Ponca Tribe of OK

Cynthia Warner & daughter Barbara recount the rich history of the Ponca tribe, including the relocation to OK from Nebraska.

Chapter 01 – 0:48
Introduction

Announcer: Cynthia McDonald Warner was an enrolled member of the Ponca Nation and oldest member until her death on July 12, 2012 when she was 93.

Cynthia was the daughter of the late Louis and Mattie Roughface McDonald. Louis McDonald was born in the "'old country" (Nebraska), and Cynthia was the last tribal member whose father survived the forced removal to Oklahoma from their ancestral lands in Nebraska.

Cynthia was born January 12, 1919, on the White Eagle Reservation. She attended school on the reservation and attended the Chilocco Indian Boarding School. Cynthia left behind a legacy of Ponca tradition instilled in her family.

Cynthia's daughter Barbara Warner was the executive director of the Oklahoma Indian Affairs Commission.

She joined us for this oral history interview of Cynthia and is heard on *VoicesofOklahoma.com*.

Chapter 02 – 5:20
Ponca Walk

John Erling: My name is John Erling. Today's date is April 13, 2010.

Cynthia, would you state your full name, please?

Cynthia Warner: My name is Cynthia McDonald Warner.

JE: Your date of birth?

CW: January 12, 1919.

JE: You're ninety-one. Who's joining us here in this interview?

CW: My daughter, Barbara Warner.

JE: Barbara, if you'll state your name, please.

Barbara Warner: My name is Barbara Alice Warner.

JE: Where are we recording this?

BW: We're recording in the offices of the executive director of the Oklahoma Indian Affairs Commission. I've been the executive director for seventeen years.

JE: Your date of birth and your present age?

BW: Date of birth is January 3, 1949, I'm sixty-one years old.

JE: Cynthia, tell us where you were born.

CW: I was born on a Ponca reservation, south of Ponca City, Oklahoma.

JE: Tell me about your mother, your mother's name.

CW: Her maiden name is Mattie Roughface.

JE: And your father's name?

CW: Louis McDonald.

JE: Okay.

CW: It's Mc.

JE: Do you know where they came from?

CW: Niobrara, Nebraska.

BW: Grandpa McDonald was born in Niobrara.

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BW: And he made the walk down when our tribe was removed.

CW: Yes he did, that's true.

BW: My grandmother, Mattie Roughface McDonald was born in 1896 after the Poncas came here.

JE: Okay, Barbara, maybe you can tell us a little bit about when you said, "Walk down here." Talk to me about that a little bit.

BW: There was a time in our American history when there was the Indian Removal Era. At one time, Oklahoma was just a desolate wasteland and it was the intent of Congress and the federal government to move Indians to Indian Country, which was Oklahoma, Indian Territory, as they called it later, so that they could take our land holdings wherever we came from. And move us here to have us coexist with just a melting pot of Indians. It was going to be an Indian state. Originally going to be the state of Sequoyah, actually.

JE: That was in the 1800s?

BW: Our tribe arrived here around 1870. There were some one hundred tribes that were removed here. There was only five that are indigenous to Oklahoma. So all the rest of us were forcibly moved here.

My grandfather was very young at that time when he made the walk. It's about five hundred miles from Niobrara to what's now White Eagle, Oklahoma. He wore out his

moccasins coming down. He watched, he estimates about a fourth of our tribe that died along the road and were left to die, some of them weren't even dead, they were just abandoned, so that they would keep moving.

JE: Cynthia, do you remember your parents talking about that?

CW: Yeah, the—

JE: That walk? What do you—

CW: Every now and then they'd mention it.

JE: What do you remember them saying about it?

CW: I know my dad said [laughing], he said he wore out three pairs of moccasins walking down from Niobrara to here.

JE: How long did that trip take?

BW: It took months because—

CW: Oh, yeah, it took quite a while.

BW: … uh, because they went from one season to another.

CW: Yeah.

BW: And they did work in the wintertime and it was just horrendous.

JE: That was your Trail of Tears then?

CW: Yeah.

BW: Yes. Most of the tribes in Oklahoma did have a similar experience and the Cherokees just happened to name theirs, we didn't name ours.

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And your mother walked too?

BW: No, she was born here in 1896.

CW: No, she—

BW: My grandfather was about sixteen years older than her.

JE: So they met—

CW: They met—

JE: … here in Oklahoma? How old would he have been when he came walking?

CW: Oh, must have been about three years old, I don't know.

BW: He said about three. Yeah, he doesn't know, he just knew about when he was born.

CW: In May—

BW: When the cherries were blooming or something like that. So we estimate about three years old.

CW: My dad used to say he was born when the grass was just so tall. [laughing] So that was in May or—

BW: Spring.

JE: First spring of the year.

CW: … something like April or May, something like that. But that was in the north.

JE: In Lamore?

BW: In the north.

CW: In Niobrara, Nebraska.

BW: In Nebraska.

JE: When they walked down here did the federal officers or troops guide them down here or—

CW: Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, just like any other prisoners.

JE: So they were—

CW: I call it that, anyway.

JE: They were actually almost treated like prisoners?

CW: Yeah.

BW: We were basically prisoners of war.

JE: So they had troops front?

CW: Yes.

JE: Back?

CW: Yes.

JE: Side?

CW: Yes.

JE: To make sure—

CW: That they stayed together.

JE: Because it could be that some would wander off and not want to do this.

CW: Wander off, you know, yeah. Um-hmm (affirmative). They wanted to keep them together. And placed us.

JE: In Oklahoma?

CW: Yeah, from Niobrara, Nebraska, to here.

JE: How did that work? Did the federal agents say, "All right, we know where the Poncas are supposed to live in Oklahoma"?

CW: Yeah, it was already allotted.

JE: Where did they bring them to?

CW: White Eagle, Ponca City area. White Eagle is south of Ponca City.

BW: North central Oklahoma at that time.

CW: Yeah.

JE: How many made that trip from Nebraska and settled here?

CW: Oh, golly, not very many. I imagine three hundred, four hundred, not many.

BW: I think it was around five hundred.

CW: Yeah, something like that.

JE: Today the tribe isn't all that big, is it?

BW: It's about twenty-six hundred.

JE: Is that the smallest we have population-wise in the state of Oklahoma?

BW: No, we have some tribes that have like two hundred, a hundred, Ft. Sill Apache and Modoc.

JE: A—

BW: The Poncas are now an average size tribe.

Chapter 03 – 5:52
Eating Rabbits and Squirrels

John Erling: Cynthia, what is your first recollection as a youngster?

Cynthia Warner: Ah, let's see. I was raised on the reservation, Ponca reservation, and, of course, growing up [laughing] my duty was to round up horses. I had my own horses. I had my riding horse and I had a team of horses. My uncle had a team of horses. My mother had two teams of horses.

They used to tell me in Indian, say, "Victory, go and get Bill, Brownie," so I have to round up Bill and Brownie, but I always knew where they were. You can hear their hooves, you know. [laughing]

JE: So you went out on your horse?

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: To locate these other horses?

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative), yeah.

JE: Because they were being used by your mother and father?

CW: Yeah, they were, of course, that was when they were going to go up town in their buggy. Of course, I can't fit the harnesses on them, I was too little.

JE: How old would you have been when you rounded up the horses?

CW: I don't know, about six, seven. And you ride a horse at six years old, like you sit on a horse like a monkey. Hang on to their mane, put my leg on, ride hard.

JE: Ever fall off?

CW: Round up—oh, I fell off when I started riding horses when I was six years old.

JE: Were you ri—

CW: Now who rides bareback today?

JE: You were riding bareback?

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Just holding on to the mane?

Did you have brothers and sisters?

CW: I had one brother, older brother.

Barbara Warner: Two years older.

CW: And then I had two young little brothers, much younger than me.

JE: Did everybody have a job to do? Everybody worked from an early age?

CW: Yes! In the garden.

JE: Let's talk about the garden.

CW: Oh, my dad was a great garden raiser. Oh, my, we had vegetables galore.

JE: What kind of vegetables?

