

3-3-93 Interview with Maya Miller
On Indian Organizing in Nevada

I was thinking that maybe we would do better to defer the National Board stuff because it goes into the march on the Las Vegas strip and welfare rights and the hunger conferences and all of those. And we can tackle the Pyramid Lake and Indian things today.

The Pyramid Lake involvement spans the years 1968-71, then I've got a whole file of Wounded Knee, which happened in '73. But we also have this file on Alcatraz with their first publication. Elvin Willy was involved with (one of our former Washoe Pines campers) with a later League publication that we put out. That says that because we had done a study of Pyramid Lake, there were people on the national board who really were sympathetic to me and liked me. That person was in competition with Lucy Benson. The fact that I had both an involvement with the Pyramid Lake and water systems that went with that – human rights – meant that they could agree on me as someone who wasn't just a pure urban riot subject. How I got involved with it was we had a study of water in Nevada and a study of Nevada State Parks and this study of water publication was put out when Nancy and I had developed an office in Reno and it involved Las Vegas and took us up to Tahoe and Pyramid Lake.

Did you know anyone at Pyramid then?

I knew Dora Garcia, who was Janice John's mother (she babysat you). Dora was one of the up-and-coming members of the Pyramid Lake tribe who found her way over here to work in Carson City and actually in the Stewart Indian School. I have a note that in 1970 Tina Nappe was interested in doing an Indian Review, and Mollie Gregory gets involved with that. As does Rosalie, who used to be a cook for Washoe Pines.

I met Dora through Peg Wheat. Peg had gone over there to the lake and to meetings of theirs, must have been at the invitation of Dora. And it was that that got her to tell me that they were being wooed but this development company that wanted to put in either row cost houses along the lake or high rises, and make it a resort. They were offering the Indians this ridiculous amount of money.

Ridiculous high or low?

Ridiculous low. And the Indians didn't really want to sell it to them. It would be by the lake frontage. And they needed a lawyer, so I gave Peg \$1,000 to hire a lawyer to take a look at it. Peg waited until the tribe had decided who it wanted to hire and it decided on a man she didn't agree was a good lawyer, but it was their decision. His name was Robert Leedlum, and he does a bunch of correspondence on the various cases that were coming on because of the California Nevada Interstate Compact and the Alpine case. The tribe ultimately became disaffected with him and he kept billing them in the way I told you. Peg brought a copy of the bill from the tribe one day, and it had things like billing for an hour with Maya, by telephone, and we would just have called and I answered the phone and he asked for Peg Wheat and I'd get her and that's all my connection with him. Peg

had the same accounts only more of them for the time he spent with her. So ultimately he ground himself into the ground. He was out in the never never.

It was then that we introduced Bob Stitser to them. I knew him from work we had done on Tahoe. He had been a lobbyist for the Sierra Club. After Bob became the Tribe's lawyer in 1970, he hired Dora to be his secretary. And so for a long while she appears on the documents and she worked for him and that was really good for her. Also the League was sort of backing into some kind of study on Pyramid and it was hard to figure out whether it should be a local study or a state study. There was one notable meeting in 1970 that Jean Ford and I went to out a Pyramid Lake where Robert Kennedy's Indian lawyer came out and they also sent an Indian lawyer from Washington who was a very distinguished lawyer. That was a meeting that both Bob Cossiger and Bob Stitser came to also and the tribe was supposed to be hearing what the various proposals for a resolution of the Pyramid Lake's part in the CA/NV compact. These lawyers laid out an account of what under one plan they would get and what under another and there were a few Indians and it was in a quonset hut in Nixon. As Bob Belsiger always told about how this old couple who had been sitting right behind me as they went out said, "We could have learned more if we had stayed and watched television" (laughs), but they had also brought Vieder who was a distinguished water analyst from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. So we were starry eyed at the talent that was contained in that Quonset hut.

No decisions were made at that meeting, but later Kennedy and some other California senator came out and met at the lake and did make some decisions. Mollie Gregory was involved and she was interested in the compact and did some writing for the League. I think Tina Nappe did the original draft and Mollie edited it. So at this time a number of people started to surface who later were really interested and important in the environmental work.

