

NEVADA INDIAN COMMISSION

STEWART INDIAN SCHOOL ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

HAPPY CLASSMATE: AN INTERVIEW WITH RUTH ABBIE

Interviewed by Terri McBride

Transcribed by Barbara L. Zeigler

Funded by:



Nevada Indian Commission ©

Funded by:



Copyright 2017
Nevada Indian Commission
5366 Snyder Avenue
Carson City, Nevada 89701

Happy Classmate: An Interview with Ruth Abbie

Ruth (Pierce) Abbie is a northern Washoe-Northern Paiute woman who attended Stewart Indian School for two years in the late 1940s, her sixth and seventh grades. Her parents were employed at Stewart and resided on campus, but Ruth graduated from Carson High School, since (as she reports) her family would have had to pay tuition for her to continue at Stewart. She then entered Haskell Institute in Lawrence, Kansas for administrative training. With her business skills she secured a position in a real estate office at Lake Tahoe, later marrying and having children. She currently resides at the Carson Indian Colony in Carson City.

My name is Terri McBride. It is Thursday, March 9, 2017. We are at the home of Ruth Abbie, in Carson City at the Carson Indian Colony. The interview is with Ruth Abbie, a former student at Stewart Indian School. We will be discussing her experiences as a student. This interview is being conducted for the Stewart Indian School oral history project for the Nevada Indian Commission and will be archived at the Stewart Indian School Cultural Center, the State Library and Archives, and Special Collections at the University of Nevada, Reno. What is your name?

Ruth Pierce Abbie. That was my maiden name. P-I-E-R-C-E.

When and where were you born?

Portola, California.

When? You can give an approximate. . .

Eighty years ago, approximately. [1937]

Okay. How many people were in your family?

It was five. Five siblings.

Five siblings or your mom and dad and two siblings?

Well, my mom and dad broke up and then there were the kids. There were five of us, I think.

What language was spoken in the household?

English, because my grandfather kept telling us, "go to school, go to school!" So they didn't mention anything about any stories or teaching

us Washoe and the Paiute side never taught about the Paiute side.

So, your grandfather encouraged you to speak English.

Uh-huh.

Then there weren't any communication problems between the parents and the children.

No.

Growing up, before you went to school, did your family celebrate American Indian types of activities; did you dance?

We had rabbit drives and people from all over would come over because our farmers had too many rabbits on their property. So, our people would go in there and get the rabbits and then have the feast. Oh, my goodness! Just crowds and crowds. It was so fun.

This was up in Portola?

This was in Sierra Valley. Every once in a while they'd have that rabbit drive. It helped out the farmers and helped us out too because I used to think my grandfather could cook rabbits a hundred different ways. (laughs)

Were any of your other family members at Stewart?

My sister and later on, my brother.

What's your sister's name?

Bernice.

And your brother?

Andrew.

When did you attend Stewart? Let's start with how old were you when you went to Stewart?

Oh, I don't know, but I was in the sixth grade. Sixth and seventh grade.

Was that in the 1940's?

Yes.

Was that during the war or before the war?

After.

After the war, okay.

Probably '45 or '46, somewhere around there.

How did you end up going to Stewart in the first place?

Well, in California, we were supposed to go to Sherman but then by the time we were, my sister was a teenager and I don't know how old I was, but she wanted to go to Stewart, so I had to go with her. But I wanted to stay home. Then it was at Schurz [Nevada] and I liked Schurz. So we . . . I had to go with my sister.

So, you didn't want to go but your sister wanted you to go, and so you went.

My mother wanted me to go! (laughs) To be with my sister. We were always together.

So, you were very close.

Uh-huh.

When you first went there, how did you travel there?

How was it, now?

Did you guys drive, take a bus?

I think my folks took us up there. Brought us over.

Did you understand where you were going?

No. Might have been over the hill! (laughs)

Right! So, what was your first impression when you got there?

It was pretty. I liked the area; the way it looked.

IS that because of the trees?

Uh-huh. A lot of Indian kids were there.

Did you enjoy being a student at Stewart?

Uh-huh. You know, we all had rules to go by, girls and boys. Just mind the rules and you'll be okay. Go to class and all that, you know.

So as long as you followed the rules it was okay?

Uh-huh.

When you left to go to Stewart, did you take anything from home with you?

No, just my clothes and that's about all.

What was the most difficult thing to leave behind?

My folks.

Oh. You missed them. How did they feel about you going away? Did they miss you?

I think they did.

But they felt what, it was the best thing for you?

Well, safety was always in their head so they knew I'd be safe, that we'd be safe.

What was living in the dorms like? Were you in the little girl's dorm or the big girl's dorm?