CW: Oh, peas, green beans, beets. I had two sisters who used to help my father cook all that and can it in jars, fruit jars. We called it fruit jars. We had a cellar that was lined, cemented, wonderful, cool, golly, it was nice and cool. And that's where my dad used to keep all his potatoes, you know, sweet potatoes and potatoes. He had a little platform and laid out all the vegetables on the tablecloth.

BW: Oilcloth.

CW: Oilcloth, yeah.

JE: Oilcloth.

CW: Oh, we had a wonderful cellar. Like I said, my grandpa had it cemented and it was just nice and cool.

JE: This would have been along about 1926 or '27, I suppose.

CW: Yeah, something like that.

JE: Because you were born in 1919.

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: What did you do for meat?

CW: I had two uncles who used to hunt, hunt, hunt, hunt for rabbits and squirrels.

JE: So you ate rabbits and squirrels?

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative), that's our source of meat, yes.

BW: And deer every now and then.

CW: Well, I don't know about that, honey. Probably much earlier, yeah, could be. My folks, my dad, of course, you know, there's no houses, they lived in a camp.

JE: You ate mostly squirrel and rabbit?

CW: Rabbits, yeah.

BW: Turtle. Big lizard.

JE: Turtle?

CW: Yeah, if you could catch them. You know, those big turtles, boy, they're delicious.

BW: Tell him how Grandmama cooked those turtles.

CW: Yeah, those poor things. Put them in the oven, you could just hear them scratch and walk around.

JE: Oh, you put them in the oven—

CW: Yeah.
JE: Live?
CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).
JE: Why? [laughing] Why did they have—
CW: That oven would be very hot and they didn't live very long.
JE: Why did they have to be put in there alive?
CW: Well, I don't know, that's the way they were cooked. And then after they're done, you tear them apart.
JE: And that was good eating?
CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).
JE: Which was the best eating, rabbit, squirrel—
CW: I don't know, I have never eaten any turtle but I have rabbits, squirrels, and how. They was the only source of meat we had then.
JE: And you grew up on that?
CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).
JE: And as far as you knew it was pretty tasty.
CW: Yep, very tasty. [laughing] My dad, my uncles, they all had guns and they were good shooters.
JE: What would a typical dinner be for you?
CW: Well, whatever my uncles can find and kill, mostly rabbits.
JE: Okay, so it would be—
CW: And squirrels.
JE: And then your vegetables?
CW: My dad raised a lot of vegetables. Yeah. He went to school at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where he learned all that. So he brought it home and did all that planting. [laughing] Whewww, did they have the vegetables.
JE: Was there a certain kind of bread or anything that you would make? Any baking that went on?
CW: As far as I remember they used to buy those forty-eight pound flour.
JE: How would they use that flour?
CW: Well, biscuits and fried bread and—
BW: Top bread.
CW: Yeah, mostly top bread.
JE: Top bread?
CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).
JE: What's top bread?
CW: They use a skillet with very little grease on it and they roll out flour mixed with water.
BW: Dough.

CW: Roll it out on a board and cut it up, either fry it or bake it.

BW: And it wouldn't rise that much, it was a flat bread.

CW: I had two sisters who were cook crazy. We used to go out on the [laughing] other people's farms and pick plums and they used to fix plum jelly. Boy, it was delicious. Just anything like that, you know.

Chapter 04 – 6:54
Sundance

John Erling: You're ninety-one, are you the only surviving—

Cynthia Warner: Yes.

JE: Of your sisters and brother.

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

Barbara Warner: You had the three sisters that—

CW: Oh.

BW: … Grandma was their aunt.

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BW: Three older sisters, they were teenagers when you were born.

CW: Yeah.

BW: And then Grandma had nine children and only two survived to adulthood and that's you and Uncle Maké.

CW: Me and my brother, Maké.

JE: You said that your dad went to Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

CW: Yeah.

JE: There's a connection here because Jim Thorpe—

CW: Jim.

JE: … he also went to Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

CW: Yeah, yeah, he went.

JE: There was a special school out there?

CW: Oh, he was much younger, of course, my dad was pretty old [laughing] when he started school up around Carlisle. They picked up young men and women and took them to Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

JE: Was that known as an Indian school? Or is it—

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BW: Yeah, it was an industrial school.

CW: Yeah, industrial.

BW: And they were displacing our Indian young people there to further their education. It was all part of the assimilation plan, actually.

JE: But in the long run, was that a good thing for them to go there and learn? They went there to learn a trade, was that—

BW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

CW: Right. They learned to cook, the women folks learned to cook and sew. The men folks, I guess, learned the farming, which is good because they can raise their own vegetables, you know, things like my dad did.

JE: Was that a government school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania?

CW: Yes.

JE: So that was the United States government way then—

CW: Right.

JE: … now that we have brought the tribes, we need to teach them …?

BW: Right it was one of the original, what you might call boarding schools, but it was more for the older person. My grandfather played football there for Pop Warner. That is the connection, because that's where Jim Thorpe also played later on.

CW: Yeah.

BW: My grandfather, Louis McDonald, was a very scholarly man. He was evidently very smart, he had beautiful penmanship, he was an artist.

CW: Yeah.

BW: He could do portraits and things.

CW: I didn't save any of his letters. He had them with beautiful hand, oh, my gosh.

BW: Um-hmm (affirmative). And he eventually became an interpreter for a tribe when the tribal leaders would go to Washington, DC. So he was an interpreter too. And yet, he was very traditional because we had a ceremony called Sundance, and he was in that very last Sundance before the government—

CW: Yeah.

BW: … said, "You can never do this again," because of the way we do it.

CW: Made them quit.

JE: Okay, I got to go there. Why did the government make your people stop doing Sundance?

BW: Well, it's because they considered the way we do things self-mutilation.

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BW: And it's because we pierce ourselves in our chests and our arms and our legs and our back, depending on what we're going to do. Like if we were going to drag ten or twelve buffalo skulls that are hooked to lines, you cut your back muscle in strips like this, stick a rock that looks kind of like a bone, you hook those ropes to that and you pull it around a

large circle at least four times. The last time you go then those are going to break, your skin is going to break, the skulls are left there, and you can leave.

JE: Did it have meaning?

BW: It's all about sacrifice.

CW: Sacrifice.

BW: We were praying for someone for something. It's a very highly religious ceremony. Only the strongest people can go through this. And you're in the sun and you don't drink water for four days. And you sleep outside.

We still do this. We go to Nebraska to experience this and it's like stepping back in time two hundred years. I feel like we're doing what my grandfather did.

CW: Can you go four days without water?

BW: Or food, no food either.

CW: Yeah, food or water.

JE: No Ma'am, I can't.

CW: That's what they did.

JE: And then their bodies would be weakened by that.

CW: Well, you'd be surprised to know.

BW: Um-hmm (affirmative). It allows the spirit to enter us and we're stronger.

CW: They dance like this.

JE: And so you say that a spirit—

BW: You're just filled with the Spirit, just like if you're in church.

JE: Okay, yeah, you get the emotion of it all.

BW: Yeah.

CW: Yeah.

JE: You get into it.

BW: Yeah, you're focused on whatever you're praying about, whatever your sacrifice is, whether it be for someone to be healed because they have some deadly disease, terminal illness.

CW: The menfolk will be dancing and all of a sudden somebody's going to pow, on the ground. Yeah.

BW: You go to another level of consciousness.

CW: It is.

JE: Yeah.

BW: That's probably the best way to say it right there.

CW: Yeah, yeah, yeah, that's it.

JE: So you can't do this in Oklahoma but you go to Nebraska?

BW: Right.

JE: We should also say here that you have two Ponca tribes, one is in Nebraska—

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: … and one is in Oklahoma.

BW: Right.

CW: Right. They're called Northern Poncas.

JE: The Poncas have always been peaceful amongst themselves, Nebraska or Oklahoma.

BW: Right. The enemy of the Poncas was the Sioux.

JE: Okay.

BW: And so that's who we fought.

CW: Boy, did we fight them.

