

AMERICAN INDIAN HISTORICAL RESEARCH PROJECT

University of New Mexico

Tape Number: #744 SIDE II

Tribe: NAVAJO

Informant: DILLON PLATERO

Informant's home address: ROUGH ROCK DEMONSTRATION SCHOOL

Band or Clan:

Date and location of interview: 10/6/70 same

Field Worker: Margaret Sizer

Date of transcription: Oct. 30, 1970

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Dillon Platero  
Rough Rock Demonstration School - Director  
October 6, 1970  
Margaret Szasz - Interviewer  
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Q. I think perhaps it would be best to start with some statistical type questions.

If you have got some facts in your head this morning, first of all, how many students do you have this semester?

A. Pretty close to 400.

Q. Is that up from last year?

A. Yes, it is, about from 350 to 360, somewhere in there.

Q. What percentage of these are live-in, dorm students?

A. About half.

Q. Just half, and is that down from last year?

A. Yes, it is.

Q. This is because of.....

A. Increased opportunity to students who want to stay at home and running more buses, and expanding our bus routes.....not in distance but in even if they live a mile and a half or two miles. We pick alot of these students up.

Q. Would you say that there is a definite preference of students wanting to live at home?

A. I think that there is. There is a tendency for students to want to stay home and for obvious reasons. I think that they like home and they like to be with their parents, they like to be with their brothers and sisters, they like to ride horse, they like to be free to do things, in which they and their parents plan and they, themselves plan.

Q. Which is impossible to duplicate in the dorm situation, no matter how hard you try?

A. Yeah, everything in the dorm is artificial.

Q. Right. Even if you replace the.....

A. To replace the home that is.....

Q. How far away do the students come from who live in the dorm?

A. Well, in our own area here, in many cases, some of these students come in from a couple of miles. But we give them a choice to stay at home or to live in the dorm. And it is not our choice, it is their's and the parents.....

Q. Sure.....

A. So that it is free for them to make that choice, and if they want to stay here a couple of nights during the week they can. And then be at home 3 nights out of the week, on weekends they all go home. The other part is that we have students from other areas, and these students come from some, come from Tuba City, but they started here about 3 year's ago, and the continued to stay. We urge some of them to go to the nearest school, but they continue to come back here. So, we have turned many down who would be in the dormitory, but right now I think we have approximately 30 to 40 students from the outside. Out of the district that is.....

Q. And once you come from that far, Tuba City, do they still go home on the weekends too?

A. No, it would be difficult for them. But when they do want to go home, they ask us and we take them home anytime they do. Whether it is during the week or on a weekend.

Q. What about your faculty. What is the ratio of Indians to the non-Indians?

A. I think it is about, out of 120 or 115 people that we have.....maybe 20 of them are non-Navajos. About 10%.....

Q. That is good. That is encouraging as a matter of fact.....I didn't know that you had that high of a ration. Okay.....Tell me about, can you tell me about your financial situation now. Your five year contract was made in '68, right, with the Bureau?

A. This is only a method of strengthening the staff's belief that, not belief but morale, that have a project that is going to go five years. Because at the beginning everyone thought that it was going to go two year's and then next year, we won't be here and so forth. So the five year is, to not only us, but to many Navajo people who are watching Rough Rock closely, a way to simply say now we are not folding up next

year. The five year's aren't up. So, even at the end of the five year contract, I don't see anything that is going to come in the way of a school being run the way it is right now. That is, being the responsibility of the local community.

Q. How does your budget compare to that of other school's on the reservation?

A. Well, obviously we have experimental programs, and then when you have experimental programs you have added moneys. And you simply don't have a program and call it experimental and you simply do it without the funds if you are going to do it on any broad scale if it is going to have any effect on total educational program.

Q. What would be the areas of experimentation that run into the most money?

A. Well in follow through, which is really child education, and then emphasizing the things that are emphasizing the head start program and following through on this.... in the follow through program in many ways so that the attention is given to a child on a as far as the staff within a classroom. There maybe 3 adults in the classroom and you have 20 kids so that the adults do pretty much the same thing, except that you have the change in the subject presentation and there are other special programs that we have and we follow through this comes to the cultural bilingual program. That is one, the other is the bilingual program - Title VII - both of these programs are funded by the U.S. office of Education. And 8910 from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and of course the regular bureau budget so that these are the money's we get for our classroom program. Other program funds are not directly related to the classroom programs, but with the exception of probably the.....funds that provide their Navajo cirriculum center. Their materials are prepared by those areas such as Navajo Mental Health program, that is all together a program outside of the classroom. The Community Development Program is outside of the classroom so that there are many varied programs in this area which are not part of the classroom program, but these are experimental in nature and they are programs which have been in which funds have been requested and we got the grant that is needed so that, this is how some of these programs are and the ways.....something like that.....we are trying to get funds through the Office of Economic Opportunity to fund the housing

program. Now this is a new direction in an education as far as I am concerned cause you have a facility like this and then you have funds in which you.....in the Bureau budget you always ask for funds for dormitory for the school facilities and for the residential area. Public Schools same thing with the exception of the dormitory. USPHS, they ask for housing along with the hospital facilities. So that the local community does not get the funds, does not get any of the money's, like if they were building a house and renting it to public health, public school, or Rough Rock personnel. The buildings are within the fence and then the money's all go right back into the school. So none of this goes out to the local community. So we are attempting to change this part of the building houses out of the community, so that rent money's are collected by people out in the community, not the school.