No, I was a teenager so I was in Two. What would they call it now?

Well, I've just heard people talk about the big girls' dorm, the little girls' dorm, but you think it was Building Number Two?

Yes.

What was that like?



Ruth Abbie's sixth grade class photo, ca. 1945. Ruth is in center row, sixth from left. Courtesy of Delbert Holley and the Nevada Indian Commission.

It was good. We had to do our housework and then keep our rooms clean. Friday night we had to clean up for the week and everybody had detail. Some would be cleaning the halls, some clean the bathrooms, window-washing or whatever, you know. And we did our own laundry, had to keep up with that. Had a laundry room, ironing board and iron, to keep things up. Just like at home, you know?

What was eating in the dining hall like?

Well, the boys on one side and the girls on one side. You'd try to get to your regular table, as much as possible.

What do you mean by your regular table?

Getting there early and sitting at your favorite table.

With your friends?

Uh-huh.

So, that was a social time.

Yes.

What about the food? What was that like?

It was good.

Do you remember any items in particular?

I know on weekends we had sack lunches and if you were on the dining room detail, after you were through cleaning up, then you sit down and you assemble all the lunches. Then they deliver all the lunches around the school grounds, to the buildings, I mean. Then in the evening we'd get our sack lunches. Sandwich, fruit, and whatever, a cookie or something like that.

So, you helped make the sack lunches?

Uh-huh. When you were on that dining room detail. But every six weeks, we'd change detail, you know. Home economics or the building, or dining room, or bakery or kitchen or wherever.

Did you ever shop at the student store? Did you ever purchase anything there?

Oh, yes. The ECA?

ECA?

Eat candy anytime store. (laughs)

I take it you bought candy there!

I liked the Coke and the bag of peanuts. Then pour the peanuts in the Coke and go outside and sit down under the trees and drink the Coke and snack on the peanuts, or in the room and read or do my homework or something.

Did you have a favorite class?

Well, I was there in sixth and seventh grade. I liked them both. Good teachers. Miss Pamp was our sixth-grade teacher and Mrs. Holly was our seventh-grade teacher.

What was the sixth-grade teacher's name again?

Miss Pamp, P-A-M-P.

Were you too young to do the vocational training, or is that what working in the dining hall was about?

Uh-huh. The bakery and wherever.

You said you did your own laundry. Did you work in the laundry?

Yes, yes! Six weeks at the laundry, too. Or the hospital, the clinic, or home economics.

Let's talk a little bit more about that. You worked at the laundry.

Uh-huh, six weeks.

So, that was your cycle there. Then you worked in the dining hall.

Bakery.

You worked in the bakery. You did help in the infirmary? Was that one of the things, or no?

No, I didn't, the older girls did that. The high school girls.

You liked both your teachers. Did you have a favorite one?

They're both my favorite!

Okay! Were you involved in the school farm at all?

No, the boys did that.

So, the girls didn't do that at all.

No.

Okay, that's good to know.

But it was a self-supporting school. Everything at the dairy, they used at the dining hall. Ah, it was wonderful. They had that farm out at Jack's Valley and just productive. They had real good grade for you know, their dairy products and everything was just first, A-1, I think.

The students did really well in 4-H.

Uh-huh.

Did you graduate from Stewart?

No, I just went there sixth and seventh grade.

Where did you graduate from?

My folks worked out there so I had to go to school at Carson. Transferred over there.

What did your parents do there?

My mother was the cook at the dining hall and my dad was a security man, security guard. At the kitchen, my mother was a cook.

They lived on campus in one of those little buildings?

In an apartment.

But you went to Carson High--do you know, how come they just didn't have you go to Stewart?

Because you had to pay tuition.

Okay. [Recording paused, visitor at door]

Did you play sports at Stewart?

No, I didn't.

Did you go to any of the games to watch?

Oh, yes! Then they had a lot of boxing and basketball games, and activities. And the townspeople would come out to see the boxing because the university would go out and

participate and Navy, service club organizations would go there too and box against the boys.

They were good!

Excellent!

Was it fun to go to those?

Yes. They had dances. I liked the barn dances, you know, the old-fashioned square dances.

Square dances!

(Laughing) That was fun!

Where were those held? In the gym?

Uh-huh. Then they'd have movies in the auditorium or programs.

Right. I was going to ask you about the auditorium. You went to the auditorium to see movies?

And class presentations and group, you know, different subjects; someone would come out and give a talk.

Did they have plays?

No, no, I don't think so. It was just that they had different class presentations.

Right. Did the band play in there?

Sometimes, yes.