BW: And the only reason there's two Ponca tribes right now, well, there's a Ponca tribe and a Ponce Nation, is when they made the removal there was a Chief Standing Bear that was a part of our party that was moved to Oklahoma. His son died, he wanted to bury his son back in Niobrara. So he went back with a part of his family.

His group, that's the other Ponca group today.

CW: Yeah.

BW: Those descendants that left with him at that time.

CW: Yeah, they're called Northern Poncas.

JE: And as I understand, the United States government didn't uphold their treaty obligations to the Ponca and instead, they gave their land to the Sioux.

BW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: In 1868, and then they relocated the Poncas to Indian Territory in 1877.

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BW: Right.

JE: Because the Poncas didn't get the land they felt was coming to them that was the contention, the fight between the Sioux and the Poncas, would that be right?

BW: Well, I think they've always been our hereditary enemies.

JE: Okay.

BW: But that was kind of like the last straw.

JE: Did you make reference, the son of Standing Bear who was a Ponca chief, he died, and Standing Bear returned to Nebraska.

BW: To bury his son. Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And then he was arrested for leaving Indian Territory.

BW: Right.

JE: And the case, which is known as Standing Bear versus Crook in 1879, established habeas corpus for Indian people.

BW: The trial of Standing Bear where he gave a very eloquent speech that we were human beings, he said, "Am I not a man like you? Don't I bleed like you? Don't I have feelings like you?" That established us as human beings. We weren't considered anything prior to that.

CW: Um-hmm, um-hmm (affirmatives).

JE: What were you considered?

BW: I have no idea but we weren't considered human beings.

CW: Animals!

BW: Yeah, we were among the animals.

JE: You were considered among the animals by whom?

BW: By the white society.

CW: Confederate—

BW: Federal government, federal government.

JE: So it was in that trial, Standing Bear versus Crook, that's when you were established as—

BW: As human beings with rights.

JE: As human beings, with rights. Yeah. Then White Eagle settled on this 101-thousand-acre reservation, which would become Kay and Noble Counties.

BW: Yes.

Chapter 05 – 8:17
101 Ranch

John Erling: A bunch of the land was leased to the 101 Ranch.

Cynthia Warner: Right.

JE: Do you have, Cynthia, memories of the 101 Ranch?

CW: A little bit.

JE: A little bit?

CW: Because it didn't last long, you know.

JE: Okay.

CW: The Miller brothers quit.

JE: The Miller brothers started it.

CW: Yeah.

JE: Did you ever go to the 101 Ranch?

CW: Oh, yeah.

JE: Tell me—

CW: My dad worked for them, there was older brothers.

JE: You—tell me what you remember about the 101 Ranch.

CW: Well, it's just a big old ranch. I just barely remember when they dedicated the White House, they called it White House, where those Miller brothers entertained movie characters. All the big wheels that came.

JE: Well, there was—

CW: To 101 Ranch.

JE: … Tom Mix.

CW: Yeah, oh, yeah.

JE: Do you remember seeing Tom Mix?

CW: Yes.

JE: Do you remember what he was doing when you saw him? Was he—

CW: Aah, he was riding a horse. It's a wonder he didn't fall off.

JE: Do you remember the name of Bill Pickett?

CW: He's that colored man, yeah.

JE: He was a steer wrestler.

CW: Yeah, gosh, yeah, that's it. He used to bite their noses. [laughing] Yeah.

JE: He'd bite the—

CW: Bill Pickens, yeah.

JE: … the cattle?

Barbara Warner: Their lip.

CW: Yeah, right above their upper—

BW: Snout.

CW: I saw so many riders because 101 Ranch was pretty big. They're big on horses mostly. And of course, they had that wonderful program that they had every year for entertainers to come to 101 Ranch to stay at the White House.

My dad worked for them.

JE: What did he do?

CW: He was the Indian Lease Clerk. He took care of all the Indian leases that those boys rented or leased.

JE: You—

CW: On Indian land. He took care of all that.

JE: You mean the Millers? They leased land?

CW: Yeah. All the Indian land around there. They didn't own anything, they just owned that White House and that Ranch.

JE: So this White House that you talk about, was that a big huge house right there on that property that—

CW: It was a very showy place.

JE: Do you remember going in it?

CW: No. They didn't allow Indian kids in there.

JE: But you'd come to the 101 Ranch because it was a show that was being put on?

CW: Yeah, oh, every year, it was every fall they had wonderful, they called it Round Up, where all the big riders come in, you know, today I guess that's what you'd call them. Cowboys come and rode the broncs, races. Some of the cowboys rode, you know, like today on movie pictures you see those men on horses standing, two of them were racing.

BW: Stunt riders.

CW: Yeah.

BW: They were stunt riders.

CW: I saw all that when I was little. Just barely little.

BW: Well, you only went to the 101 when you went to work with Grandpa.

CW: Yeah. Once in a while I went with him.

BW: Yeah, it wasn't a daily thing, she just went there sometimes.

CW: Yeah, my dad took care of all the Indian leases surrounding the 101 Ranch. Thousands of acres.

JE: Let's go back to the house. What's the first house you remember living in? What was that like?

CW: You mean my parents' house?

JE: Yes.

CW: Uh, it was a house. [laughs] A bungalow, nice. My grandpa had a wonderful property outside of Ponca City, south of Ponca City. Of course, he had two sons who talked him into selling that 120 acres that he had around there.

Now today, guess what it's worth? It's got oil tanks on it.

BW: It's now where Conoco is.

CW: Yeah.

JE: Well, it was Ernest Marlin, who was a friend of the Miller brothers, he's the one who thought there was oil on the Ponca land, as I understand it.

BW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: He formed the Marlin Oil Company, which was the forerunner of Conoco.

CW: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

JE: So the house you lived in, that was a good memory for you?

CW: Oh, yeah, it's a nice house.

BW: Actually, that part, that's where she was born. But they sold that land. Grandpa Roughface had this other land, which is where we now call the east timber, that's where their house was. Where she really grew up and where I grew up. It was a one-bedroom, dining room, living room, kitchen place, with a big front porch that's made out of stones. In my memory, it was a real big house. It probably wasn't in real life but I was there when I was very young.

That's where she grew up. That's where all the horses were and the horses would go into the timber. That's why she would go down and get them, have to get them out.

CW: Yeah, [laughs] I—

BW: And that's also where we got our water. Because even I, as a child, because there's no indoor plumbing and we had an outhouse. Eventually, my grandfather put a pump in there where we had water outside the house. But there was a spring down in the timber. She would go get water, I would have to go get water in buckets and bring it back up to the house. It sounds primitive but it was a wonderful place to be.

CW: That was a chore.

JE: And for you that would have been in the '50s. You were fetching water.

BW: Yeah, from a very young age. Four, five.

JE: Was she a pretty good hauler of water?

CW: [laughing] Yeah, not big buckets, they had medium size buckets. But the big buckets I had to—

JE: But did you—

CW: ... tote from the spring to the house. Boy, was that hard. [laughing]

JE: And you did that?

BW: Yeah, because it's downhill. But when I had to do it I had a bucket and I was young, I was small.

CW: Yeah.

BW: I was short. And I had to go past an area where there were bulls. There was a herd of cattle and this bull was really mean. I'd have to wait long enough to run past there, get the water, and then I had to run back with the water and I'd come back with about half a bucket. I never did have a whole bucket because I was always running from those bulls.

CW: [laughing] By the time she got up to the house it was half full. [both laughing]

JE: Was she a pretty good worker?

CW: Oh, yeah. All three girls were. Of course, Norma Sue is little and she wasn't too big a help. That's my youngest daughter.

JE: But everybody had to have a job, I mean, nobody—yeah.

CW: Oh, yeah. Gosh yeah. I had to help my dad. I had three older sisters. One sister, who was a very big help to my father, planting vegetables, you know, after they came up she'd help pick them. Just a big help to my father.

JE: What did you do for entertainment? What did you do for fun?

CW: There was no entertainment when we were young.

JE: Talk to us about the ceremonies that you remember and powwows.

