Ralph Cameron's Education at Sherman Institute

Tape 3
Side A

Ralph Cameron talking about his school experiences at the Riverside Indian School located in Arlington, California during the years of 1931 to 1932. To my surprise when I arrived at Sherman Institute I found the school system was a lot more easier, to me it was just like a regular school and I appreciated it more. So I was assigned to work in the agriculture department there, so that was my future I thought so I wanted to learn more about the agriculture department, and there I did a lot of things that I already learned for instance, at many of the boys were able to irrigate the crop fields, but like I said I had experience in that, they put me in there sometimes I'd go out and irrigate at night with the aid of lantern that was the only light I had to but I was used to that and another good responsibility they gave me was that on the Saturday I would hitch up the team to two mules to a wagon and I would drive down to the Santa Anna river, which was a distance about two miles I believe and there I was, I loaded up sand to be used for building material by the masonry department and I, it would only take about an hour to load that and I took my time in it and loaded it and after I finished I would wait around awhile and by the time I got back to school it was time for lunch hour all I did was just unhitch my team and go to lunch and that's one of my experiences I had, then, and like I said the school was good and that fall they were offering a lot of athletic activities and I chose to play on the varsity football team but I was still young and I tried out, and I lasted only three days and they weeded me out because they had a lot of good players there, who are grown up and stronger than I was so I just tried it out and I found out that I couldn't make the team but that team like in the government schools but they always had shop teams like all the print shop, the masonry, the carpentry, the tailor shop, and many other vocational training shops that we would compete with, with each shop every Saturday so I wanted to learn to play because I wanted, one of the main things I wanted to learn was the letter, the athletic award, that is given to each varsity player as you qualify, they give the school gives you a sweater like over there up over at Sherman, there is a big gold and purple S on your sweater and it looked good and I wanted to have one of them and I
made up my mind, that I was going to win one of those in the former years to come so I chosen and played on the aggie team, we called it the Aggie team which was the farm team and we had some good boys in there and we practiced and this practice gave a lot of real varsity players experience because most of the volunteer players were out coaching each shop team and I remembered we had a young man by the name of Eddie Jones he was I forgot what tribe he was but he was from Northern California but he was the varsity quarterback and he was the one who coached us plus another assistant that he had to help him. And we played and we won most of our games right along and right then at the end of the season the two top winners would play each other for the final championship and so it ended it up that the team that I was on which was the aggie team and the tailor shop team was the runner up so there was a Saturday set aside where we would play off for the championship to see who would come out the winner. So we got ready and we practiced but somehow before the week was up the tailor shop canceled it, cancelled playing with us or maybe they were afraid to go against us, whatever it was they cancelled it. So we became the championship of the shop teams that year and that gave me enough courage to uh to play again like I said I stayed there two years. Then the final year, this was the final year that I have heard somehow oh another thing that I experienced that really made the future for me, like I was irrigating one night, all night and I was off for the day, the next day and all the children, the school students were all at work or either in the classrooms so I was the only one walking the parade grounds there coming east, and all of a sudden something came into my heart and that it told me that education was very important, we must learn this so I took that to heart and I went on and like I said I liked the school and stayed there my second year and then I came home when the Phoenix Indian school set me up there like I said I went on government transportation the government will not furnish a ride back to my home for the next five years but like I said, I had gotten around in the world and I was experienced and so I decided to come back home, I wrote and then I found out that year in 1932, 1931 that was when the military system was abandoned, they did away with it and all government schools and I've heard that the Phoenix Indian school was also released from that system which I didn't like, so I wrote back to the school and I told the superintendent and asked the superintendent that I wanted to return back to my home school and I got the reply saying come on over and we
will enroll you here and you can go to school here. So, that summer, I came home on my own and I stayed home and then, that fall came and I went on up there but this time I was grown up so I went up there on my own, walked in the office and I met a new superintendent the old superintendent was he believed in corporal punishment and that was the reason why the school was so hard on the students, they had jail houses there where they would lock you up and feed you bread and water which was very severe to us and that was carried out and like I said, I met this young superintendent and he was a Dr. Skinner, fresh out from, not, not fresh out, he was a graduate from Stanford University and he had managed some boy school up in California and then after that he was transferred to the government school and he was superintendent of the Phoenix Indian school. And I had a good talk with him and he was glad to see me and right away he was encouraged