

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Announcer: Ross Swimmer’s Native American heritage and work in real estate law intersected when he performed pro bono work for the Cherokee Nation Housing Authority, and he later became in-house counsel for the Cherokee Nation. Ross began working for the Nation in an official capacity in 1972 and became Principal Chief in 1975.

He remained Principal Chief until 1983, when he left at the request of President Ronald Reagan to serve as Assistant Secretary of the Interior-Indian Affairs. Swimmer was instrumental in helping western tribes secure water rights and providing funds for projects that allowed tribes to use that water for agricultural and business projects on reservations.

Swimmer served as president of Cherokee Nation Industries, Inc. before being asked by President George W. Bush and Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton to return to Washington as the director of Indian Trust Transition at the Department of the Interior. In 2003 President Bush nominated Swimmer to become the Special Trustee for American Indians, an appointment requiring senate approval.

Now you can hear Ross tell his interesting story on the podcast and website VoicesOfOklahoma.com.

Chapter 2 – 11:08

Worm Ranch

John Erling (JE): My name is John Erling. Today's date is June 27, 2018. Ross, would you state your full name?

Ross Swimmer (RS): Ross Owen Swimmer.

JE: Are you named after someone in particular?

RS: Swimmer is a Cherokee name that was given to me from my dad who was half Cherokee. In Cherokee it's translated as Adewuski. Swimmer's name was very popular in the 1800s. One of the Swimmers was known for writing a book on medicine, the Cherokees and herbal solutions, things like that. But as far as I know, it is just the name from the Cherokee.

JE: And Ross, was that after someone?

RS: Well, I was told by my dad that it was after John Ross. I don't have any knowledge that I'm in that line from the Ross family. It's pretty broad even though John Ross was only an eighth Cherokee, but he had married into the Cherokee Nation. His first wife was full-blood Cherokee, and they had children and other siblings. As far as I know, that's where the name Ross came from.

JE: Your date of birth?

RS: October 26, 1943.

JE: So that makes your present age?

RS: 74.

JE: And where are we recording this interview?

RS: Tulsa, Oklahoma, at my home where Margaret and I reside.

JE: And where were you born?

RS: Oklahoma City.

JE: Let's talk about your mother, her maiden name, where she came from, and what she did.

RS: Mother was Virginia, and her last name was Pounder. She was all English, and her family came from Leeds, England, a town north of London. She grew up in Oklahoma City. Her mother and her sister lived in Oklahoma City when I was very young. We spent a great deal of time with them. Other than that, I don't know much about her. Mother was an interesting lady. She worked for the Federal Aviation Agency for a long time. Eventually, when she was about 60, she went to law school. She was doing the work of a lawyer at the FAA in Oklahoma City, but she couldn't be paid for it because she didn't have a degree. So she went to Oklahoma City

University Law School, graduated, and was able to continue working for another four or five years. Her main job there was to register aircraft. Every airplane in the United States has to go through the FAA in Oklahoma City. At one point, she was one of those government workers that felt like it was her job to get things done instead of finding reasons not to. One time I heard the story about Braniff Airlines. They wanted to register a new airliner. Mother was not available at that time to do it, and they said, "We will wait until she comes back," because they knew they would get the job done with her there. I think she was on the first flight of the supersonic airplane that went from here to Europe when they developed that. It doesn't run anymore, but that first— I forget what they called it now, but it was one of those supersonic planes. She was a very good mother, probably why the three of us survived and did well. They were divorced when we went to college. I think it was my freshman year when I was in college that they got a divorce. It's one of those things where I think they stayed married for the kids. Because Dad was an alcoholic, he was an attorney and did reasonably well in Oklahoma City. His name was Robert Otis Swimmer. He practiced law in Oklahoma City, did a lot of criminal practice. He represented a lot of the bootleggers around town to keep everybody in business with their liquor. But he developed alcoholism. I don't know how long he'd had it, but ever since we were very small children, he exhibited all the signs of alcoholism. That created a lot of problems for him and for the family over the years.

JE: How many children are in the family?

RS: The three of us. I have two sisters, Virginia Lassiter in Argyle, Texas, and Patricia Lazenby, who resides at Salt Spring Island in British Columbia. Dad remarried after Mom and Dad were divorced, and he had two more children. He married Betsy Swimmer from Pryor, Oklahoma, who is also a Cherokee. I have a half-brother, John, who resides, I believe, in Minnesota, and Lisa Swimmer, who lives here in Tulsa. He was married the first time before to my mother, and I had a half-brother, Robert Eugene Swimmer. He was kind of a role model. He was one of these guys that, when I was growing up, he was 10 or 12 years older than I was. He was a big guy, about six feet, about 250 pounds, always worked out. He went to California to get into the movies and played a few bit roles in things like "Rawhide" and "Gunsmoke" and some other shows out there.

JE: What was his name again?

RS: Robert Eugene. We called him Gene Swimmer. He made a living in real estate out there, helped develop the La Costa resort area of Southern California. He was killed in a plane crash. He was showing property, and they had taken a group of people up to an area on one of these small planes. When they were coming back, apparently the pilot failed to take the gust locks off of the tail, and when they tried to take off, it went straight into the ocean. That was 40 years ago, maybe.

JE: How did your mother influence your life? How did she encourage you?

RS: It was a series of things. She was the calm person. She was the one that held it all together. If Dad was out drunk or threatening, which he did, she would always be protective and make sure we were taken care of. She was the mother that would always come to the school plays and encourage all of us to do our best.

JE: And to pursue education, obviously.

RS: And to pursue education. We didn't even think about that. It's a little different because back then, when you thought about college, it was just assumed we were going to OU. There wasn't much discussion about it, and that you would go to college. That wasn't an issue. We graduated from Putnam City High School. We had grown up in the Yukon School District and attended Yukon from second grade all the way through the tenth grade. We lived out at Lake Overholser on the north side of the lake on a five-acre ranch. We called it the worm ranch because Dad wanted to make sure we had our time occupied. He came up with the idea of raising worms, and we sold worms internationally. It was a real industry back then. We were at Lake Overholser, so we had all the bait dealers, and the kids would go out, harvest the worms, and take them around to sell them. That was a good experience. I can't complain about it. I did then, but I don't now.

JE: Right. So your father, despite being an alcoholic and tough to be around when he was drinking, was a big influence on your life.

RS: In that respect, he was. He didn't pay much attention to what we did as far as schoolwork. That was Mother. It was good for us because we worked. We started working when we were 10 years old, doing things out there on

the acreage, keeping it up, and learning a little bit of business through the sale of the worms. We raised livestock—chickens, geese—and had a truck garden. We would harvest the goods from that, take them, and sell them. It was a good experience as we were growing up and learning to deal with people.