CW: The first one that I remember was out in the country. Because I remember wearing moccasins and I was sliding around on that grass. [laughing] But that was kind of fun. That was the only time that I remember wearing a pair of moccasins. I was young, I guess about six, seven, eight years old. Hauling water, hauling wood. My uncles would chop wood, you know, I mean, to about this long, to put in the kitchen stove where my mother cooked.

Oh, my mother sure loved to cook. No problem to cook for the family. She loved to cook. She did old fashioned cooking. Some things she could do in a matter of minutes; forty minutes she would have a meal. Five potatoes, biscuits, gravy, bacon, especially, we'd make gravy out of that.

JE: Where did you get the bacon?

CW: Dad was a clerk for the Miller brothers at 101 Ranch and a lot of that meat and stuff came from 101 Ranch. And that's how I remember having a lot of meat.

JE: Maybe that was part of his pay?

CW: He had to buy it, yeah.

JE: Ok.

BW: Yeah, he'd use his pay to purchase at their store.

CW: Yeah, he'd bring home little pieces of meat. My mother would cook up a meal in just a matter of minutes.

BW: And when she's saying pork, she's talking mainly salt pork.

CW: Yeah, they'd boil it first, salt pork, boiled it off, I guess, and then fried the bacon and make gravy out of it.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

CW: That's what I was raised on. [laughing]

Chapter 06 – 6:07
Government Boarding School

John Erling: When you were very young, the first language you spoke was Ponca?

Cynthia Warner: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: You speak Ponca today?

CW: Oh, yeah. I hate to say this, I hate to mention it even, we're losing our language.

JE: Yeah.

CW: Nobody speaks Ponca. Very few, if there's anybody left.

Barbara Warner: There is.

CW: Okay.

JE: When did you start speaking English?

CW: When I went to school at White Eagle. It's a little elementary school.

JE: And you were what, six years old then?

CW: I was seven years old. I started late. I was very smart [laughing], no I picked up very easy the language.

JE: So that was when you first were—

CW: Yeah.

JE: … introduced to English?

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative). Yeah, I started speaking English and I never stopped.

JE: When you were in school, could you speak Ponca in school?

CW: Aaaah, no, we can't speak *in* the classes, is that what you mean? No. It was a no-no.

BW: What if you did?

CW: I don't know, nobody spoke. They said, "No," and that's it.

JE: What—

CW: I mean, we listened, we listened to them.

JE: Was that because they just wanted to really learn English?

CW: Yeah.

JE: It's kind of what they do today, they immerse kids into French classes and Spanish classes.

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: This was the first immersion then probably—

BW: Yes.

JE: … in English, and they didn't want them to speak Ponca. Not because they didn't—

CW: Yeah.

JE: … respect, would that be true?

CW: Yeah.

BW: Well, probably at that level at that school and the other boarding schools it was looked upon a little more harshly. Punishments were very severe in boarding schools if you spoke your language.

JE: So then after grade school, where did you go?

CW: I tried to go to school at the white school in Ponca City, junior class, senior, shhhit, couldn't make it. So I went back to Chilocco.

JE: Chalockwa?

BW: Chilocco.

JE: Chilocco?

CW: Chilocco. C-h-i-l-o-c-c-o. And it isn't Chilly-co-co. [laughing] That's what some white people say.

JE: Tell me what that was like.

CW: Oh, it's just another school, except that it's all Indians.

JE: Was it a boarding school?

CW: Yes. We slept and ate there. We never saw our parents for quite a while.

JE: How old were you then?

CW: Fourteen, fifteen years old.

JE: Was that a good experience for you?

CW: Yeah, I think so. Coming off a reservation.

JE: Where was that school located?

BW: North of Newkirk.

CW: Newkirk.

BW: Three miles from the state line.

CW: Yeah.

BW: Kansas state line.

JE: Who operated that school?

BW: US government.

CW: US of A government.

JE: Now your parents thought this was good for you to go to that school?

CW: Yeah.

JE: So this was run by, as we say, the white man?

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: How did they treat you? Were they respectful of you?

CW: Oh, yeah, yes. They're all Indian kids. They have to treat us so that we can learn what they were trying to teach us. It was pretty hard, coming off a reservation and doing all Indian traditions.

JE: You say Indian traditions, did they want you to keep those Indian traditions or were they telling you to forget those traditions?

CW: Forget them. But I don't know whose idea it was. We had Indian clubs.

JE: Indian clubs?

CW: Uh-huh (affirmative). Indian groups, different, all mixed, but all Indians. But we were treated right, I thought.

JE: Barbara, do you have any recollection of what we're talking about it?

BW: No I think she has very pleasant memories.

CW: Yes.

BW: Any memory that she's ever talked to us about has been very pleasant. Because she was with her relatives and friends and she made lifetime friends there. So it was a good experience for her.

Her father instilled in her the need to be educated. She followed the rules, she wasn't a rule-breaker. So I believe she got along real well there. She was even a favorite for some of the teachers because she was scholarly and she caught on quickly and everything.

CW: Yeah. Oh, that was pounded in our heads.

BW: But some of the other kids at Chilocco and other boarding schools across the United States were severely reprimanded for speaking their language—

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BW: … for doing anything. One that always stands out in my mind is having a rubber band placed on your teeth and then they would pull the rubber band and snap it on your mouth. And of course, makes your lips swell up and everything, but as a reminder not to speak your native tongue.

And the hand-rappings with the rulers and the knees and, you know, things like that. But that one rubber band example was just kind of horrendous to me.

JE: Did that happen to you?

BW: No.

JE: No.

BW: No, but—

JE: These are stories that you heard about the government schools?

BW: Yes, yes. And there's many, many more that are equally horrific. There's been books written about them now. Now people are starting to talk about them.

JE: What was the government trying to do? They wanted them, these groups—

CW: [laughing] They wanted us to forget our Indian language. That—

JE: And probably forget your whole traditions of the past.

CW: Yeah.

BW: Of the culture.

JE: Was Barbara a good daughter? Did you have to—

CW: Oh, yeah. All three of them were.

JE: Yeah.

CW: All—

BW: I was the best.

CW: [laughing] They all listened to me. And their daddy.

JE: In the ceremonies and the powwows it's only men who participate in them. Is that true or not?

BW: Well, originally, our dances were what they call man-dances, *Hethuska*—

CW: Yeah.

BW: We have those usually in the late spring. We still have those. Then we have this powwow—

CW: That's right.

BW: … that's not a ceremony, it's a social gathering and it's become very popular because in the *Hethuska* only the men can dance. The women can dance at their seats. But the powwow, at the social event, everybody can dance. It's caught on throughout Indian country and it's a time when we can go down there and most of my relatives, our relatives, are there. So she gets to see all the grandkids and great grandkids and the other relatives that live out of state.

Chapter 07 – 7:18
Peyote

John Erling: Louis McDonald, your father--
Cynthia Warner: My father.
JE: … and Frank Eagle cofounded the Native American Church.
Barbara Warner: Yes.
JE: In 1918.
CW: I don't know about that.
JE: Historians give your father credit.
CW: Oh.
JE: So talk about church, what kind of church did you go to?
CW: Well, the one that I remember is a Methodist church, on our reservation. Ponca Indian Methodist Church.
BW: Well, you need to start out though with Grandpa being befriended by Quanah Parker.
CW: Oh!
BW: There was a vision that was had and this man in buckskins will come and bring us good news. That man was Quanah Parker, he's a Comanche.
CW: Quanah Parker.
BW: He brought the Native American Church, the Peyote Religion to our people. When he met my grandfather, my grandfather was quite young. And he took him under his wing and taught him the ways of the church.

I remember as a young child when I got sick they would give me what they called peyote-tea, it's peyote-tea.

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).
BW: I'd go to sleep and I'd wake up cured. To this day, I'm a member of the Native American Church. And I participate in the [indecipherable] Native American Church in Hominy. That's my church. She also did participate in the Native American Church with her father. And then they later became Methodists. I remember my grandfather telling me, "If you want to be saved, go to church. If you want to be healed, go to the Native American Church."
JE: The Methodists, did they send missionaries in?
BW: Yes. That was all part of the assimilation also was to have us turn our backs on our own spirituality. We didn't have religion, per se, we had spirituality. And had our own religious practices. But part of the assimilation process was to bring all the different types of churches, Baptists, Catholic—my mother was raised Catholic—onto the reservations to bring us the Word.