The Indians were trying not to let their water be taken away by the system that takes it to the Lahontan Basin. They had lost a lot of water in Pyramid Lake – the level used to be much higher. They didn't want to lose more. You could see that the communities – that Reno could take it all if they had been able to. So that was part of what they wanted. And Mollie did a whole film proposal for survival arts of Native Nevada, and there was a whole series on Nevada Indian Review that the league did as an educational tool for members.

So the League did this batch of studies and writing on Pyramid in 1969 and 1970 and started connecting with people like John Dressler of the inter-tribal council, and I knew some of these people because of knowing Harold Rupert and his wife. Harold had been a plumber on my mother and father's little guest house, so when the general contractor was going out of business, he had gone to bat for their paying up Harold. So Harold was always grateful for that, and we used to see them socially. They'd come and spend five hours sitting around. Talking a little and just sitting.

The Ruperts were really active and with John Dressler they actually stumped the state to get Indians to register and vote, pointing out that the Goshute Indians have to drive across

Nevada to get to any center. They are on the Utah border across a terrible road. They said, if 200 of you living in Goshute registered, there would be a paved road. And then they started the Inter-Tribal Council.

Dressler is an Anglo family.

Yes, it's an Anglo name. Then, all of them took those names. It's interesting because all during the War on Poverty, 68, 69, 70, this VISTA publication is all about Indians and people were showing an active interest. Oh, yes, here is one on Peotism.

You can see that when Nancy and I did our study of employment, really our poverty study of Nevada, you could see that the Indians were the main minority (in Nevada), but even at that time they were a very small number compared to the Blacks. There were 8,000 Indians or something in the state then, and about 30,000 Blacks.

So when you say main minority you mean in terms of...

In terms of their being all through the state and also having a claim on some of the significant pieces of land and water, especially water. And so I had this little diagram that was my contribution to the Tahoe, Truckee, Pyramid White Racism in Water Management, because suddenly I began to put some of those pieces together like the Westbrooks had pointed out to me how little water they have in Black Springs, whereas the Stead Airbase, that was just beyond them, which was all White, had lots of water, it was taken right past Black Springs.

Tahoe had been a Washoe hunting ground in the original and that was how they got most of their food, except for the pinions, for the winter and that the water went out of Tahoe and comes down and goes through Reno and Sparks and is used by them and then in its natural course it went down to Pyramid Lake, which was a Paiute Lake and then there was Old Winnemucca Lake, which by that time had died actually.

It wasn't solely because of irrigation. It also had to do with weather, and dunes. But there were fascinating pictures of a little fishing resort at the edge of Winnemucca Lake (on the playa) from maybe the 20s or 30s. That was probably Indian land, I don't know. The people that ran that little fishery were White fishermen. The fascinating thing was how they put in Derby Dam to serve this whole farming community in Lahontan and Fallon. Then the water did shrink in Pyramid with the diversion of that water. And then the water was marginal for farmland, and then they used it for still water, which was a lawyers and bankers use for duck hunting. They had their blinds and their clubs out there, and one of the Paiutes once said, "Even the Indian ducks of Pyramid get the raw end," I mean they had ducks in Pyramid too, but they were drying up the available water for their ducklands and sending it to Lahontan.

This little diagram helps to show that flow.

You know this man Vieder had done a fascinating series that were in the Congressional record when he had testified about the Missouri River and how it was racism in water management. How they had diverted the Water in Missouri down there to serve the purposes of the White man and that in that process had dried up the water for the Indians. I don't remember where all of those are, but it was such a revelation to me. Then you had this wonderful little microcosm of that, which included the world of water to White communities up near Reno, and the starving of it for Black communities. You begin to see that it isn't just money that is manipulated to make a racist society, it is resources, and the most fundamental of those is water.

Especially in the desert.

Well, especially in a desert like Nevada, and then all through the west. Vieder's writing was one of those clicks for me. It was just fascinating reading because he was so lucid about it, and he was ultimately fired essentially before his term ran out with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, because he was too extroporous. But he was a funny little typical bureaucrat with a chain on his watch – I had expected a sort of Man of the West because he writes about these western waters.