- Q. This is more in line then with the idea of the school being of economic benefit to the community.
- A. And also the community having a great deal to do with the school, involved as much as necessary.....
- Q. This is just another step in that direction. And this is new, is it not.....It hasn't been done anywhere, has it?
- A. Right here is the first place.
- Q. So you feel pretty secure about the financial situation, I thought you said you were applying to whom for money for a possible high school?
- A. This will be to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and some of the money's that we are getting for planning are from the foundations, back East and then this we are going to be.....going to the next Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday in the New York and Boston area so that people representing the schools from this area will be in that area for those days requesting funds for plans and specifications and then for architectural work that has to be done, the actual construction.
- Q. Okay. All right, very good. I would like the history of the school and how it came about. What would you say were the key reasons why the Bureau consented to give the facilities of the demonstration school and let the project go ahead?

A. I think that the Bureau really wanted to experiment in the classroom program, and I am not to sure whether they were expecting the success that happened to work out like the school here. Now over at Lukachukai, I think that the project was a failure simply because there were two administrative heads, the Bureau ran the tribe. Here they were talking, the Bureau is not involved in the decision making, what goes on in the school and it is the boards perogative to do the decision making and to operate the program.

Q. Do you think that the Bureau would have done this, say in 1960? Do you think that there has been a change?

A. I think they could have, if people within their organization were not creative. They have some creative people, it is the red tape, the policies, the new people that come in. Everyone had a different program. So that the Indians were not at the time; they didn't have too much to do really with the program, but their voices are now heard to a greater extent than I think the.....But then this might have been achieved even at that time. But I think that one of the main areas was funds from other sources. So that the economic opportunity program provided an impetus in this area. By providing extra money so that the control is not with the Bureau alone.

Q. Would you say that the factor of developing Indian leadership had anything to do with influencing the Bureau?

A. I think so, I think that gradually I think it was several years advocated that there should be a department of Navajo education, and that there should be planning done by the education people of the tribe. And many other things.

Q. Who would you say were the key individuals who made it possible?

A. I think there were people such as Allen Yazzie, such as Bob Roessel, and people like Graham Holmes, I think in Rough Rock. I am talking about Rough Rock specifically here.....I think prior to this, there was a program which the education committee of the tribe had a great deal to do with and I think could have gone along ways if the idea was continued on a basis that it was started on, at least in the middle '50's. So that I think even then there was a great deal of concern and there was not the

lack of involvement on the part of the Navajo leadership, even at that time. I think that the time just wasn't right and the money wasn't there and the Bureau wasn't oriented to really think in these terms.

Q. Would you say that in a sense Rough Rock paved the way for the Community College?

A. Yes, it did.....

Q. Rough Rock had the approval of the tribe, but not necessarily the approval back at Washington?

A. Rough Rock really did not have the approval of the tribal council.

Q. Oh, it didn't?

A. Yes.

Q. That I didn't know.

A. But it's committee, the Education Committee approved the program and it is a private nonprofit corporation that was set up at Rough Rock.

Q. Having been back researching at the Bureau of Indian Affairs this summer, reading various and sundry correspondence, I had run across criticism of Rough Rock which is understandable. I wondered how you would define your relationship with Bureau officials at this time? Has it improved? The question was on the relationship with the Bureau, at this time, and has the relationship improved since you started?

A. I think so. I think that the relationship is quite improved to the extent that there is plenty of communication with the various Bureau officials. Now you asked the first question about publicity. The publicity that goes out, whether it is from Rough Rock or from other people, by.....The publicity doesn't do any damage to us, I don't think. There was publicity which wasn't good from the start, there was publicity that was good. But then it was four years ago then. This is the fifth year, and it was developing into a high school so that.....whatever their beef..... I simply discount, but I think that where there is constructive criticism, I think that we take a close look at it. Of course, somebody simply talks through the top of his hat, I think we disregard it in many cases, but in the paper, I think that some Bureau people, some individuals have tried to get us to come out in the paper by

saying things, like Rough Rock is a failure. The instant reaction some people would have is that right away they will go write to the paper and slam back at the person. But this is not our way of doing things, I don't think this is what we want to do.

△ We don't intend to.....So we will go about it, and in our subtle way of presenting our true image and the things that we are doing and accomplishing.....So that if we have a project, an experiment which people are afraid of, and we are doing it, we are not afraid of it.....being a failure, at least we have tried it. A lot of people don't, so that we see the successes, we see the failures. And I must say that up to this poing, the successes are pretty much overshadowed the failures.....