JE: So they were telling you then, "Ignore whatever spirituality you had of the past and now believe as Methodists and Baptists. Ignore your ceremonies and your powwows because," they were probably telling you they don't bring any healing to you, but our message of salvation is what you need. Am I saying that right?

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BW: That's correct. They wanted us to turn our backs on our culture, traditions, and spirituality 100 percent. Forget our history, forget our language, forget our culture, forget everything about what we were about. And we couldn't do it, that's why we're still here today.

JE: Yeah, there was just something inborn and made everybody stronger reject this new message that came along.

BW: Well, it's hard to replace something that's a part of you. It's like taking off an arm, you can't really replace that. And our culture was a part of us, it still is to this day.

JE: So the Native American Church, did it have a Bible? Did you use the Bible or not? Help us understand maybe the difference.

BW: Okay, it's very difficult to explain and for those of us that are members of the church we try not to talk about it too much because it gets people confused. And unless you actually experience it you can't really explain it. It's sort of like trying to explain a taco to a blind person. And some things are misconstrued because we do use peyote. But they don't understand that it's under the guidance of the church. That medicine takes us to a higher level of consciousness.

JE: The peyote?

BW: The peyote. The ceremonies are full of prayer, full of order, there's an order to all things in that church. There's no chaos, there's no anything that's negative, it's highly controlled. And it just happens to take place at night from approximately nine o'clock to sunrise. Then you eat, but that becomes your family, once you take part in those ceremonies, those people you will always remember, you will always know.

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BW: And you walk out a better person as a result.

CW: Yep.

JE: Well, then, you must have real close ties here when Cynthia's father and your grandfather, Louis McDonald, helped cofound that Native American Church.

CW: He had a big part of it. Yes. As Barbara mentioned that Quanah Parker.

JE: He was a Comanche. Why did he come to the Poncas? Because he came out of his tribe from where? Where would he have come from?

BW: From around the Lawton area.

CW: Yeah, he was a Comanche.

JE: So Quanah Parker somehow came to the Poncas because of your father? Or—

BW: We don't really know why he ventured up there. I don't know if he was driven to take this peyote to other tribes because of the success that he was having as a result of that. And how it brings people together and things like that. I don't really know why he came up there. That's why I said, there was a vision and then he came.

JE: Who had the vision?

BW: I don't know, some of the tribes said, "There's going to be a man."

JE: Okay, okay. Peyote, this is a liquid, it's a drink?

BW: Well, it comes in different forms. You can cook the cactus in water and it makes a tea, per se.

CW: Yeah.

BW: It can be dried and be powder. It can be ground up just like smashed peas and can be rolled into a ball that way. There's a variety of ways that you can ingest it. You can eat the whole button, for that matter.

JE: The button?

BW: It's a cactus bud, so they call it a button.

JE: And there was healing from that?

BW: Well, yes, it depends. You have different reasons for having a peyote meeting. Some of it's for healing, some of it's for celebration, some of it's for memorial. There's spring ones, there's fall ones, there's winter ones, you know, there's a reason why you have these meetings. Sometimes it's just around birthdays and things like that. So it's not always just for healing but for a variety of different things.

But out of those things you always have problems, and you're going to place those on those coals. We have an altar with coals, you're going to place all your problems on there and you're going to give blessings if it's a birthday. If you're going to ask for healing for someone, you place everything negative on there and that's why you walk out lighter and better off for being there.

JE: What is the term for God in the Native American Church?

BW: Well, among the Poncas it's *Wakanda*.

CW: *Wakanda*.

JE: *Wakanda*.

CW: Uh-uh (negative). You have to have that certain—

BW: It's like a gk.

CW: You have to have that certain—

JE: Oh, so there's a g in there?

BW: Gk.

CW: Wakanda.

JE: Wakanda.

CW: Uh-uh (negative).

JE: Okay, I'll have to pick it up.

CW: Well, you can't get it, it takes a Native. [lots of laughing by both women]

JE: Yes, I'm sure that's true. Did you or your family become members of the Baptist or Methodist church?

CW: Methodist.

JE: Methodist church?

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative). I guess they came pretty early because most of them were members of the Methodist church. Then the Baptist. Then the Nazarene.

JE: Did you go to both? Say the Methodist or Baptist or Catholic and then to go to Native American Church as well? Go to both churches?

CW: No. It depended on where you were raised. Like my folks were raised around White Eagle and that's Methodist area. It was Methodist preachers came there first.

BW: They pretty much recruited people—

CW: Yeah.

BW: … to bring your children. We've got baskets of food, they reeled them in, pretty much. And eventually it did catch on, once we kind of understood what the Christian religion was about.

Chapter 08 – 7:37
Clown Dance

John Erling: Weren't the Poncas known for their knowledge of songs and dances? Kind of, that was a specialty of the Poncas?

Cynthia Warner: Very much.

JE: Very much?

CW: Very much. Most tribes copies off of us. [laughs] I hate to say it but that's the way it was.

JE: There was a man by the name of Gus McDonald.

CW: Gus McDonald, that's my cousin, that's my father's oldest brother's oldest son.

JE: He was crowned the first World Champion Fancy Dancer.

CW: He sure was.

Barbara Warner: But originally, tell him what he was originally. He was a clown dance.

CW: Oh, yeah. They all were, or they all tried to be.

JE: Clown?

CW: Clown.

JE: What does that mean, a clown dance?

CW: Oh, it's just funny. [laughing]

BW: They just did it for fun, to make people laugh. And it caught on. Now they have these bustles and—

CW: Yeah.

BW: … everybody thinks it's a real traditional thing. It's not, it was originally a clown dance.

CW: Yeah.

JE: So maybe because of that the Poncas became known as good dancers? Or in songs?

CW: Oh, they were the best.

BW: Yeah, well, yeah. Because the war dancers that they have now, that was born out of White Eagle, Oklahoma.

CW: Yeah.

BW: It wasn't just my Grandpa Gus, but it was a Kiowa man named Steve Mopopy that was there and an Otoe guy named Rudy of, I forgot Rudy's last name.

CW: I can't remember his name.

BW: But anyway, there's three different tribes that started this and they did cartwheels and they did all kinds of things in the arena.

CW: Yeah [laughing].

BW: To make people laugh.

CW: That's true.

BW: And they wore long johns. Some of them had color, some were white, you know, and they put their bells on crazy. Then people started mocking them and it became very fashionable to do this type of stuff. And so it's been like that ever since. And that's fine, as long as people understand that that's not an historic dance. Ours was the Hethuska, it's the man-dance, or it's a very dignified type of dance, which is now kind of like straight dance to this day.

Yeah, my Uncle Gus started that and then he was the first one to get a trophy for World Champion Dancer.

CW: Champion War Dancer, yeah.

BW: We still give that prize and have his trophy on exhibit every powwow every year.

JE: Umm (thoughtful sound).

CW: You see those men up there? With the war bonnets?

JE: I see the picture of four war bonnets there.

CW: The very middle one is my grandpa. His name is Paul Roughface. They called him Old Man Roughface, of course. When he was young he was a great warrior.

BW: I want to mention too about the Ponca singing before we go off a little bit further. Poncas were known for our songs. We have very beautiful songs.

CW: Oh, yeah.

BW: Very melodious, easy to catch on to songs with beautiful words behind it. And we have a certain drumbeat that we've always had that people like and it allows you to dance a certain way. We are, to this day, still known for our songs. They're a part of our history.

There's a song about my great grandfather who killed a Sioux chief.

JE: Your great grandfather, what was his name?

BW: It was Grandpa McDonald's song.

CW: Oh, him—yeah.

BW: But he killed that Sioux.

JE: You're not talking about Louis now?

CW: No, that's my father.

BW: No, his father.

JE: Oh, his father.

BW: Right.

JE: He killed a Sioux?

BW: Uh-huh (affirmative).

CW: Yeah.

BW: In a certain fashion—

CW: And how!