Chapter 3 – 7:55

Alcoholism

John Erling (JE): Here's the follow-up question to do on your father. Because of his alcoholism, did that make you sensitive to that issue of alcohol as you grew up and got older and realized others had a drinking problem?

Ross Swimmer (RS): Very much so. I was very worried about getting the disease and reluctant to drink. I never drank during high school. It was always in the back of my mind—what if I can't stop? Growing up with someone like that, he could be sober for a year, but then he'd take that drink, and you'd go for two or three years where he was drinking again. Fortunately, or maybe fortunately for him, he was the kind of alcoholic who could do some pretty bad things, and the next morning he would deny it—he had no recollection, just a blackout. I remember one instance when he and I went fishing. We lived by Overholser, and there was an area besides the lake where you could fish. I remember he had taken a six-pack of beer, and we drove to it. I was worried about him driving, so I think I drank two or three of the beers to keep him from drinking them. That was probably the first time I had anything. But I've been fortunate. I haven't developed any great craving for alcohol. I have a drink every now and then, and it's no big deal. My younger sister didn't fare so well. She's had alcohol problems. She recently went through a serious brain injury. She had a fall, and I suspect it's related to her drinking. She's been in a rehab or hospital-type nursing home for almost nine months. She's now getting much better up in British Columbia, but she's the one in the family that it fell to apparently.

JE: Did your father become sober before his death?

RS: I don't think so. He died with basically nothing. He got remarried and had two children, then he and Betsy got a divorce. He went to work for legal aid as an attorney over in Muskogee. I'm really not sure what else he did. He came to me after I was elected chief, and he wanted me to hire him in the tribe. I told him I couldn't do that.

JE: Why?

RS: I wouldn't do it simply because he's my father. Second, we had a nepotism policy, so I couldn't legally do it. I could have found something, I'm sure, but it wouldn't have been good because he was not in any condition to do anything constructive. I found out that Betsy had pretty much thrown him out of the house, and he had no place to go. My older sister and I went over to Locust Grove. He had a half-sister who was full-blood, and she was a great person. She would take care of him when he had an episode. I have a cousin, Meredith Swimmer—now Meredith Fraley. Meredith's now a county commissioner over in Mayes County. She was on the tribal council and ran for chief two terms ago. Anyway, we found out that he was basically homeless. We went up to Locust Grove, got him a place to live. Then I got a call a couple of months later that he had died. He went to Hastings Hospital in Tahlequah, and he had died.

JE: How old was he?

RS: Gosh, I think he was about 70, maybe 72 or 73. He had cancer—stomach cancer. He had some heart trouble. Obviously, the alcohol was debilitating. He had all kinds of things wrong with him. I really attribute it to alcohol as much as anything.

JE: As we trace your life and professional life, he's involved in that. He was an accomplished person on one hand and then had these problems on the other. As you reflect on him, how do you view him? You certainly must respect some of the things that he did professionally.

RS: Yeah, aside from the problems with alcohol, he was a decent guy. Part of why I decided to go to law school—I had thought seriously about med school. After taking a couple of advanced chemistry courses, I decided I should be doing something else. Because he was practicing law in Oklahoma, I thought, well, that sounds good. I think I'll go into the legal field. That probably gave me the idea to go to law school. Those are the kinds of things you can look at and say it's good or it's bad. Wish it hadn't

been that way, or it was just a terrible situation. It was all an experience, and it's all life's experience. You take out of it, hopefully, the best parts and say it wasn't all bad. There were a lot of good things that went on. Even with the alcohol, it was a situation that made me think about what I should do later on as far as drinking. I think all three of us realized it was more of a disease than anything else. It wasn't intentional. He just absolutely couldn't stop.

JE: Alcoholism runs in all races. Fair or unfair, we sometimes hear that Native Americans have that gene more than others. Is that unfair?

RS: No, I think it very probably could be genetic. I just have to believe that because the incidence of it is so high with American Indians that there could be a genetic issue involved.

Chapter 4 – 7:30

Shyness

John Erling (JE): You spoke about your half-brothers being tall. You're tall yourself. How tall are you?

Ross Swimmer (RS): 6'4".

JE: OK. What kind of person were you when you attended Putnam Heights Elementary School? I think you were kind of a shy guy, weren't you?

RS: Yes, very shy.

JE: And then you attended school in Yukon, as you said, and went on to junior high school. Somewhere along the line, that shyness went away or you started overcoming it by getting involved. Talk to us about that.

RS: It didn't go away very quickly. It went away about the time I decided to run for chief, and I was 30 years old. The anecdote that everybody talks about is our first-grade teacher at Putnam Heights, who was also our godmother, a wonderful person named Francis Barrett. She sent a note home one day to my parents and said, "I want you to have Ross's hearing tested because I want to know if he isn't hearing me or if he isn't paying attention." I would

sit in class, put my head down, and not be responsive. Once she knew what the issue was, she knew how to deal with it. She helped me a lot just in first grade to overcome some of that. I don't necessarily know where it came from—unless it's genetic—but there are shy people and outgoing people. I don't know that you have that much control over it. I did eventually overcome part of it. I also started playing the clarinet because my older half-brother, Gene, was quite accomplished. I thought I'd like to do something, so I wanted to play the clarinet. At Yukon, I started in the band there, took lessons, and Mother bought me a clarinet. I learned how to play it, did fairly well, and rose up in the ranks at Yukon. Then I went to Putnam City. Our graduating class at Yukon was about 35 or 40, and at Putnam City, it was about 1,200. It was an enormous jump from a small rural school into a much larger school. That probably also pushed me a little to overcome some of that shyness.

JE: You got very involved. You got involved in the Latin Club.

RS: Latin—I loved Latin.

JE: School plays, scholastic meets, a member of the Honor Society. You were becoming very social, though some of that shyness was still with you.

RS: It still was. I just forced myself to do things because I thought it would be good for me. I played the clarinet solo at graduation. I still think back on that and wonder how I did it. I would go to music competitions, and I'd be so nervous I could hardly play. I thought, "I've got to overcome this somehow." I just kept pushing to try to overcome that nervousness so I could play. When I played the solo at graduation, it seemed to go okay.

JE: And you graduated from Putnam City High School in what year?

RS: 1961.

JE: Here you are, 74 years old. Do you feel you still have some of that shyness in you?

RS: Oh, sure. It's been a liability. I'm not comfortable just going out and meeting people for business or any other reason. I tend to pull back, and I need to overcome that. I continually work on it. People assume you're aloof, that you're not interested in them, but that's not it at all. It's a personality thing. It makes a big difference. I've never been real gregarious.