to talk to me to give me added more um, more want to go to school that much more and so I that first year was my freshmen year and I got on I tried out for the football team and I ended up on the j.v. team, and urn, I played on it the full year and we won most of our games and then the next year, my freshmen year I made the varsity team so stayed on the varsity team for three years, my sophomore year, my junior year, my senior year and those days like I said I wanted to earn a sweater, an athletic sweater cause I saw the varsity players sport that bright P letter on their breast on their sweater and I wanted that so to be on the varsity team to earn you sweater there were strict requirements. First you had to keep up on your grades in school and I was just only a c average student and I had to really try hard to pass every subject that I had that was assigned to me and I had to do a lot of homework and I slept in the dormitory and I didn't have no private place to go and study and I went to the place they called the sitting room for the boys, and there was about almost a hundred kids in there, running around making a lot of noise but yet I had to sit there and do my homework, but somehow someway I passed it, I passed all my grades, every I had every passing grade for every game, and another requirement was that you disciplined what they call the demerit system if you go below a certain set number then you are not qualified to represent anything on the school so that was another thing that I had to keep in line and also at the at the uh vocational shop where I worked my grades had to be above average too also and my discipline along with it too so it was really hard and the hardest one was the was when we in order to win the sweater and a
letter you have to play at least one quarter in every game and that's hard to do, you have to keep in shape or you cannot get hurt or miss one game or else you will not qualify to get that letter but somehow someway I did not get hurt bad, I played in every game and so I finally won that sweater and that was I remember it was in nineteen hundred and thirty five that we I was awarded that sweater in the month of January in the student body hall all student body was in there, the band was playing school songs and everything there was a lot of cheerleading, and yelling and going there and there was seven of us that qualified for a sweater that year, I remember that there was about myself, who representing the Maricopa tribe, there was about there was one Papago boy, and there was about two pima boys and there was one Chippewa boy and also I forgot the other two. Anyway, we were seated up there on the stage and they were given us the honor all around and final thing that they did during the ceremony that they presented the sweater to us and we slipped it over, over our body it was not that open sweater where you button up the front ours was the old style, the slip over sweater, so we slipped it over and there I was standing there with that great big letter P and I was really proud of it, and we slipped on that that sweater, the whole student body seemed to go wild, they were cheering and hollering and clapping hands and I guess that there were some that were shedding tears back there but that was one of the biggest moment of my life was when I was awarded that school sweater. I was awarded that sweater 1935 in the month of January and I still have that same sweater yet to this day, Nineteen Hundred Ninety-Five and that's sixty years old and I'm proud of it and I have it put away and one of these days I don't know what I'll do with it but uh, that's one of the big that's a main thing that I was wanting to win, to be awarded that sweater and through that I was able to receive my diploma at the end of the year, my senior year, if it wasn't for that I guess I would have haphazardly go and make a failure and probably would never graduate from school. So, that is what happened that year, and during those uh, I like I said I used to run away from school and I became a teenager, got to the working age year and so these years they were like, I've said they were the boys have qualified were set out different places to work the summer and at the time the ECW, they call it the ECW the Emergency Conservation Works, that the president has put out to help those out of job, because we have been going through a depression since 1929 and this was 1936 and I wanted to work, so I signed up for White
River, Arizona, Apache country where it's nice and cool right out among the pines out in the wild making trails, making fire breaks up in there and I enjoyed it very much and we would work there for about almost all summer but they let us go, coming home they gave us two weeks in August and during that time I start going to work in my sophomore year so like I said, we climbed high mountains we run down the side of the mountains during the end of the day, we climb mountains and we were really in shape when we came back to carry on our activities, then I think, I was member they, like I said the varsity football team and also the varsity track and field and uh I specialized in throwing the javelin, the discus, and the shot put and I loved to do that and I go out there every afternoon, and I practice, and practice and practice although I was not the best but somehow I made it and there is where I spend most of my last three years in school, going out and working like I said I enjoyed it very much and we had some Apache boys, in there with us working, every night they would sing an Apache songs, and the food like I said the food was excellent and we had plenty to eat and we camp at the side of the creek there and we drank out of the creek and we bathed in the creek and it was a wonderful time, that we had there every summer and that's another thing that we used to do for exercise was learn to ride a horse at an early age, we would go down to the river bed and we would learn how to swim our horses because some of them don't know how to swim in deep water so we trained them, so we could swim because a lot