Q. One question that, I have heard one particular criticism and I would like your opinion on this. This is that the Bureau says that you are not relying on testing results as much as they think is necessary. What do you think? Do you think that tests are that important, do you think that what they show is the significant? Do you rely on them?

A. No, we don't.....I think that there are many ways of testing children, the children who are happy in the classroom and obviously.....seem to like the atmosphere.....I think that this is the test itself, but I think that the attendance of certain individuals when they keep coming, I think that this is a test. I think that we are measuring so that it confirms with the other, meaning the traditional education that we have had.....I think that this is a false impression that we get out of children. And we try to say that this is where they are, but they're really are not, simply because they are presented a curriculum that is everybody mentioned this, that it is prepared for middle-class American and here you have all again, a different culture and so that, I think that these things, have a real meaning when people say this. So that I don't think that we can safely say that these children should be given tests and so forth, especially in experimental nature such as our situation.

Q. Okay, I am glad to hear that answer, I agree with you.....Now this has been discussed a great deal, but what would you say of the nature of the relationship with the Navajos in the Rough Rock area? Could you just describe it?



- A. Well, I think that it provides income, I think which is of economic nature. Which is up grading the homes, upgrading the diet that the people receive, the children, and then I think that the constant coming in and criticizing the school are saying that I should have this from the school. I think that this is good, it is a healthy sign. If we had a school where there was no criticism, where there was no....then I would be worried. But as it is, I think that I am happy because we do receive criticism from others, from leaders, from the Board, and people from the community who work right here at the school, so that this is continuing thing. And I think that this is healthy sign, I don't think that we could ever reach utopia.....Where every-f thing is just perfect.
- Q. One question on you have so many visitors and I know that you have had alot of visitors from other tribes. What is their general reaction?
- A. I think that their general reaction, I think that the first thing that they see when they are walking down the hall is all the mothers and fathers sitting around and walking down the ahllways which is, which we don't see in other schools, but here you do. That is the first impression that you get at Rough Rock.....and.....
- Q. We were talking of visiotrs and you were mentioning their first reaction.
- A. Yes, one of the first reactions I mentioned earlier is that the Navajo people is that they see people down the ahllways and in classroom corridors and also outside, and just talking. And this is not only in the school buildings, but when you go to the school dormitories you also see the same thing. So that, this is one of the first impressions. Secondly, I think that the atmosphere of the school itself is that you have a program in which you see that, that there is a young staff and thattthere is a tendency to feel quite free and quite.....the atmosphere, let's see how can I.... say that.....I think that freedom to do things that one wants to improve the total program, either by talking to teachers, or by talking to the different people here, even students.....
- Q. Feeling that you don't get another school again, this is trying...Which would you say are your greatest successes to this point, perhaps we have already gone over that?

A. I think that the area relating to local control, I think that this is what we wanted to prove and we have.....it could be done.

Q. Could I ask you one question, on this yourself. Did you go to boarding schools?

A. Yes.

Q. Where did you go?

A. Wingate, Santa Fe, Crownpoint.

Q. Is this one reason why you feel so strongly about Rough Rock?

A. Not necessarily, I think that it is an educational program and it, in which we all feel should be improved....regardless whether you go to a public school or Bureau school or mission school or any private school. I think that if you have a feeling that you want to be in education and that you want to improve Navajo Education that this is one of the things that is important in anybody wanting to.....is the interest and willingness to do what you want to do. But there are cases where some people have to agree with you before you can do these things.

Q. One last question, I won't keep you anymore.....Could you tell me a little bit about the National Indian Education Association?

A. The National Indian Education Association was formed to do, be of service to the Indian people and not to dictate to the Indian people that this is an organization that is going to do this and that. But rather the, the reverse, that it comes from communities who say that this is the program that we would like, help in this area, we would like more information in this area and there are many things that the National Education Association can do. We have a Navajo Education Association, which we call the Navajo Naboitch Association. I think this association is action service oriented. In the short time that it has been in existence, it is made its programs felt all over the reservation by teachers and the youth programs and things like that. So that I see that the comparison here, that, one is specifically dealing with one group and the other, education association, dealing with a broader, a much broader basis than what we are.....Will all the Indian groups and in many cases, I think affecting the legislation through their programs and making changes, and I think that it is going

to help the total Indian education picture.

Q. Is it not a new organization?

A. It is a new organization.

Q. And you are meeting in Minneapolis this year?

A. Yes.

Q. And you were chosen officer?

A. Yes, I am first Vice-President.

Q. There will be what, annual meetings?

A. Well, I will have some regional seminars....some are meetings sponsored in cooperation with the national, the office of education, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and with the states and so forth....

Q. Would you say that this is a sign of Indian local self-control, taking over?

A. I think so, definitely.

Q. So that in this sense it is a very healthy organization.'

END OF TAPE