Fortunately, marrying Margaret helped a lot. She's very outgoing. She will meet somebody, and before she's done talking, she'll know who their kids are and where their last trip was. Two years later, she'll meet them and remember they were going to take that trip. She has a photographic memory. I have a terrible memory, and that has been one of the biggest liabilities for a political person—not being able to remember people's names. That is an asset that goes so far. People will come up to me, and we'll talk, and I have no idea who they are. You try to develop a mechanism to handle that without them realizing you don't know their name. That's a liability for anyone. You try these tricks of the trade to overcome it, and it works a lot of the time, but maybe it's the shyness, or maybe it's just the memory. If you don't have the ability to remember all those details—especially people's names—it makes a big difference. I've experienced that in the political world.

JE: Everybody listening to this knows what you've accomplished and is probably surprised to hear you talking like this. Would you say you have a reclusive nature?

RS: Yes.

JE: And rather than go to that big house next door and see all those people, you'd rather sit here?

RS: Read the newspaper.

JE: Right. So that's in you, but obviously, you pushed through it, as we will find out here.

Chapter 5 – 4:53 Of Counsel

John Erling (JE): So you went to the University of Oklahoma. You practiced law?

Ross Swimmer (RS): Out of the University of Oklahoma in Oklahoma City, yes.

JE: And I think that was from 1967 to about 1972?

RS: Yes.

JE: And what law firm did you work for?

RS: The firm's name was Hanson, Tumulty, Fisher, Peterson, and Tompkins. I practiced real estate law. We represented a mortgage company there and did closings. What moved my career further was that around that time, with the Great Society programs coming into being, the Housing and Urban Development cabinet was formed, and they started providing funds to build low-income housing. All the developers wanted to get into that, and I thought it would be a good area to get into from a legal point of view. It was, because Indian land titles in Oklahoma are some of the most complicated due to the allotment process in 1906 and following through with the Five Tribes.

Particularly difficult was the issue that if you were a full-blood, your allotment was restricted and held in trust by the government and managed by the BIA. If you were less than a half degree of blood, you got your land free and clear, and you could sell it the next day. But when you go back and look at the title, you have to be sure what degree of blood the person was at the time of sale. Then you go through quiet title and all of that.

So I met with Bill Keeler and offered to volunteer a day a week to drive over to Tahlequah and work with the housing authority to help them. They had attorneys in Tulsa working for them, but I thought it would be something beneficial for the tribe and a way to get more involved. One thing led to another, and I did get more involved.

JE: Right. And Bill Keeler was the chief of the Cherokee Nation. You did that for some time. Then, didn't you become an attorney for the Cherokee Nation council?

RS: I did. I worked for the housing authority for a couple of years, in 1972 and '73. In the second half of '72, I went to Tahlequah and was hired by the housing authority. I worked for them while the housing authority was still a separate agency, like a city housing authority. It was licensed under the tribe but operated independently. There were issues between the tribe and the housing authority. At one point, I found myself writing letters back and forth to myself. I realized that wasn't going to work. I told both the

tribal people and the housing authority that I needed to do one or the other—I either needed to work for the housing authority or work for the tribe. I said I'd love to work for the tribe.

In 1973, I went in as in-house counsel. Earl Boyd Pierce of Fort Gibson was our general counsel. He and Andy Wilcox of Muskogee had done the legal work for the tribe for years, mainly suing the government for claims that the tribe had against them. The Cherokee Nation was still a small entity at the time, with very little to do. The social programs in Indian Country in Oklahoma were just beginning. But there were issues developing, and they needed legal counsel in-house. So I was hired and worked for the tribe.

Chapter 6 – 7:50

Margaret and Sons

John Erling (JE): Mary Margaret, when did you meet and when did you marry her?

Ross Swimmer (RS): We were in college. I'd actually been engaged to a girl for a couple of years before I met Margaret, and I'd broken up with her. I loved her family more than I loved her, and it was one of those things where you just didn't want to say, "This isn't going to work." My cousin Gretchen was in the same sorority with Margaret, Alpha Gam, down at OU. They were having a Christmas party, and my cousins wanted to set us up on a blind date. I told her I would do it. I wasn't much of a dater, still shy, but I agreed. I went to the sorority house, picked her up, and we went to their Christmas party in Norman. That night, I decided that was who I wanted to marry. I went home and told my mother, "I think I've met the girl I want to marry and live with." About 30 days later, we got engaged, and six months later, we got married.

JE: Did Margaret have the same feeling after the first date?

RS: I don't know. It might have taken a couple more dates for her to make that decision, but she did. She lived in Wynnewood at the time. She lived at OU, but her mother was in Wynnewood and was a school teacher. I went down

and spent some time there, and after a couple of weeks, we decided to get engaged. No sense in wasting time.

JE: How long have you been married now?

RS: 52 years.

JE: How many children did you have?

RS: Two boys.

JE: And their names?

RS: Michael and Joseph. Michael is here in Tulsa. Our older son, Joe, he's a couple of years older than Michael. He is an interesting study. He is gay. We didn't know for sure, but when he came out and told us he had met someone and they had a relationship, our younger son already knew. We waited for him to tell us. That was an interesting time. I told him, "There's nothing wrong with you being gay, but I am sad only because I know you're going to go through a lot of heartache. People are just not ready." This was 20 years ago. I said, "They're not ready to accept it. We'll be with you every step of the way, but it's not going to be easy."

JE: When he announced he was gay, you said it casually. In many families, it's a disruptive event. Some parents ostracize their children. But you and Margaret were very open from the outset. Is that true?

RS: Very much so. Long before that, I was convinced that this is how a person is born. Joe even told us, "I don't particularly want to be gay. I don't have a choice." We said, "We understand. You are who you are. You make the best of it and do what you can." There's nothing wrong with it; it's just a challenge, an added challenge to life. Hopefully, society will reach a point where it's not a big issue. You love somebody, you marry them—that's what it's about.

JE: In today's society, in 2018, life has become more open to gays. Would you agree?

RS: In the last 20 years, very much so. But I do think it's become part of our politics. When the Supreme Court made its decision on gay marriage, there was a question of whether the court was moving too fast. It was happening quickly, and then their decision came down. I think our politics

today reflect that. The right-wing evangelical group sees that as just one more destructive thing in the country—whether it's abortion, gay rights, racial issues, or immigration. They think we're getting overrun. Trump came in and said, "We'll take care of this. We'll take us back to being a white country." But I'm glad that society has progressed. I'm glad that we've moved socially to a point where we can accept people as they are. Hopefully, we will continue to make progress in that regard.

Chapter 7 – 10:36

Chief Swimmer

Ross Swimmer (RS): So Keeler and the other chiefs decided they would have an election. They did in '71, then we were ready for one in '75. Keeler calls me in and says, "We've got to do something about the next principal chief. Who do you think ought to be our candidate?" I said, "Well, Bill, I don't know. I don't think any of them." We had the usual candidates—preachers and others. I said, "I really don't know. What do you think?" And he said, "Well, I agree with you. There's nobody in that group that can do the job, but I do know somebody." I asked, "Who is it?" And he said, "I'm sitting across from him. I want you to run." He gave me \$5,000 to help support the campaign. So I go home and tell Margaret I'm going to run for chief, and she says, "You're out of your mind."