BW: By zigzagging in front of him, dancing from rock to rock. And that Sioux guy didn't know what to do. He was looking at him.

CW: Yeah.

BW: That allowed my grandfather to shoot and kill him.

JE: Was that in Nebraska?

CW: Nebraska.

JE: The early dances were war dances? That's how that all began, wasn't it?

BW: Right. We had war dance, sun dance, scalp dance.

CW: Yeah, everybody copied off of us.

BW: Well, I wouldn't go as far to say that but the Plains tribes had very similar dances. But some of the things that we do, it does catch on and other tribes adopt it.

CW: Yeah. I shouldn't say that but—

BW: That's right.

CW: ... the Poncas were very, very popular. It's singing, catch a day, they copy us now. Tsk, tsk, tsk.

JE: Well, that's an honor, isn't it, that they would copy you?

CW: I don't consider it an honor. Copycats! They're all Ponca songs. Oh, I don't like it when somebody start the Ponca song. But I have to take it and like it today.

JE: You mean when somebody non-Ponca?

CW: Right.

BW: Well, at one time, our songs were only sung on our reservation. They were for our ears only. That became a part of the powwow and then other people liked it and they would take off and sing it inappropriately in other places.

JE: Okay. Not with the same respect?

BW: Well, some of our songs are only sung at a certain time of the year for certain people. We have like children's songs and chief songs and only if you're a chief's descendent can you dance, you know. And so they sing it as a social song. And it's not a social song.

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BW: It's supposed to be used in a different way.

JE: The name Clyde Warrior, is that a name that's famous?

BW: Clyde Warrior was one of the first Indian activists in the whole United States. He happened to be Ponca, a member of the Giveswater family and was highly respected nationwide for what he did for Indians in Indian country.

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BW: He brought attention to some of the Native American plight as we started realizing in retrospect what we'd been through and realized that we had certain things that were done to us that shouldn't have happened, that we were wanting to put a stop to. And he was one of our greatest leaders in that respect.

JE: Was he involved in South Dakota? Did he get involved in AIM, American Indian Movement?

BW: I don't know if Clyde was there. My other relatives, my brothers, Carter Camp, Craig Camp, Dwayne Camp, there were all a part of the American Indian Movement. Carter was one of the leaders. They were at Wounded Knee, they survived Wounded Knee. My brother, Carter, was imprisoned for his actions at Wounded Knee.

JE: Your brother?

BW: Yes.

CW: We say brother because their mother was my first cousin.

BW: Yeah, we don't have cousins. Carter's mother and my mother are sisters. So that makes he and I brother and sister.

JE: You don't call them cousins?

CW: Uh-uh (negative). Very close.

BW: No. In the Indian kinship we bring our kin closer and we don't push them further. We don't have first, second, third cousins. We don't even understand that. My nephews are my sons.

CW: Yeah.

BW: We bring them closer and closer and closer like that.

JE: So Carter Camp then participated in the '73 occupation of Wounded Knee.

CW: Yes.

JE: Now you said that he was in prison.

BW: Yes, imprisoned for his part in Wounded Knee.

JE: Were you very aware of that? You would have been in '73, and followed—

BW: Absolutely.

JE: … all that. Tell me your recollections of what you heard and followed. And here you had your brother and other brothers up there too, didn't you?

BW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: How did you follow this?

BW: Oh, everybody knew what was going on. We were in constant contact in one way or another. We had people coming in and out of Oklahoma that would go to Wounded Knee. They'd come back to get supplies to take up there and they'd have to sneak them in under the cover of darkness and things like that.

But we knew what was going on. I'm very proud of the fact that my brothers, the Camp family, they're another part of the activist part of the Ponca Nation. We don't sit back and take it. We've got people that will stand up for us and have loud voices and they're smart people. To be an activist you've got to be smart. You've got to know how to speak, you have to be very eloquent. So that part of our family serves that purpose for the Ponca Nation. And I'm really proud of it.

JE: Maybe you mentioned, Thomas Roughface?

BW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And he was?

CW: Oh, he was first cousin. My Uncle Nelson, who is my mother's youngest brother's son.

JE: What was he known for?

CW: He was a preacher.

JE: He was a preacher?

CW: He was Reverend Thomas Roughface.

BW: Yeah, he was a highly respected man of the Methodist church.

CW: Very highly respected.

Chapter 09 – 7:40
Family Tradition

John Erling: You've mentioned—this is interesting—the family, and how you don't have cousins. It's brothers and sisters. You all come together, say for a big dinner and I think, Barbara,

you mentioned the last time you were here was about how sister-in-law, father-in-law, don't address each other. Tell us about that.

Barbara Warner: Well, it's what I call the in-law taboo. The daughters-in-law don't speak to the father-in-law. The son-in-law does not speak to the mother-in-law. The reason why we do that is very simple, it's all to keep peace in the family and it's the highest form of respect.

In my family, to this day, we still practice it and there's a lot of Plains tribes that do practice it. I have two sisters that are still married and when I had a husband we'd have to place my mother in a position where they couldn't lay eyes on one another at a family dinner. She would address them as son-in-law in Indian,"Wekanda des, does Wekanda want some meat?"

I would turn to him and say, "Do you want meat?"

He would answer yes or no and I'd turn back to her and say, "Yes, he does," or "No," even though they can hear each other, but they can never look at one another or speak to one another.

Cynthia Warner: It's a big no-no.

BW: So no matter what happens in our relationship they will always have that respect for one another.

JE: And that goes on today?

BW: Yes.

CW: Yeah, I couldn't talk to my father-in-laws.

JE: You never did talk to them?

BW: Um-um (negative).

CW: Never.

JE: Well, I guess it eliminates some problems, some infighting there, huh?

CW: [laughing] Yeah, you could say that.

BW: Yeah, there's never a harsh word spoken between in-laws.

CW: Yeah, that's true.

BW: Ever. In our way.

JE: Families must have tremendous respect for elders.

CW: They do. They sure don't have respect for me now.

JE: I'm sure they do.

CW: Today. [laughing]

JE: But isn't that a big part of your traditions that the elders are to be well-respected?

CW: Yeah. I think so.

BW: Yeah, there's a hierarchy of the way our people are established. Elders are the most respected of all of the people that we have. Like at our powwows, even today, when we have a feast, the elders still stay seated. We take the food to them. The rest of us have to get in line and go through and get our own food.

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BW: In the same respect, we have this order to things and elders are served. But also the men eat first. Women eat next. Or visitors, it depends on what the situation is. And the children eat last.

Where I notice in today's society it's always like the women and the children that eat first and then what's left goes to the people that are supposed to be the breadwinners.

CW: [laughing] Yeah, it's awful like that.

BW: And in our culture, originally, it was the men went out hunting so they needed to eat and keep up their strength and get the best pieces of the meat.

JE: Cynthia, they even bring food to you, don't they?

CW: Yeah, now they do [laughing]. No, I have to get my own food.

BW: Oh, no you don't.

CW: [laughing] No, they have a lot of respect for me.

JE: Cynthia, and then Barbara, of course, what about handing on the traditions to young people of the tribe? Are they anxious to learn about this or does it not mean anything to them at first when they're young?

CW: No, it doesn't mean a thing to them. But as they grow older, of course, they pick it up, as we teach them. Boy, I was told so many times, "No, you don't do that. No, no, no, you know." But anyway, that's the way I learned. And that's what I passed on to the children.

JE: And Barbara, maybe you can talk about that. How many children did you have?

BW: I have two.

JE: Talk to us about when they were early ages and did they kind of reject and then they didn't care and then they finally came around, kind of talk to us about that.

BW: First of all, I want to say I was raised very traditionally. I spent most of my childhood with my grandparents. Because in our tradition, the oldest grandchild is supposed to go live with the grandparents. For some reason, my folks didn't want to send my older sister, so I was the one that got spend most of my time in White Eagle with my grandparents.

In the same respect, when my older son was born, he spent most of his time with my mother. So what they did together, I'm not sure, but the purpose is for him to absorb most of the culture, just like I did firsthand from the grandparents.

JE: So when you say you go live, how long?