So, you went to the square dances, you liked those. Were there other clubs on campus that you joined?

There were different arts and crafts clubs and they had that arts and crafts club over at that, the guys went into that and they were carving mountain mahogany. Oh, they were beautiful!

So, the girls could do stuff over there too?

No, just the boys did that. You know, their groups were separated, boys and girls are separate.

Were the boys and girls separated all day? So, when your sixth grade class was taught, you guys were all taught together, right?

In the classroom, where we sat—just like different seatings—boys on one side and girls on one side. Just automatic, you know, gather among ourselves. Then at church, same way, boys on one side and girls on the other side. (laughs)

Keep your hands apart! Regarding other buildings on campus, any other experiences in particular buildings? The reason I'm asking about this, is because eventually they'll do guided tours out there and explain to visitors what happened at different buildings. So, I'm just interested; you talked about the gym, the square dances at the gym, the dorms. When you lived in Dorm Number 2, did you have a room with a roommate or were you...

We had four in a room, with bunk beds and you were assigned to those rooms but you could change if you wanted to be with your friend, you know. You'd ask the matron. Sometimes you could get your request.

If someone else wanted to switch?

Uh-huh.

Did you ever get sick and go to the infirmary?

Oh, yes!

What was that like?

It was good because Miss Hersey was the head nurse and Miss Tallis was the . . . her helper. There was a dentistry—just like a little hospital.

So, it wasn't terrible to be there?

If you were sick and you wanted to get well, so you go there. Or if you have a problem with something like a cut or a sliver or something like that. You know, minor.



Ruth Abbie, March 7, 2017. Carson Indian Colony, Carson City.

Right, right. Were you in there overnight when you got sick?

Uh-huh. Yes.

Did you get the flu or what was it? Do you remember?

I don't know; it probably was. I just went there and stayed overnight.

What church did you go to when you were at Stewart?

The chapel on the hill! I guess it was nondenominational or something. Anyway, it was just a church.

So, not the Baptist church and not the Catholic church.

Nuh-uh. Later on, the Catholic church was built across the road.

Right. So later, after you went there.

Yes. I think it was when the southwest [tribes] came up here, they built the Catholic church.

Okay.

But just like in a town, you go to any church that's there, in the town, you know.

Right, there's different churches to choose from. Did you ever leave campus?

Yes, on weekends if you had a good student card. You could go to town and shop or go to a movie. We'd walk to town and then walk back. But it felt good to walk, you know. Just three miles.

But you had to be in good standing, right, to get permission to do that?

Uh-huh.

You would shop and go to movies?

Buy a lemon or pear or something like that to just snack in the movies. (laughs)

What'd you do during the summers while you were there?

We could go home.

Did you go to Schurz then?

Uh-huh.

Okay, so you went to Schurz.

If my folks lived there, I was just with them. Or people that needed babysitters or workers in their homes or businesses, then they'd check out the girls who wanted to go. The ones that didn't have homes to go to, you know, family. So, they'd go out and work at Tahoe, or town, or Reno, or wherever.

Did you do that or were you too young for that?

No, I didn't because—not until I graduated from Carson did I work at the lake [Tahoe]. People thought it was still going yet and then they'd refer people to my house, to my folks, and then they'd interview me and then I'd go up there and work with them. For the summer.

Do you have memories of your classmates?

Yes, some of them, yes. There were all friendly and studied.

Were they from the area that you were familiar with?

Different areas because Stewart took in all the Western area, so there were students from different areas. It was interesting to hear them talk about their tribe, you know.

So, it was interesting to meet people from different areas.

Yes.

Did you keep in touch with any of those people?

No.

What about teachers? Did you go back to visit teachers later, when you were older?

During Carson Days, the employees' kids were there and we'd be friendly with them, you know, because we'd meet at Carson and rode the bus and had our activities at Carson. So we'd see the parents and Miss Pamp wasn't married and

no children so . . . she was a little old lady, an old maid! Young maid, I guess.

Right, not so old! Were there any friends from Schurz that you knew that went to Stewart?

I think so! Yeah, there were some there.

So, kids you knew from back home also ended up there too.

Uh-huh.

Can I ask what kind of student you were? Were you shy? Were you a troublemaker? Were you happy? Were you quiet?

I'm quiet and shy and I don't like to sit in the front seat, front row, you know. The smart ones sit in the front row so I try to sit in the back row! (laughs)

Did you have goals or was there something you wanted to be when you grew up?

Well, Miss Pamp and Mrs. Holly always said to continue your education and go on to school and go to college and things like that.

So, you had hoped to continue schooling.