John Erling (JE): Did you commit to him in that initial meeting that you would run?

RS: Yeah.

JE: Here's Mr. Shy Guy.

RS: Mr. Shy Guy. I thought, "I don't know what I'm doing." But I said, "Yeah, I'll put my name out there." One thing I'd done at the housing authority was spending almost every night going out to the communities to explain the housing issues—what people could get and how to do it. That helped because a lot of people knew me beyond just being the tribal lawyer. So I agreed, and Margaret could tell you the story—when I told her I was running, she waited a couple of days. Then she came in and said, "If you're

going to run, you better get your butt out there and start working." I asked, "Well, what am I supposed to do?" She said, "We have to put a campaign together." She was the one who organized it. She got all our friends—most of them Cherokee—together, including Gary Chapman and his daughter Susie. We gathered around the dining room table and figured out how to run a campaign. We stuffed envelopes and sent letters by hand. No fancy mail centers. Then I started campaigning. I would write a speech, go to a community meeting, and carefully read it. Margaret said, "That ain't gonna work. You've got to connect with the people. You know what you want to do. You know what the tribe needs. Just get up and talk." After a month or so, I threw away the speeches and just started talking. It kind of worked.

JE: And you were only 30 years old at the time.

RS: I was 30.

JE: Would you be the youngest chief ever?

RS: I guess so. I don't know all of them, but I think so, based on the ones I'm acquainted with going back to the mid-1800s.

JE: You won that election. Was it because people knew you? Were you the only candidate proposing a constitution?

RS: That was my platform. Others agreed, but I don't think most knew what they were talking about. The interesting thing about that election was the attempt to keep me from running. The group I opposed was writing the election rules for Keeler to sign off on. In '71, they had set the age limit at 30. By this time, Keeler was in Tennessee, ready to retire. The opposition, mainly within the Cherokee government, sent revised rules to Keeler, changing the age limit to 35. When Keeler returned, I met with him and said, "Bill, you just wrote me out of the election." He said, "That didn't happen. I haven't done anything." I told him, "You signed the rules." He hadn't read them—just signed and sent them back. He said, "That's not gonna happen." He got the rules and struck through the change, putting it back at 30. The other rule that worked in my favor was that the high vote wins—no runoff. As best I recall, I got maybe 28% of the vote out of 10 candidates. The next highest had about 18%, then 16%, and so on. With a plurality of the vote, I got elected.

JE: There were anti-Keeler people?

RS: Yes. We had a lot of protests. It was bitter. Some of it was that I was also a banker. The Bank of the Cherokees had kept the tribe afloat. But opposition wasn't necessarily because they supported someone else. We just either weren't "Cherokee enough" or were business people. I remember at the inauguration, Andy Wilcoxson was the master of ceremonies. A lady from a small town north of Tahlequah had a placard, waving it around. Andy leaned over—we were outside at the courthouse or Capitol building—and handed her a dollar, saying, "Why don't you go buy a lemon? You're just so sour about everything." She just wanted to disrupt, but it was a tough election because we had 10 candidates. Everyone had their favorite.

JE: You were half Cherokee?

RS: A quarter. Dad was a half. Granddad was full, so each generation intermarried.

JE: And they said you weren't Cherokee enough because you were a quarter?

RS: Right. That was a minor issue. The main issues were about business and cleaning house at the tribe. It was a tough situation.

Chapter 8 – 10:40

Bell Water Project

John Erling (JE): Just a couple of issues as you were elected the principal chief of the Cherokee Nation. You helped improve economic development. Casinos, when did that become a part of economic development?

Ross Swimmer (RS): Well, casinos in Indian Country began back in the early '80s with court decisions. Much of what has happened in Indian Country over the years has been accomplished through court decisions rather than legislation. Congress doesn't want to deal with Indian affairs, and as a result, the American Indian has suffered for generations. We have severe issues in places like North and South Dakota, eastern Washington, Montana, and parts of Arizona and New Mexico. People live in terrible conditions and have been for over a century. We are fortunate in Oklahoma not to have reservations, but it raises the question of whether

we even really have tribes here, given our high level of assimilation. Still, we do have tribes. Gaming started in the early '80s, first with bingo, which was widely accepted. When I left office in October 1985, my last action as chief was to veto a bill from the council permitting gaming. I didn't think it was the wisest move for the tribe. We had businesses like a plant nursery and Cherokee Nation Industries doing well, so I felt we could develop without gambling. However, just a few months after I left, they brought it back, and Wilma Mankiller signed off on it. The rest is history. They built a bingo hall where the Hard Rock Casino is now, and as laws evolved, they expanded into full-scale gaming. Economically, it has been extremely valuable, but it also comes with social problems. Many Cherokee people are hooked on gaming, spending every last dime they have at the casino.

JE: Do you think that if they had listened to you and avoided gaming, it would have been beneficial? Other tribes moved into casinos and profited. Wasn't it inevitable?

RS: After I left, if I had been there for another year, I probably would have moved forward with it. It was becoming a major economic enterprise for Indian tribes.

JE: You implemented a self-help program for rural development, which became an example for other tribes.

RS: Yes, in Bell, Oklahoma, in Adair County. The dilemma was that people lived in ramshackle houses without indoor plumbing. The Bureau of Indian Affairs' housing repair program wouldn't fund bathroom installations because there was no running water, and Indian Health Service wouldn't install water lines because there were no existing facilities to connect them to. The system didn't allow for logical solutions. We needed water, so we worked to install 16 miles of rural water lines through rough terrain. We met with the community, explained the problem, and proposed a self-help solution. We provided materials from Phillips Petroleum and hired a backhoe operator, but the community had to do the manual labor—laying pipes, bedding them, and filling the trenches. They agreed to the terms, which included working in designated teams, remaining sober, attending training, and maintaining consistent progress.

JE: And you chose Wilma Mankiller to lead this effort?

RS: Yes. She had experience in social work and activism, including her time at Alcatraz. She worked closely with Jane Schautz, who was an expert in self-help programs, and with her future husband, Charlie Soap, a Cherokee speaker who helped communicate with the local people. The project was a great success. We built the 16 miles of water line at a fraction of the cost of hiring contractors. Later, we expanded the model to housing projects, where the community helped construct their own homes. Every community project moving forward required a self-help component.

JE: That became an example for other tribes?

RS: Yes. We shared our methods with other tribes and helped guide them. The challenge is that it's easier to just hire a contractor. But the real impact of self-help went beyond infrastructure. In Bell, we not only built a water line, but we also achieved employment opportunities, job training, and skill development. We saw decreases in alcoholism and increased school attendance. The sense of accomplishment that comes from building something yourself transformed the community.

JE: The community became closer together.

RS: Very much so.