So how did Pyramid Lake fit into the national program? You talk about him coming out with the Kennedy guys.

It has to do with the California-Nevada Water Compact. I mean the Federal Government has a vested interest in that. The watermaster is a Federal employee because it is interstate. At that time I think it was up for ratification or something. Or maybe it was new and they were building on the Orr Ditch Decree. But it had to do with the Tahoe Water and the other waters coming off the Sierra. And then we got to be more informed like XX mother? who was a student at Berkeley. She was going to Library School there when they decided to do the action at Alcatraz.

Elvin and Eddie Willie, who both were kids at Washoe Pines Camp. Elvin taught art. They were taken by their mother to be part of the Alcatraz action. And so it was like getting to know the Hagwoods. You begin to get personally acquainted with someone who is in this.

Were their parents both Walker River Paiutes?

I don't know anything about his father. In this Alcatraz booklet they give thanks to the Pyramid Tribal Council, along with a whole batch of other groups of Indians who had supported them. So I think there was a very close bond with over here. Beth through the Schurz connection, and Elvin's mother making a real academic effort to give herself a better shot. Those Indians who were over in San Francisco and Berkeley really did like the idea about Alcatraz. And so there is a whole batch of clippings here from the Oregonian, and an affidavit for Bob Stitser's Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe Indians vs. the Secretary of the Interior and the Attorney General.

And the summary is: "In support of allegations that the Pyramid Lake task-force is infected with interests conflicting with those of the Pyramid Paiute Tribe, and that the Secretary of the Interior is violating his own regulations by diverting more water to the Newlands Reclamation Project, and away from Pyramid Lake, than even the generous limits he had preciously set."

And so, that was the burden of the case. And here is Doris Garcia's signature on that for the tribe. But the League found ways to support that both with publicity, sending word along that we support them. And getting other people too. And getting a sense that mainline America was in support of both actions like Alcatraz, (which we didn't have as much immediate effect on from here), and the court case. The court case was one that we were able to speak up on.

The action was in the courts, and was remote and ultimately was in the Supreme Court. But we got it out through education pieces more than anything else. And that education of course worked both ways. It certainly educated us in a way that we wouldn't have had otherwise. And the think=g that is interesting to me, is thinking about howlike some of the other parts of my life like the State Parks an all, how it was moving from the environmental interests, the land and water and state parks, and parks, to an involvement with the people who were concerned.

So that it didn't leave me where Charlie Watson was, constantly discount the people that are involved and not have any interest in finding out about them. And in that process, the people I was working with were Mollie Gregory, Tina Nappe, Jean Ford, and of course, Esther Nicholson and all those people too.

Where did they get the money to continue that suit? Did you keep funding them, or?

No I didn't. The tribe did. When they hired Bob, he worked out his own money arrangements. The only money I ever gave was to Bob Leeland and then just made sure that Bob was introduced to them, because he was interested in doing something for the War on Poverty. But as he said, "I was brought up with Indians. I understand Indians." He didn't understand Black people, and so he took that as his niche.

Bob Stitser was from Winnemucca. He had grown up there and he knew Stanley ___ who was lut in jail for shooting a deer out of season. That time we got the Race Relations Center involved. It was the same issue as the Danns. Stanley had his whole family with him, his wife and little baby and two or three other kids, with him when he was taken to jail. So Eddie Scott helped them. It was an opportunity for Eddie to serve the Indian community as well as the Black community. Those were the two communities who were at the economic scale suffering the kind of racism that had a lot to do with poverty in America.

So just having those running starts, from having known Dora and been involved with Peg and all, and then having this interest in the land and water, made it so that I see that we were really privileged in a way that people in the East, like on the National League

Board, would think, Well, that whole understanding of Pyramid Lake is a water issue and a people issue. I had the chance to take around the chair, who was from Greenbay Wisconsin. She was on the National Board and she was a very popular person, the subject was very popular in the League. And I took her on a trip out to Pyramid, up to Lake Tahoe and around, and showed her what this diagram shows, where the water was and how you got it. I would think being in her place on the National Board, she would think it a breath of fresh air to have somebody who saw poverty and racism in western terms.