Uh-huh. Then when I did graduate from Carson and I worked one year, then I went to Haskell. That's in Lawrence, Kansas. I sat in a seat that Mr. Holly sat in when he went to Haskell. I told Mrs. Holly about that one. They were living in Arizona then. I had to be down there for surgery and I called them before surgery and visited with them, and I told them about the seating arrangement. (laughs)

So, he was an Indian man? Was she native too?

I guess she was Irish, she had red hair.

Oh, okay! So, you did talk to them later after leaving.

Yes, so we connected. Their kids and then we visited on the phone.

So, how long were you at Haskell?

One year because I had commercial. I had commercial one year at Carson.

What do you mean, "commercial"?

Oh, typing and bookkeeping.

Like administrative skills?

Uh-huh. Yes, but they called it commercial in those days.

Okay, so bookkeeping, typing . . .

Shorthand, and all that. In Haskell, it was just like a refresher from what I had in Carson.

Was there a sense of camaraderie between students. Is that something that you all shared, that experience being at Stewart. Was that something that kept you all...?

Uh-huh. Just we were all connected because we're Indians, you know, and it was interesting to hear other people talk about their home and their activities at their home and things like that.

Well, that leads me to my next question. What was it like for so many people from different tribes to all be together in one place?

Well, you know you're Indian and that's where you're connected and you're friendly and just like everyday people. No one felt superior, you know, or this and that.

Okay, were there cliques? Like tribal cliques?

Well, there were class cliques. Classes hung together, in the classmates. And their activities were just about the same.

All high schools have jocks, right? And non-jocks. (laughs) So, after you left Stewart, you ended up at Carson High School, and then you worked for a year, and then you went to Haskell for a year. Then what? What did you do after that?

Well, I worked at the lake [Tahoe]. One lady had a real estate office up there. I stayed at her home and it was right by the lake. It was so beautiful!

What did you do at the real estate office?

I was just like a receptionist.

Making appointments and . . . ?

Yeah.

How long were you up there at the lake?

During the summer.

What did you do during the winter months?

I'd work in town and keep busy. Living at home and that's about all.

When you were a young adult, you lived with your folks still?

Uh-huh.

Okay.

Until I got married.

When did you get married? How much longer after school?

When I was 26, I got married. We eloped to Schurz because my uncle was a Justice of the Peace down there and it was on my husband's birthday so I was his birthday present, he said! (laughs)

That's cute! Do you think attending Stewart affected your life, afterwards in a significant way? As opposed to other schools that you went to?

I liked it, and I liked Carson and I liked Stewart. I missed the Stewart School because when I first went to Carson, the first day I missed my classmates. It was all different, you know. There was about three Indian girls then in the Carson class, eighth grade. But we were all in our own classes, you know, hung together.

What's a bad memory of Stewart? Can you think of one of the worst memories that you had, being there?

Being away from home is the worst, I think.

Missing your family.

Uh-huh. Maybe that's why kids ran away. Because I wanted to go over the hill, back of Stewart, to go home.

Tell me that again.

I wanted to run away and be with my folks and I thought . . . and I didn't know the river was there either, and I just thought I could walk over the hill and go home.

Right, that Schurz was just right over the hill.

Four hundred miles down the road! (laughs)

What about some of the good memories?

All the activities that they had, dances and the school activities, the clubs.

Did they keep you busy there more than at the high school?

Oh, yes! We had our regular chores to do and, you know, you have your curfew, your time to be in the building. They had that bell out there in the center and they'd ring the bell and you'd go to different activities, go to classes, and whatever.

Right. Do you share your memories of Stewart with your kids or your family? Do you talk about it?

No, they don't ask me about it and I've never . . . Except when my kids were big, they were kind of interested. When they were little, it was just, it never came up.

Being kids. You've visited the campus since you left, since you live right here. Do you go to the Father's Day pow wow, sometimes?

Yes.

Ruth, what more than anything needs to be told to visitors who aren't familiar with Stewart, who have no idea about the whole Indian boarding school situation? What needs to be told as part of the whole Stewart history?

For me, I think if it could be open yet because of the young generation because they give you good training and friendship and right now it seems like the kids, some kids, don't mesh with others, you know. It just gives them a good start, education plus—like learning something vocational, you know.

So, that would be a good thing to have today.

Uh-huh.

Finally, any other thoughts? Anything else you want to share with me?

I liked Stewart. It was a nice place to be.

So, when you go there now, does it bring you back?

Somewhat, yes. Being on the campus and having the Father's Day pow wow. At first I think it was a reunion, then they blended in the Father's Day activity, combined it.

Thank you very much for sharing your experiences with me.

You're welcome and thank you for coming over and bringing lunch.

You're welcome!