Chapter 9 – 10:00

Ross Goes to Washington

John Erling (JE): So you were chief for 10 years.

Ross Swimmer (RS): I was.

JE: Then you were appointed Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs as part of the Department of the Interior by President Ronald Reagan.

RS: Yes.

JE: So you were going to leave. Who did you ask to run for principal chief?

RS: Well, in 1981, I had cancer. I had lymphoma. I was treated at MD Anderson and successfully. My first election, as I said, was won with a plurality. The

second one was won with over 60% of the vote. By my third election, I had not intended to run—not necessarily because of my health, as by 1983, I had finished all my treatment and was in good health.

Perry Wheeler was my deputy chief, and I had invited him to be my deputy chief when I was first elected in 1975. Perry was a nice guy, part of the old political machine in Sequoyah County, and a funeral homeowner. He was effective, and one thing that happens in Indian Country is people like to travel to meetings like the National Congress of American Indians, so I would send Perry to those because I didn't have the time or interest.

In 1982, when we were preparing for the election, Perry decided to run against me. Rumors circulated that I was going to die and that others needed to start taking control before the election. I saw the Cherokee Nation being taken over for political purposes outside of the tribe. Today, the Cherokee Nation is simply an arm of the Democratic Party, and it's not Cherokee.

So I decided to run again and needed a running mate. I asked Wilma Mankiller to run with me. She was heavily involved in community development and was well-liked and intelligent. She thought about it for a few days and accepted. Some of my best supporters opposed the idea, saying a woman couldn't be chief. I disagreed and thought she would do a great job.

The campaign was tough. One program from the Department of Agriculture provided free food to tribes, and I had put a hold on it to research whether we wanted it. Wheeler went on television, holding a stack of food boxes, claiming, "If Swimmer had signed off, you'd have free food today." Another rumor circulated that I was going to die. On the first ballot, I got 50.1 or 50.2% of the vote, just missing the required majority, forcing a runoff. I financed Wilma's runoff campaign, and she ultimately won.

In 1985, I was asked by all three Secretaries of the Interior in the Reagan administration to go to Washington. I turned them all down. Finally, Donald Hodel was Secretary in 1985, and he told me how important it was for me to do my civic duty. The President wanted me to serve. I was hesitant since I was in my third term as chief. I had to discuss it with Wilma to see if she was willing to assume full responsibility. I also talked with Margaret, my wife. Our boys were teenagers, and she was practicing law. I would be in Washington most of the time. I told her she needed to hear

Hodel's pitch. She did, and afterward, she said, "I don't see how you can turn him down. They seem to really want you to do this."

Thinking there was an opportunity to make a difference in Indian Country, I accepted the job. I was nominated in May or June, but Senator John Melcher of Montana put my nomination on hold for months because he wanted the Park Service to give him \$100,000 for a project. When they refused, he delayed my confirmation. I was finally approved in October and started work.

JE: And Wilma then ran for principal chief?

RS: Yes.

JE: And she prevailed?

RS: She was chief for two years, then sought re-election twice after that, serving a total of ten years.

JE: We've interviewed her on Voices of Oklahoma, and people should listen to that. She talked about the government relocation program and how her family was placed in San Francisco's red-light district. That experience gave her a lot of knowledge she later brought back to Oklahoma.

RS: Oh, absolutely. I have a different opinion about the relocation program, though. I think it was one of the best things that ever happened. About half of the Native population took advantage of it and remained in the urban areas where they relocated. They built lives, had families, and many were successful. Wilma's experience was unique. Relocation was voluntary—people were given the option to leave difficult reservations for places like Chicago or Los Angeles. The government paid their expenses, provided housing, and offered job training. Many people saw it as a good deal and left.

However, Wilma didn't speak as glowingly about it.

JE: No, she didn't.

RS: I imagine being a part of it was different. But I don't know why her situation was particularly difficult. Her family seemed to do well. She married a wealthy man, got involved in the local Indian movement, and

became a leader. I'm unsure what caused her specific hardships, but I know that for many, relocation was a positive opportunity.

Chapter 10 – 13:43

Prejudice

John Erling (JE): Prejudice against Native Americans has been there for some time. Would you agree?

Ross Swimmer (RS): It has, it is, and it's still here today.

JE: Has it increased or decreased over the last 20 or 30 years?

RS: It's decreased, but it's also localized. For instance, if you go to Pine Ridge in southwest South Dakota, it is the absolute worst condition of any reservation. About 10,000 people live on that reservation, and about 9,900 of them are alcoholics. They have nothing to do. The school systems on Indian reservations, provided by the BIA, are awful. You can't fight the bureaucracy. You put government workers out there—principals make \$100,000 to \$150,000 a year, superintendents make \$200,000 a year, teachers do well—but they're not very competent. They just don't care.

Many parents on reservations, if they want their kids to get an education, send them to public school. Nearly every BIA school has a public school nearby. But kids who drop out of public school end up in the BIA school. There are just lots of problems. Places like Pine Ridge have never had leadership that would give them the opportunity to really do something. They get money, they have their own law enforcement, and they get funding for housing.

One of the things we had to fight was the government's approach to housing. They decide it's better to take five acres of land and build 20 houses on it because it's more economical. But then you have families moving in who don't get along, and before long, it's just a rural ghetto. A few years later, the windows are broken, the doors are gone, and the houses are falling down. There's been very little effort to engage tribal members in what they can do, what they need to do, and how to do it. The leadership is poor, so nobody cares who gets elected. You elect the proverbial brother-in-law because if they screw up, the BIA will come in and fix it.

JE: We should point out when you say BIA, that's the Bureau of Indian Affairs. I want to go back to Wilma again. When she became principal chief, she faced backlash from a largely male council, and she talks about that. So she had that to contend with.

RS: That's because she's a woman.

JE: Exactly, right.

RS: Ridiculous.

JE: She had to make some decisions early on to show them, "I can make these decisions, and they're going to stand."

RS: Yeah, I think so. An interesting side note—when I went to the Bureau in '85, by mid-'86, I would hear from people back here saying, "Swimmer is still running the tribe. He tells Wilma what to do. They're in constant communication." The fact is, I never did. When I went to Washington, I couldn't do anything for or with the tribe due to ethics issues, and I never had any contact with her. The only thing I knew about was the gaming issue.

The one thing I did know—and maybe this is where the rumor came from—we had a plan for health care. We knew where we wanted clinics and what we wanted, and that plan was about halfway done when I left. She continued it. We had some educational initiatives that kept going. The only major difference was gaming, which grew as a business more than any other.

JE: As much as being a female worked against her, being a female also helped her because she became a celebrated person for that reason.

RS: A female Indian with the name "Mankiller," right.

JE: And she was the first principal chief, the first female principal chief. So being a female made her a star.

