incredibly liberal side too, because it's not going to go radical and it's certainly not going to go this liberal. It's gonna be right down that middle. It's gonna be. So as far radical as a few radicals can get, the more over that middle goes. I'm not going to sit here and say that I think that if you're pissed off, if you're angry, that AIM is the way to go. I'm not saying that at all. And I'm not saying that you should sit back and just let the non-Indian progress you to his dictates. I'm not saying that at all. I'm just saying that somewhere in your own mind, you're going to have to—in your own conscience, you're going to have to figure out exactly where you're gonna go. AIM has incredibly legitimate gripes, and I think AIM has done a lot for the Indian, a lot. Some of their ways of going about and getting it are not necessarily my ways, but I certainly can relate to their frustrations, even though indirectly, because I don't necessarily have the same problems. But I can relate to them. I can relate to the frustrations, I can relate to some of their tactics. The non-Indian has put 'em there. I mean, the non-Indian has created AIM, you know, it's not the Indian's fault. The non-Indian has created AIM, and there it is, and now they have to deal with it. And they're mad, and they should be mad. And they're getting tired of being hit, they're getting tired of being shot at, so they're gonna shoot back. It's natural, but I'm not advocating it. I'm just saying it's there, and I believe it has its place. I'm not necessarily there, but I can totally relate to it. I knew I had to deal with that question sooner or later. Nobody has really asked me about it, and I

knew sooner or later somebody was going to bring it up, and I knew I'd have to deal with it, so that's pretty much how I feel about it.

U2: That's a good answer. I think most Choctaws certainly do feel like AIM is good. It has its purpose, and a purpose of good, but not necessarily the way they're going about to achieve their aim and their goals and their purpose.

M: I pretty much feel the same way, but I don't—I'd sure hate to see the FBI go in and lock up AIM. That would really scare me a lot, because I do believe that AIM does have its purposes. And I don't think it's necessarily AIM policy to shoot FBI people, and I think it's only—I think it's a personal thing when it's done, and I'm not necessarily saying that that was a bad thing. It's always bad when somebody loses their life, but we only know what the paper tells us. And we all know that the paper don't tell the truth. So, all we know is that there are two FBI people dead, and that's all we do know. That's all we do know. We don't know what happened, and I don't know whether we ever really will.

U1: What do you think about the fair, the Choctaw fair and something similar to the fair in other parts of the country and the event?

M: I like it, and I wish there'd be more of it. I go to—every year—to the Lummi Indian—it's kind of—it's a tribe that not too many people hear about. It's a fishing tribe in Washington, and they have relatively the same thing. And last June was my third year there, and I've watched it grow and grow and grow. And it apparently is exactly like the Choctaw fair. And, from what I understand, it's grown and grown and grown, and it's getting bigger every year. I must say that the Choctaw fair is a much larger concern than Lummi in that—what's great

about Choctaw is that the non-Indian is also helping, which really is encouraging, because a non-Indian won't really get involved with the Lummi, mainly because there's a fishing hassle up there. And so, the non-Indian—not all non-Indians, but some non-Indians—by and large, the non-Indians up there just say, you know, "Go put on your fair." They really won't give 'em any help. But they succeed every year. They succeed in spite of it, you know, mainly because they just sit down and say, "Okay, we've got to do it." And they do it. Here it's a heck of a lot better feeling. You know, it's a lot more friendly feeling. And understandably, why the Lummi can't do it is, they're hassled a lot, they've got a lot of pressure that they're really not used to dealing with, they're doing things that they had never done before. And I think it's incredibly brave and incredibly energetic on their part to put together what they call the Lummi Indian Stommish Festival. And it's a water festival, they have war canoe races and things like that, and here you have your stickball, and I think it's great, and I think it's important. I think it's also important that everybody exposes the non-Indian to it. Because sooner or later, one way or another, the Indian is going to have to deal with a non-Indian. He's going to have to deal with him in the outside and, by the same token, the non-Indian is going to have to deal with the Indian, and if there can be some sort of a coexistence going on, the Indian will be allowed to be Indian. That's what's—it's to knock down this fear barrier that is going on. The reason why a lot of non-Indians don't want Indians to be Indian is because they're afraid of it, they don't understand it. And with understanding, breaks down that fear. And if they can—if they're allowed to understand what an Indian is, what an Indian really is, I think—

God, I hope I'm not wrong—but I think that the non-Indian will allow the Indian just to be Indian. All he wants to do is to be himself. What more does he want, you know? That's all. That's all he wanted from the very beginning.

U1: I guess that's all the questions we've got, so I—

M: Okay.

[End of interview]

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