BW: Till I started school.

JE: Oh, from a year or two?

BW: Uh-huh (affirmative). Yes, from very young.

JE: Until, until five or six years old?

BW: Yes.

JE: You actually lived with them?

BW: Yes.

JE: The purpose of that was?

BW: I would be immersed in the culture.

CW: Yeah.

BW: And I would remember more. To this day, I probably remember more about things than certainly my sisters. Because I learned so much firsthand and because I've always been what we call "in the circle." I've always been participating in the dance. I've been a princess, I've been a dancer, I've won a lot of contests for doing my Indian dance and things like that. So I always was a part of the circle.

When my boys were growing up we always took them to Ponca. They knew all about everything. They were shown the ways of our tribe early on, from walking on up. When my older boy was about twelve, I put them both in the circle at the same time, had straight dance clothes made for them. You place them in the circle, you introduce them to the tribe so that the tribe accepts them as a part of us. Even though they're enrolled Wichita, but they were raised Ponca.

Then they get older, teenagers, and they go to schools where there's not very many Indian kids and they learn a different way of living. They turn their backs on their Indian culture, I would say, my children did, for the most part for a long time. And now I'm very proud to say that my son's had a reawakening and he's back to embracing our culture. He surprises me all the time because he remembers things that I didn't think he ever caught on to. But it's all coming to the top again.

So his Indianness never left him. I just couldn't see it for a while.

JE: That could probably be said for many other of the younger generation that eventually they do come back.

BW: Yes. If you plant the seeds, they'll be back.

CW: Oh, yes. Let me tell you something. When Barbara first learned to dance, she got up [laughing], she got up and danced. One whole slew of them got behind her to help her dance. Tradition is her first time dancing I had to put out some blankets on the ground. There were six of them.

BW: Pendleton blankets.

CW: They donate those and she stepped over them. So me and the helpers, boys, menfolks, I guess you'd call them, have to pick them up as fast as we could because they had a whole slew of them behind her dancing with her. We didn't want them to dance on those blankets. They're pretty blankets.

JE: Absolutely. So was Barbara a good dancer?

CW: Yeah, very good. How many trophies do you have?

BW: I don't know.

CW: Trophies, I mean—

JE: She must have—

CW: … they're this tall, taller.

JE: She was a pretty young lady, wasn't she?

CW: Very. [laughing] Just like her mama.

JE: I was going to, that's what I was leading to [both laughing].

CW: That's bragging.

JE: And you were too. You said bragging. Is there a humility that's taught more so maybe among your people than others? Or not?

BW: I would say that we're taught not to brag.

CW: Yeah.

BW: You don't put yourself out in front as being better than anybody.

CW: Right.

BW: In our competition we prefer everybody to come in at the same time, in a footrace, you know, think of it like that. It's not to put anyone down, ever.

CW: Never.

BW: Or to make yourself better than anyone because we're all a part of the same tribe.

Chapter 10 – 10:09
Preserving the Ponca

John Erling: Do you fear, both of you, that, say, fifty years from now, what will be the state of not only the Poncas but other tribes? Because other tribes face what you're facing.

Cynthia Warner: They're in the same state as we are.

JE: They are.

CW: English, English.

JE: Right. Could it be possible that it would fade away or what do you see happening?

Barbara Warner: In my mind's eye, we will be around forever. Our culture is so strong it reaches beyond anything that we learn outside of that culture. So I think that when we were created, when the Poncas were created, when the Otoes and the Osages were created and our tongues were split so that we spoke our own language, we were given a gift. That gift is our tradition and our culture and it has not faltered. We're forgetting some things, we're losing some things, but, you know, you can't take the Ponca out of me. It's there—

CW: Right.

BW: … it's a part of my history, my culture, my being. And I think my children have that, they're also Wichita. It's just in you. So as long as it's in you, it's never going to go away.

JE: And in this day and age, I believe that the tribal history of not only the Poncas but others, is more embraced maybe by, should I say, white man, than ever before. I mean, if the Poncas were going to go away, it would have happened under duress in the 1800s and as they were paraded down here to Oklahoma. And then as you were sent to school, Cynthia, and you were told to forget. And missionaries came and you were told to forget.

Well, now in this day and age, nobody's telling you to forget.

CW: No.

JE: The climate is much better. Everybody wants you to preserve. Don't you get that feeling, Barbara?

BW: Um, I'm not sure I would go as far as to say everyone wants us to preserve, but certainly, we recognize the need to recapture some of those things that are waning in our tribe, the language, some of the culture to bring some of our children back to the fold and let them feel comfortable so that they can continue our customs. Just things like that.

All the tribes that I'm aware of, especially in Oklahoma, are making great strides in preserving language. We realize that we're at risk. We are a high-risk culture. If you think about it, there's twenty-six hundred Poncas in the universe. Once we're gone, there are no more Poncas.

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BW: In the universe.

JE: So that's a concern.

CW: Yeah.

BW: Absolutely.

JE: And it probably would be rare that a pure Ponca comes along anymore.

BW: That's correct.

JE: And marrying outside.

BW: Well, our culture almost dictates that because we have our clan system. And that keeps us from intermarrying. So you can't marry anyone within your clan. And you have to marry outside with another clan. And eventually, you have relationships.

If there they're related in any way, shape, or form, by blood or by clan, you can't marry them, so you have to go outside of your tribe and find another tribal person that's not Ponca, to marry.

Like I did. I found a full-blood Wichita man and I married him. Because all the Poncas in this day right now, almost all of them are related to me.

CW: Related. [laughing] Yeah. I got so many kinfolks, you'd be surprised.

JE: So the inherent in that is the danger, isn't it, of it slipping away?

BW: Um-hmm, um-hmm (affirmatives).

CW: Right. Uh-huh (affirmative).

JE: But then you have Indian Cultural Centers in Oklahoma and other places that are trying to help preserve.

BW: Well, they're preserving it as a museum would preserve it.

CW: Oh, yeah.

BW: It's not anything that's tangible that you can just pick up. They'll have, to me, it's like a memory, they're going to have a voice of a Ponca speaking Ponca. But that's like a memory. If you don't really speak it and you're not among the culture itself, all you're doing is getting a hint of what we really are.

JE: Right. So then it is in jeopardy, the Poncas in fifty years from now? Where that goes, and so if there are young people who become strong leaders and we need to preserve the Poncas—

BW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: … that's what it's going to take.

BW: Yes, and we have those young people. They're alive and well in White Eagle, Oklahoma, for the most part. But we have a lot of our culture so much intact and it's evident around our powwow time in August. That's when all of our kids come out. We're all in camp, we're all cooking our traditional foods. We're speaking the language, we're singing our songs that are hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years old and it's all good.

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: When you see these children around, that's real important to you, isn't it?

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BW: Absolutely. In our culture too we all have Indian names. We're given names at birth or later on. I see these little children now and no one has my Indian name but they have Mom's Indian name. A couple of those little bitty toddlers. They'll say, "Le-dtho-way"?

CW: Yeah.

BW: It's this little child, it's not my mother. So that's being carried on.

CW: Yeah.

BW: Her name is being carried on.

JE: And so what is your Indian name, Cynthia?

CW: Le-dtho-way.

JE: Leetoway?

CW: Le-dtho-way.

JE: I can't even say that, can I?

CW: Le-dtho-way. [laughing]

BW: [laughing]

CW: Yeah, it's hard.

JE: Leetoway. And Barbara, what is your Indian name?

BW: Lezateh.

CW: Her name is Lezateh and it's hard

JE: How did that name come about? Did you name her?

CW: My mother named her.

JE: Your mother named Barbara?

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

CW: She named all my kids.

JE: Is that part of tradition too or did that just happen because your mother was ...?

CW: My mother was, how do you say, big wheel in the tribe. She was a very well respected person. She's one of the elders. She was the one who can dictate to you. "Sit down!" You sit down.

BW: That's the way it was.

JE: Is that the way, Barbara, you see your mother here today, across the table from you? Was she very strict? Very disciplinarian? Or ...?

BW: I—

CW: I wasn't very strict.