RS: And my only regret about that was that I felt in her last term, second full term, that she was far more involved in the women's movement than she was in the tribe. She and Gloria Steinem became best friends. She spent an awful lot of time in New York working on women's issues, which is fine. She had that persona and received good publicity for it.

JE: So she was working on women's issues but not working on Cherokee issues? Is that what you're saying?

RS: Yeah, she wasn't paying that much attention, and that's part of what I think caused the debacle in '92 when Joe Byrd got elected. She had promoted a fellow to be her successor as chief. He was a nice guy, probably would have done a good job, but she wasn't paying enough attention. They got into a runoff—Joe Byrd and this guy. Then it turned out that he had been arrested for an assault or something back in his younger days. It had been expunged from the record, but the opposition in the tribe took it up as an issue. The tribal court ruled that the Constitution stated if you'd ever been convicted—even if it was expunged—you were disqualified. So they ruled him out of the runoff, and Joe Byrd took over as chief. That was a disaster. Those four years were awful.

JE: What does it mean to be a federally recognized tribe? Does that mean that not all nations or tribes are federally recognized?

RS: Yes. Federal recognition is a term of art. In order to have all the trappings of an Indian tribe—sovereignty and all that—you have to be federally recognized. That means the United States government must recognize you as an Indian tribe. There are dozens and dozens of groups that call themselves tribes. Some are state-recognized but not federally recognized. There are a lot in Virginia. I'd bet there are at least 30 Cherokee tribes—Cherokee Tribe of Tennessee, Cherokee Band of Georgia, and so on. They're listed as tribes but are not federally recognized.

The federal government has full authority over an Indian tribe. It can create or dissolve an Indian tribe. There are two ways to become federally recognized. One is through the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) recognition process. That involves a lengthy review—does the tribe still have language? Have they been consistent in meetings and gatherings? Do they have a tribal roll? Do they have the trappings of an actual government that have continued over time? If so, the BIA may recognize them.

The other way is through an Act of Congress. Congress can create or dissolve a tribe. If the BIA denies recognition, a group can go the political route and lobby Congress for recognition. That's how the Pequots got recognized. The Pequots had essentially disappeared a couple of hundred years ago. Allegedly, a couple of Pequot descendants applied for recognition, went to

Congress, and got it. The outcome was the largest casino in the world at the time—the Pequot casino in Connecticut. Now, the Chickasaws have the largest gaming floor in the world.

In our case, the only way we were able to get a constitution was with the help of Keeler and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. When I went to Washington, I had made the promise that we'd bring a constitution forward. But I had no authority to do that. There was nothing in the law because the 1906 law had essentially dissolved our government. So I proposed a constitution to the Secretary of the Interior, saying, "We want to get organized." We didn't have to go through the recognition process because we had historically been recognized and had not been terminated in 1906 due to specific legal language. We were the first of the Five Tribes to do that. We convinced Secretary Kleppe to sign off on our constitution, which allowed the other four tribes to do the same. Before that, we weren't entitled to many federal services because we were not formally organized.

JE: So the other four tribes?

RS: Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole.

JE: Talk about sovereignty—a self-governing state. Can tribes buy land and make it sovereign?

RS: Yes, and they do that by getting the federal government to accept the title to the land and hold it in trust for the tribe. If the Cherokee Nation buys land, they transfer it to the U.S. government with the government's permission. The government holds it in trust for them, and the tribe is allowed to conduct activities on that land within certain limits. But everything they do is still regulated by the federal government. Even gaming is regulated by the National Indian Gaming Commission, which has oversight on how tribes operate their gaming businesses.

Chapter 11 – 10:30

Close BIA

John Erling (JE): You were 40 years old and you thought the Bureau of Indian Affairs should go away. You wanted to remove Washington from the

equation, and I quote, "As long as the tribes look to the federal government to solve their problems, the problems will always be there." The National Congress of American Indians, one of the largest and oldest Indian advocacy organizations, attacked you for your effort to pull the government out of Indian affairs. They said you blamed Indian problems on too much government help. Am I characterizing all that you faced?

Ross Swimmer (RS): That's correct. That was where the opposition came from—NCAI and other Indian advocates disagreed wholeheartedly with me on that. I also made the statement when I met with BIA employees, telling them the best thing they could do was work themselves out of a job. I said those jobs need to be on the reservation, not in Washington. We need to change our attitude. That didn't go over well because the most valuable jobs on a reservation are those funded by the federal government. You have agency superintendents, people in Indian education offices, social workers—all of these positions are tied to federal dollars.

At the time, and even within the last 10 years, the budget for Indian Country from all federal agencies was about \$18 billion for 1.5 million Indians. That's a lot of money being spent without real results. I still advocate for true tribal sovereignty today. I told this administration when they asked if I was interested in returning that I wasn't, because until there's real tribal sovereignty, nothing will change. Maybe a Puerto Rico model, maybe a Washington, D.C. model—tribes need to be independent governments. Give them a set amount of money and say, "That's it. Now you run your government, your schools, your social programs, your housing programs." Tribal leadership should be responsible for what happens instead of blaming bureaucrats in Washington.

The current system assumes tribes need to be controlled. Even their land is held in trust by the government, which decides how they use it and invest their money. The last administration paid out \$3 billion to tribes for alleged wrongs against their reservations.

One example is a reservation in Oregon. They had a contract to manage their land under self-governance, which I introduced in 1987 or 1988. Before that, tribes had to apply for money through specific programs, even if they didn't need them. Self-governance meant they could take the money and create their own programs. This tribe sued the government and got \$100 million because their lands were overgrazed. Every person on that

reservation had a horse, and they had too many for the land to sustain. But no tribal leader wanted to go take away someone's horse, so they sued the government for allowing it to happen—even though they were managing the land themselves.

A friend of mine, Pat Ragsdale, was with the BIA and went to the Navajo Nation once to tell them they had to reduce their sheep population because of overgrazing. They ran him off the reservation and threatened him.

JE: It sounds like Washington and the tribes are both complicit in this. Is that fair to say?

RS: Yes. The tribes receive federal money, but many tribal governments are corrupt. The money doesn't get down to the people, and they receive it with impunity because no one in Washington wants to hold them accountable. Every major crime on a reservation is a federal crime, and only misdemeanors can be handled by local tribal police. But few FBI agents want to go out and investigate a rape, murder, or armed robbery on a reservation. They just don't want to do it. If a crime goes to federal court, it gets caught up in bureaucracy.

That's happening right now in Oklahoma because of the Creek decision from the Tenth Circuit. The ruling said the Creek Nation was never disestablished, meaning every Indian in that territory who commits a crime must go to federal court instead of state court. If that ruling holds, it will change the entire relationship between tribes and the state of Oklahoma.

JE: So on some reservations, crimes go unprosecuted?

RS: Most of them do.

JE: You could have rapes and murders going unpunished?