Did this understanding about Pyramid Lake also tie into National awareness on Indian issues?

When I got on the national Chair of the League, we moved to get others to understand about Indian issues, and ultimately we had a session here at the ranch when we actually produced a national publication for Indians, called *Indian and Proud of It*. Mollie Gregory helped on that.

Kit produces the booklet, which has a linoleum block printed cover.

Where did this come from, do you know?

Washoe Pines. Probably Elvin or Eddie made it. It's got a pyramid on it.

I know, it looks like Washoe Pines. Wouldn't it be fun to make some prints from it. And you see it's a handsome little publication, about 12 pages long, going through some of the history of Indian and government relations. I don't think you could ever say that it was a popular document, but it did mean that we had something on the National League of Women Voters docket to think about Indians in a concerted way, in relation to the government.

Here is a note from May 31, 1973, from Mark and Ellen Morrison from Chicago – campers parents. They say, "Congratulations on your Pyramid suit. We saw an article about it in the newspaper, Nov 10. The judge Gerrard Gicelle worked with my Uncle Steve, Roger's father. Congratulations again." And there's their little picture of water and their Washoe Pines horses. Then here's Bob Pelsiger's Native American, after then won the case in the Supreme Court.

And essentially that case – did that guarantee a minimum amount of water go to Pyramid Lake?

Yes, I think so, and the effects were of course

It was November 11, 1972 when the decision came down.

Giselle ruled that they had been wasteful in their use of water, the people who had been pulling the water for the Newlands Project and cut down the numbers of acre feet that

they could take at Derby Dam away from Pyramid Lake. Derby Dam creates the Lahontan Reservoir to water the farms of Fallon.

(back and forth on Stanley Smart case)

I also knew John Trudell through Barbara Bodie's outfit (Children's Defense Fund). I knew John and his wife – they were from Pyramid Lake, and I knew them in Washington. We were doing an action in Oklahoma about the Indians right to school lunch. Barbara Bodie was giving them her office to work – I followed up out here. Much later when we were involved with alternative jobs for women, we met with Tina Trudell's mother and sister. She was John Trudell's wife, from Pyramid. Her mother worked in the Human Services part of the State Government in Carson City. She was killed in the fire that burned up Tina's house, out in Battle Mountain in the eastern part of the state when John was away on a speaking trip.

The house was burned and the two children and her mother. The father lived, but he was outside trying to get back to get the children.

The Church Committee was interested in the possibility of that being an FBI fire, and they never got to it. Somebody asked me the other day, Roxanne Ortiz, what I had known about it. I knew very little, except that I thought it was highly probable that it could have been. When you see some of the pictures like Thunderheart (?) and realize what real concerted undermining goes on, went on back then.

At the time, did you think it could be the government?

Uh huh, uh huh. And it was one of those things, because it never was explored, you could never say that that's what happened.

What year was that?

I don't know. It must've been the early 70s, but not too early. Because I had known two of them in Washington, Tina and John, in '74, '75, '76.

He was from Oklahoma. And Roxanne said the other day that she had gotten him to come to campus, and that she was really thrilled because with all the cutbacks, her campus brought him, for \$2,000, to read his poetry and talk. She asked me what I believed about it, and I told her I believed it was a conspiracy. I think you can't underestimate the way the FBI operated in those conspiratory days. How you realize they kept files on everybody and Martin Luther King, and all of those. I think such an atmosphere of fear had grown up, that there was going to be some sort of revolution from dissatisfied, and especially people of color.

Do you think they thought he was there (in the house) or was it to scare them?

I don't know. I don't think it matters. When I came back from Washington, it was like in 1977, and that's when we were caught up in trying to get women into construction jobs and then it was that we talked to Tina's mother, so that was before the fire. And her sister was married to a very successful Indian artist who was showing in Paris, and we were talking about getting jobs in flaggin(?) and things then.

(distracted mention of Reno Black entrepreneurs)

END