of times in those days in rained a lot and the floods came in the afternoon to swim across there and the way we would do that was when we would cross the flooding water and we don't know what's under the water, under the surface of the water a lot of times there was a great big tree that's rolling under there would catch part of the saddle and drag you under so what we would do is we bring what they call stirrups and tie it on the saddle horn and then we would then we would lead our horse in the water and then grab the tail and they would drag us on through there or sometimes we rode on the horse clear across and that was one of the things that we did and another thing, those days this was in the early part of the shade tree and there used to be a lot of horse trick riders and we wanted to be trick riders so we used to go down there to the Salt River sandbars, those great big long, wide sandbars there was nothing but sand and it was nice and soft. And we would go through the dune and tried to learn do some tricks, we'd fall of the horses, and a lot of other thing and I think that's a good experience
and I knew how to break a fall when I fall off because um, at my late age, since the last four years of my life about life about seventy six years, I've had four bad falls, but it's the biggest training I had years ago that I learned how to break my fall, before I hit the ground I make myself roll and that eases up the shock, and it prevented me from having a disastrous accident it has helped me quite a bit in that way not only that but a lot of other Indian boys that were doing the same thing, we walked the river, sometimes we rode the river, went out hunting, we went out mountain climbing and a lot of those things that we did like I was always said we did not have ready made playgrounds like you have today, those beautiful setups those stairs, nature provided us all the recreation things, it really did benefit us in the future and today I feel sorry for these young people who have never had this experience some of the recreation are still there yet, but the children of today has not been used or told to use those things yet and another thing that we go out we leave home and we wouldn't come back home for till the evening, we would go riding out there we know where all the fruit trees are like, especially in the summertime the mesquite bee's grew bountiful and we knew which tree bears large fruit, juicy sweet fruit and we would go and pick that and fill our pockets, and we'd chew on that and that would keep us that would keep the hunger away from us and also that we would hunt along the way. Like if we go hunting, we would go all day and we would kill birds, quails things like that we would roast it there and we eat that so we don't have to come back home for lunch or anything and we would stay out there all day long and by the time we got home we were so tired that we fell asleep a lot of times without eating, the evening meal and also we spent a lot of time fishing and that's where I believe that I have gained a lot of patience I went swimming there and I would sit out on the far hanging willow trees and I would fish from there, sometimes I wouldn't catch anything for hours and hours but that didn't bother me I sat there and I believe that is where I learned to make my built my what is a saying awhile ago, my that was what I was trying to say, was that I built my patience up right there. While I'm not just sitting there idle, there is so much activity going on there, like I see the wild birds, the water birds that would be flying some would be out there by the side fishing, small water flower, some large water flower, water birds and also I would see the fish on the bottom of the river there. The beavers they come out early in the evening and they would be flopping their tails against the water, and you
could hear them along way off, those are things kept that that built your patience up, one main things that I learned, was that one place where I go fish there is, a sort of shallow place, a high ridge, there's rocks and there's water run over the rocks, and it make noise and when you sat there long enough it turns into music it sounds like music, coming out from the ripples of that water so that is the reason why we were not impatient every minute of the day was worthwhile, there was no waste of time, always learning something out there, or ? like is said, building up our patience. All those things I remember the first time I went out there and fish, I caught my first trout it was about I'll say about eight inches long. and boy, when I caught that trout, the first thing I remember was even to this day I thought of my grandfather, right way this is for him, I just cast my fishing pole aside and I ran and I ran and I ran and I got home and I give it to him, this is my this is my fish I caught for you so he prepared it and ate it so those are the many things that we did those years when I was a young boy below the age of ten we used to go hunting for the old people. The old people would tell us to the old people was already I didn't know this but they were teaching us to learn to volunteer and help the old people because when we used to go to different residences we heard that they have a like a plowing party there, the old people would be there and they were the warriors of old times and they got so old that they tell us, I'm hungry for ? so you two boys or three boys and go down this rows of trees and you other boys go this way and about three parties went out and we would go out there and hunt for those old man, and sometimes we get lucky and we bring one or two and give it to them and this was a lesson in itself, I didn't think about it then, but they were trying to build in us was to learn to volunteer and to do things for older people like them that is one of the great things about we did those years and also they have also the get together, celebrations, four celebrations that we celebrate each year, that was New Years, Fourth of July, Christmas and I forgot the other one, anyway, there was four of them.