BW: I would say no, no. I have more memories of my grandmother telling me—

CW: Yeah.

BW: ... things to do. And see, that's the way it is, the grandparents really tell you what you're supposed to do and not do. And then the parents just kind of reinforce it. So I was getting it from all these other relatives on how to do this and that, because we have so many rules for everything, it's very difficult to be Indian—

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BW: ... because you have to memorize all these rules.

CW: It's very difficult to be a Ponca. [laughing] Boy, is it difficult.

BW: But I wouldn't say my mother was strict at all.

CW: I couldn't go in front of my father-in-law. I couldn't walk in front of him. I had to go behind him.

BW: Well, no woman can.

CW: Yeah.

BW: That's part of the culture.

CW: Most women had to go behind them.

JE: A father-in-law? But not your father or—

CW: Well, yeah, older person.

JE: Any older male?

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BW: Right.

CW: Well, older person like my mother. My mother was very strict.

BW: Yeah, my grandmother was very traditional.

CW: Yeah.

BW: My mother's only brother, who is my favorite uncle, his Indian name was Makay. I called him Uncle Make. My older son is named after him, Makay Ross. My Uncle Make died of stomach cancer at the age of thirty-eight. And I was just a little kid. And that was the year my younger sister was born.

But at his funeral, what is our tradition—my grandmother had long hair, she always had long braids or long hair, had it pulled back, and my mother had to help her. You get your hair and you just cut it off with a knife.

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BW: And you then you let your hair just hang down and it's just a part of that mourning. And she took it even a step further, she took a big knife and she hacked herself. You just cut, cut, cut, cut, like up and down, and it's to take away the pain that she's feeling. 'Cause you're feeling this pain, you don't feel it so much here.

She mourned for at least three years.

CW: Yeah.

BW: Our tradition says that you go into mourning for a year, at least, when someone close to you dies. And it's out of respect for them, and you're not to go to social events, not to powwows and things. Pretty much isolate yourself, that's when you really mourn and get that out of your system.

CW: But it's pretty hard.

JE: Your husband, or Barbara's father, say his name again.

CW: Samuel Alford Warner.

JE: When did he die?

BW: Two thousand seven.

JE: How long were you married?

CW: Aha, sixty-two years. Sixty-two wonderful years. He gave me three daughters, three wonderful daughters.

JE: So then did you participate in this mourning like Barbara has just described?

CW: Yeah, I didn't go anyplace for a year. No social gathering, no nothing. It hurts.

JE: You would go to no events of the Poncas or anything?

BW: No.

JE: You would just stay at home?

BW: Yes. It's expected of you and it's just what you do. And when you suffer a great loss, you don't really want to be social. You need to remember things about that person.

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BW: You need to go through their things. Of course, we give everything away or burn it after someone dies. But you kind of gather your thoughts and get your strength back up and you figure out ways to memorialize that person.

So it's just a very difficult part of our lives but, you know, like after a funeral too, you isolate yourself for four days, for sure, and that's when you really cry and let it all out. And it's to help bring you back to your sanity because there's so much anguish and pain in the whole funeral process. Which for our people, it's four days. The day you die is day one, and then you count three more days after that. And we don't inter until the fourth day. During that time, we feed people every day, breakfast, lunch, and dinner. We stay up with the deceased all night. You never leave them at all. When you go to eat for a while, somebody goes in there to sit with them, but they also bring the deceased a plate of food and water. And then that's taken away and disposed of in a particular way.

It's a very difficult process but it allows for us to really mourn and to, what I say, get that out of your system. I've been to non-Indian funerals and they tend to hold their tears back and I think that makes you carry a burden of not being able to grieve properly.

CW: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BW: Whereas we just really allow opportunity for us to mourn in a very hard way, I think.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

CW: It's pretty hard.

Chapter 11 – 4:22
We Don't Say Goodbye

John Erling: Can you say something to other young Ponca children right now that you would like to leave for them? What would you tell young people? You can do it in English and then do it in Ponca. But what would you like to say? You're ninety-one years old, and you want to talk to the future generations and to children who are seven, eight, nine, ten, fifteen years old who will listen to you. What would you like to say to them? Leave for them?

Cynthia Warner: Dada edepay. [unsure of correct spelling]

JE: What did that mean?

Barbara Warner: She wants to tell them to remember who they are and where they came from. Remember the sacrifices our old people made so that we can be a nation. To stay in the circle.

CW: Yeah.

BW: To keep our traditions, to keep our customs.

CW: Oh, that's hard. It's hard. My father used to get up and talk to the gathering in Ponca. He'd tell them to teach the young generation to speak Ponca. Have respect for the elder. That was pretty hard for him to explain it to the young generation.

JE: Maybe that's about your message then is to have respect for their elders?

CW: Yeah. Today. I hate to see even though or mention it.

BW: Don't say it then.

CW: But nobody has respect for each other.

JE: So our message to the youngsters is to have respect for everybody?

CW: Yeah. I'm still a grandma to most people.

JE: Barbara, maybe you can sum some of that up yourself.

CW: Grab a—

BW: Well, I want to mention something first. The reason why she has difficulty just coming out and saying some things is in our culture the women are not the speakers. We step back and we—

CW: Yeah.

BW: … have someone that we ask to speak for us, always.

CW: Always.

BW: So we don't just come out and do this type of thing, certainly. And her generation, for sure, they never did anything like that. So I need for you to understand that there's a reason why it's more difficult for her to do things like that.

JE: Well, this is all learning for people who will listen. What would you like to pass on to the younger generation about the Poncas?

BW: Well, I think I would want to echo what my grandfather said, "Everything we do is out of respect." Whether it's respect for the land, for each other, for elders, for children, for life, it doesn't matter, it's that respect that kept us together all these centuries. And we need to continue that and respecting other tribes and other people. And that will make us whole and keep us save and intact and make us be able to hear the voices of our ancestors in our culture. And pick that back up and keep it in our hearts, just because they are Indian, born Indian, it's there forever. And if it's there forever, we'll be here forever. That's what I would like to say.

JE: Good. And Barbara, real quick, tell us your job now?

BW: I'm the executive director of the Oklahoma Indian Affairs Commission.

JE: What do you do?

BW: Our job is to be the liaison between state government and tribal government. And that encompasses a whole plethora of things, any issues that relates to tribes in the state. We are there to help get the right people together to network, to get information out.

JE: Cynthia, that must make you proud because when you were going to those schools there was no time did you ever think that you'd have a daughter—

CW: Yeah.

JE: … who would be a go between, between, say, the white man's government—

CW: Yeah.

JE: … and your tribe. You never thought that would happen?

CW: Um-um (negative).

JE: But now you have one.

CW: Yeah.

JE: Barbara's here and so that must make you, you don't need to—

CW: Very proud.

JE: … be, you don't need to be humble about this. This you can be proud of, right?

CW: Yeah, very proud. There's the three of them.

JE: That's great.

CW: Three girls.

JE: Well, I, I thank you for spending this time and it's been very enjoyable. I really enjoyed meeting both of you and, Cynthia, you are a feisty woman.

CW: [laughing—all three laughing] You don't know the half of it.

BW: Well, thank you, John.

JE: Yeah, yeah.

BW: I sure appreciate this.

JE: Yeah. So how do we say goodbye in Ponca?

BW: We don't.

CW: We don't.

JE: Really?

BW: We don't say hello and we don't say goodbye.

JE: Oh, okay. All right.

CW: Well, let's see. The best thing you could—

BW: We just say, "I'm here," and "I'm leaving."

CW: The best thing you can say is, "*Keyzewhy*,"[unsure of spelling] which means, "Okay, let's go."

BW: Or in the morning I'll go tell her, but that means, "I'm going."

CW: I'm going. I'm getting the hell out of here.

BW: But we don't, we don't say "Bye." [both women laughing]

JE: Well, this is wonderful.

Chapter 12 – 0:33
Conclusion

Announcer: This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous foundation-funders. We encourage you to join them by making your donation, which will allow us to record future stories. Students, teachers, and librarians are using this website for research and the general public is listening every day to these great Oklahomans share their life experience.

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