RS: Yes. Sometimes tribal authorities will arrest someone for murder but charge them with simple assault just so they can put them in jail for two years, because they can't get the feds to prosecute the murder. It's ridiculous. Tribes need law enforcement power on the reservation. They should run their own law enforcement and courts. Most tribes now are fairly sophisticated. Our court down in Tahlequah is well-run.

JE: Can they prosecute their own cases now, or does it still have to go to federal court?

RS: It's still federal if it's an Indian committing a crime on restricted land.

Chapter 12 – 8:20

Assimilation

John Erling (JE): So quickly then to show how much Washington valued you, in 2001, President Bush named you as director of the American Indian Trust Transition. In 2003, you were named Special Trustee for American Indians, the first American Indian to hold that position. You oversaw the trust for more than 400,000 Indians and 500 Indian tribes. The trust's assets consisted of \$3.5 billion, 55,000 acres of land, with an annual income of approximately \$800 million. That's a whole lot of money to be managing, isn't it? And do you think that some of this prejudice against Native Americans comes from this—what I just talked about? People see all this money and think maybe it should or shouldn't go to the tribes?

Ross Swimmer (RS): I don't think so. I don't think the prejudice is in that nature. I think it's just the same thing you see with African Americans. You still have the prejudice. I hate to use the anecdote, but I'll tell you one thing that really took me back. I couldn't imagine it. When I was with the bank in Tahlequah, the president of the bank, Peter and I, Manhart, had given some thought—because we were always known as the Bank of the Cherokees, and we had the Cherokee language out there—we thought maybe we ought to change the name of the bank to "Bank of the Cherokees." One of the board members said, "Well, why don't you just call it [expletive] National?" Wow. This was Tahlequah in 1979 or 1980.

If you go up to reservations like Pine Ridge or really any of the Sioux reservations, they really can't go into town very often. There's still a lot of prejudice up there today. There's not as much in Oklahoma because we're assimilated. You see me walk down the street, and nobody says, "Well, there goes an Indian." They don't do that because we're so assimilated, so mixed up.

JE: I grew up in North Dakota and knew about the Sioux and their reservations. As a young boy, we didn't have a very high opinion of Native Americans. We thought they were drunk most of the time, lazy, didn't work, and lived on reservations. That was the general thought. I held that for a long time. When I moved to Omaha, I didn't think about Native Americans much. But when I came to Oklahoma, my whole attitude changed. I gained a high level of respect—to the point where I've said I wish I had some Cherokee blood in me. That's how much my perception changed. Here in Oklahoma, we respect them and hold them in higher regard.

RS: Until you get to Western Oklahoma.

JE: Yes. I also know elected officials today who are very much anti-Native American. It comes out in their speech.

RS: Caricatures of Indian people.

JE: The Trump administration—here we are in 2018. Is this a good fit for Native Americans?

RS: Not necessarily. It could be, though. He seems to be interested in tearing everything up and then trying to rebuild it. If someone were willing to go that next step and change the relationship between the federal government and Indian tribes—actually giving tribes the responsibility of being sovereign entities—that would be good. But you won't get Congress to do that. Their attitude is, "We keep throwing money out there, and I don't have to worry about it." There are only 1.5 million Native Americans, maybe 1.75 million now. There are only two or three congressional offices that could be affected by the Indian vote. We're so scattered that there's no way of influencing the vote. Having people like Markwayne Mullin up there, I think, is good. Tom Cole has been great for the tribes.

JE: And he's Native American.

RS: Tom, he's Chickasaw. He's done a lot to help Bill and Tubby down there.

JE: What about the customs and the culture? Wilma Mankiller thought that with the Indian Removal Act, they were trying to destroy the culture of the tribes, the nations. I don't know if that's true or not, but Native Americans

are marrying non-Indians. Do you fear that the customs of the Cherokees are just being washed away?

RS: I think that's a natural thing that happens with people. It's how you become acculturated, and is there a reason why you should not? I don't know. I don't know why there would be. I enjoy going down to the stomp grounds and even participating in their socials down there. The language is never going to come back as a readily used language. It's great for kids who want to take it or take it as a foreign language, but there's no one to speak to, so it's not used commercially. The languages of the tribes, I think, are an educational thing. That's fine—do what you can to keep kids interested in it.

I'm sure that the opportunity given for relocation had part of that in mind—that we need to get these people off reservations, and if we can incentivize them to move, then it's in our best interests and theirs too. But as people become assimilated, they're going to intermarry. Our kids are an eighth Cherokee now. We have Cherokees on the roll that are 14,000 and something because we don't have a blood quantum. I've never thought that blood quantum made anyone Indian or non-Indian. It was a matter of, do you belong to a tribe? And Cherokees do because they have an interest in that. I just think that's a natural occurrence as far as assimilation.

JE: But it's important, isn't it, to impress on these young Native Americans the importance of their history?

RS: Yes, and they should read the history. I just finished a new book on Cherokee history, and it's interesting because it has a whole different light on the Ridge and Ross factions and whether Ross was right in trying to stay in Georgia. The author tends to say that was not a good idea. It was inevitable that Georgia was going to kick out the Cherokees and that Andrew Jackson was going to back them. So why not pick up and move when it's timely instead of waiting until the soldiers come in and say, "Time's up"—and then you have the Trail of Tears? Stand Watie and that group came over early, started setting up settlements in western Arkansas, and were already doing fairly well, while Ross was holding the Full Bloods back.

If you look at Indian Country and compare it to Oklahoma, what has assimilation done? Even though we have 39 tribes, our alcoholism rate is

no different than it is for the general population. You don't have that concentration of tribal people in an area where you have that kind of problem. I think it helps to have the integration and assimilation with the general public, and I think that's why the tribes in Oklahoma are doing so well.

I asked Bill Anoatubby of the Chickasaw Nation, "When's the last time you had to meet with the BIA on something?" He said, "I don't even remember. We run our own shop." They're about as independent as you get.

JE: So you're saying the alcoholism rate is greater when they're all grouped together, and it reduces when they become assimilated into the general population?

RS: If you live on the reservation, the consequences are that there's very little to do and not much opportunity. You tend to fall into those kinds of problems more so than if you are part of the general public. You're not as likely to succumb to that kind of thing as you might be otherwise.

Chapter 13 – 7:44

Student Advice

John Erling (JE): Young people listening to this, students are using the website, professors are using it. You give advice for young people, say, coming out of college. Maybe some to Native Americans, however you choose, but what would you say?

Ross Swimmer (RS): Well, I think it's really important to young people today to get involved in their government—state, local, and federal. We're seeing some malaise in that regard. They say the millennials aren't really very interested in democracy anymore, and I think that's a huge mistake. I think history is extremely important for young people to learn—to go back and look at where we came from and what we've accomplished in this country. For Indian folks, I do suggest that they get in touch with their tribe, learn what they're doing, and go to work for them if they can. They are unique in that they have reasons to offer their services to their tribe, and I think that's a good thing for Indian people to do. There are quite a few opportunities,

more so today than ever before, to get involved with the tribe and do things. But as far as young people are concerned, the world is theirs. The opportunities today abound. There's no limit, whether it's technology or being a laborer. So many opportunities that we have not had before are available going forward, and they should take advantage of them.

JE: We've talked about your shyness when you were young. You've reflected on your life today, and you look back on all the accomplishments and major leadership roles that you've played. To think that I was once this shy little boy and I've been able to accomplish what I've accomplished.

RS: Sometimes I feel like Forrest Gump. I don't know. I never went into this life thinking I was going to do any of these things. We always knew about our Indian heritage, but we never really got that excited about it. We'd go to Locust Grove periodically to see other relatives over there. That's where our allotment was. But I never had an idea of becoming an Indian chief. I never thought about working for two presidents or being called to Washington. These things happened because of other things that happened. It was not something that I strived for. Some people go into business and decide they want to be a multimillionaire and head of their company. I just started out wanting to practice law and was somewhat successful at doing what I was doing, and then one thing led to another. It was funny because two years before, in 1990 or 1991, we used to go to Tahlequah and to Tenkiller. One day Margaret and I were walking around the campus at Northeastern and said, "Wouldn't this be a great place to live if you could make a living?" Two years later, I'm in Tahlequah. I had no ambition at that time of going to Tahlequah for anything. Life happens, and you accept the consequences, take part in it, make what you can of it, and go forward.

JE: Some of our interviewees knew at a very early age what they wanted to be.

RS: I can imagine.

JE: Singers, business people—they knew at five, six, and seven years old what they wanted to do. Governor George Nigh, when he was twelve or thirteen years old, said he would be governor of Oklahoma. They knew. You didn't know.

RS: I didn't.

JE: But then also, as you look back, you were laying the groundwork for the next position that you were to take on. Don't you think you find yourself saying, "Wow, I was preparing myself for this, and I didn't even know it?"

RS: Well, I guess I was, and in a way, it worked out. The reason I became assistant secretary is because I was basically lobbying the Department of the Interior for three years before that to get some satisfaction out of the Arkansas Riverbed case that the court said we owned. In visiting with various secretaries, I came to their attention. They said, "We need you to come up here. You know what you want to do with Indian Country, and we need somebody like you." One of the solicitors was Gale Norton. I didn't work with her very much, but I knew her. When the huge lawsuit involving Cobell came up, where an individual of the Blackfeet tribe sued the government for \$180 billion, I got a call from Gale in 2001. She said, "I was appointed secretary three months ago, and now Judge Lamberth is threatening to hold me in contempt because I haven't already solved this trust problem with all of these individual Indian people that we're being sued by. I don't know anything about it, and I'm told that you did some work on it when you were the assistant secretary," and that was ten years before. So she calls up and says, "Can you come up and help us?" And I said, "Yeah, I'll come up and talk to you about it." Next thing I know, "We want you here." Things happen like that. As you say, you can be prepared for it, but I wasn't expecting to go back to Washington in 2001. I didn't know how long I'd be there, but I stayed for the whole term. We got the trust done. We got it straightened out so people could actually get an account statement showing what they owned, how much money they had, and where it came from. It was a sad situation. I could understand why they were suing the government because people had no idea. All their land was held in trust and managed by the BIA, and people weren't keeping records. They didn't know where the money was coming from—lots of oil and gas money, big dollars.

JE: I can say that you had a stellar reputation because of integrity. You were smart, and you had sound judgment. People see that and say, "Here's a man we can trust." That's why you got where you did, and I will tell you that.

RS: Well, I appreciate that.

Chapter 14 – 5:23
Politics

Ross Swimmer (RS): I did want to run for Congress, and I started to. When we did a poll, this was when Kathy Keating was running. The polls showed that she had 97% approval rating and about 98% name recognition. Of course, Frank was governor. I did one on me, and it was about 60-40, somewhere in there. I mean, it was enough that I could have run. I decided when Inhofe was first elected, we had an open seat. I had talked about running for Senate. He offered me a ride from the airport into DC one time, and we got to talking about it. He said, "I hear you might be thinking about running." And I said, "Well, I considered it." He said, "Well, you know, I don't know, with Margaret being head of Planned Parenthood and having a gay son if that's a good idea." And I thought, well, you can overcome some of those things, but why do you want to go through it? And I knew they'd come up. I knew this would be an issue. And the other thing is, if you're gonna run from Tulsa, you've got the South Tulsa contingency, and you just cannot overcome those social issues if you're not pretty far right. I mean, you just look at Hern and Coleman and all. They pledge fealty to the president, they pledge fealty to anti-abortion and evangelicalism. And I can't go there. I just cannot make myself say something that I just firmly don't believe.

John Erling (JE): Now you're referring to the present election which was yesterday, and you're referring to the very, very right wing that is seeming to control the elections.

RS: Yeah, and especially in Tulsa. It didn't used to be that way, but times have changed. I was a big fan and friend of Jim Jones, and he always had a challenging election running as a Democrat from Tulsa. I was sorry to see him give that seat up and run for Senate because he could have been, he could still be in there if he wanted to be. We've been lifelong Republicans. Henry Bellmon got me into the Republican Party just out of college. I wanted to work for him, and I served in different activities. He would appoint me to do something or other, and I always admired him. He was a great man. When we went to build the new Indian hospital, I couldn't get support from the administration, so I went to Bellmon. Bellmon didn't

want to support it either because he said, "I don't like single-purpose facilities. I don't even like the VA. If you're gonna have government spend the money, it ought to be for everybody." He said, "You go back to Tahlequah and get those rednecks to work with the Indians to come up with a solution on how we can make this a better deal for everybody." And I said, "Okay, I'll do it." One of the things that came out of that is today, the best optometry school in the United States is in Tahlequah. Not only that, we worked out ways with the local hospital to share services, and I went back to him and told him what we had done. He went to work and got us \$18 million appropriated to build that hospital.

JE: If we had several Henry Bellmons today, we really need them. We also have Henry Bellmon's interview on VoicesofOklahoma.com. I just want to thank you, Ross, for today. I knew you'd be a good talker, but this was really wonderful, and thank you for committing time. Because future generations will be listening to this, and students will listen to it as well. So thank you for your service to the state, to the tribe, and Washington DC, and all that. We appreciate it very much.

RS: Well, thank you, John. I think you are doing a great service to capture some of this information from people around the state. That's the kind of thing that young people need to know about, need to hear. I think you've embarked on something that, I guess, started as kind of a hobby. But I think you're doing a great job with it, not just because you chose to interview me, but because of who all you have interviewed. I'd love to listen to Henry's. I mean, there's a statesman.

JE: Just ultimate statesman.

RS: Well, thank you, John. I appreciate it.

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