

NEVADA INDIAN COMMISSION

STEWART INDIAN SCHOOL ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

CONTINUAL STUDENT AND ETHNOHISTORIAN: AN INTERVIEW WITH JOANN NEVERS

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Continual Student and Ethnohistorian: An Interview with JoAnn Nevers

Alida JoAnn Nevers is a northern Washoe woman whose parents were employees at Stewart Indian School when she was very young, so she lived at the campus as a toddler. JoAnn (her preferred name) then attended Stewart Indian School briefly, fourth through sixth grades, after her dad entered military service and her parents divorced in the mid-1940s. She then attended Carson City and Douglas County high schools, and went on to attend classes at Bacone College in Muskogee, Oklahoma. Ultimately JoAnn graduated with a degree in anthropology from University of Nevada, Reno, and is considered the unofficial tribal historian of the Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California.

My name is Terri McBride. It is March 8, 2017, on a Wednesday. We are at the Carson City [Nevada] library meeting room. This meeting is with JoAnn Nevers, a former student at Stewart Indian School. We will be discussing her experience as a student. This interview is being conducted for the Stewart Indian School oral history project for the Nevada Indian Commission and it will be archived in the Stewart Indian School Cultural Center, the Nevada State Library and Archives, and the Special Collections at the University of Nevada, Reno. To begin, what is your name?

My first name is Alida, A-L-I-D-A, JoAnn, capital J, capital A, Nevers, N-E-V-E-R-S.

Can you tell me about your name Alida?

I was named after Alida Bowler, one of the superintendents in the early days at Stewart. My mother knew her so she named me after her.

Was your mother friends with Alida?

She might have been because she went to school there and she later worked there. Both my parents worked at Stewart Indian School—not after they graduated—but later on in their years. They were employees there.

JoAnn, when were you born and where were you born?

I was born on December 17, 1936 at the sanatorium located at Stewart. It was the only

hospital in the area where most of the Indian people were born in those years. I think it burned down; I don't know what year. Many, many students at Stewart were born there. Some of them were born or left there and then they later went to school. I know several that did that.

How many people were in your family?

I had three half-brothers and three half-sisters. My mother had three daughters when she went to Haskell after she graduated from Stewart. Then she married a man named Leon Gorsich in Kansas City, Missouri. My dad married Virginia Samilar from Moapa and he had three sons. She later died giving birth to his youngest son, Raymond. Later on, my dad and mother met and married and they had me. But they knew each other at Stewart before that.

What language was spoken in your household?

My dad spoke Washoe and my mother spoke Paiute.

Was that spoken at home?

Yes. My dad spoke it all the time. That was the main language. But he didn't want us to learn it.

Did that cause communication problems between the kids and all?

No, we learned Washoe too because he'd tell us what things meant and he wanted us to know our

culture like hunting, fishing, and traditions. But language, I don't know why he didn't want us to learn. But we knew a lot of words.

This is a follow-up question about what you just said about the hunting and fishing and traditional activities. Did you celebrate American Indian cultural ceremonies with your family? Like pine nut harvest or dancing?

Yes, we did because I attended a lot of the girl's dances, puberty dances, but I didn't participate in it because I didn't have a mother. My parents divorced when I was young. So, at Dresslerville my father became the ranch manager there in the early 1950's and I would go to all the girl's dances they had at Dresslerville. He would go too, and he would sing and dance.

So, your mother and father went to Stewart?

Yes.

Did anybody else in your family go to Stewart?

My sister, Mary Helen, my half-sister. But she was older than me. I don't know how long she stayed there because that's when we separated after Stewart.

How long did you go to Stewart?

About three, two and a half years. I remember my mother left, I think it was in the fall and she took me to Stewart and entered me there and she introduced me to some of my relatives that were there so I'd be familiar with them. But I was very sad because I didn't want to go there and she left, and my dad had gone into the service so my sisters were in town yet, in Carson. One sister went to Stewart—Mary—with me and she was in the big girls' dormitory. I was in the little girls' dormitory. But I didn't get to see her that much.

When was that, about?

Let's see, that's when I get kind of fuzzy. I know I'm in a yearbook. I don't know which one, '48, '47, somewhere around there.

Okay, so late '40's?

Probably.

After the war?

No, I don't think so—or was it?

Because your dad went into the service.

Yeah, he went to SeaBees. I just know I was in the fourth grade half of that semester. In those days, when I went to school at Stewart, the different grades had different names. We were called the "frontiersmen," in the fourth grade. We learned about the frontier life, we learned how to make the foods that they ate, and talked about it. Our teacher introduced us to many things that the pioneers went through.

You talked a little bit about this earlier, I think. How did you end up at Stewart in the first place?

My parents divorced so they put me there.

And you didn't want to go.

No, I didn't want to go. It was very hard for me because I had to leave my paper doll collection, which I always played with, and my comic books. I did! I had a big collection of it. We lived in Carson City. After my father went into the service, she moved to town. She didn't want to live at the Carson Colony because it was too cold, probably. So, I got used to living in town. I don't know who lived at our house; probably my dad's relatives, at the Carson Indian Colony. He built a house there. Later on, when I got out of Stewart—well when he got out of the service he moved back into the old house at Carson Colony.

You had gone to another school before getting to Stewart.

Yes.

What was your first impression then, when you got to Stewart? How was it different?

To me, there was no love at all. It was strict. The girls, everyone had to march to school. We had to make our bed. We had to put quarters on



JoAnn Nevers, March 8, 2017. Carson City, Nevada.

there and you could bounce a dime off the sheet. They cut my hair real short and I had to wear the clothes that they issued. I couldn't wear any of my clothes. I don't know what happened to my clothes. I had a lot of clothes and I didn't have anything that was mine there. All government issue. It was strict and the older girls that supervised us were mean, very mean to us. It was different from your home life. Real rigid. Cold. Unloving.

I see. Lots of rules and discipline.

Yes.

Did you come to enjoy it there?

No, I never did enjoy it. I enjoyed my friendships. My girlfriends that I had. I made a lot of friends and we played a lot outside there. So that's probably the only thing. School was good. I liked what we did.

The class?

Yes, the class.

Besides your clothes, did you take any of your personal belongings with you when you went?

I did, but they all disappeared. My relatives would bring apples and oranges and I'd put them in my locker and they'd disappear. By the time I'd come back to look, they were all gone. Never, ever kept anything; and clothes the same way, socks, anything was gone. No one knew what happened to them. That's what happened to me. I knew some of the matrons from being in Carson City, they weren't very, well, they were nice, nice people. The teachers were nice. Some of the matrons, I think they were all nice. It was the girls.

The older girls?

Yeah, the older girls.

How do you think your mom felt about you going to the school?

Well, she probably thought that was the best place for me because she went there in her early life. I guess she must have enjoyed it. She

never did say anything to the contrary. My dad seemed to have liked it too.

Getting to campus life, what was living in the dorms like? You were in the little girls' dorm?

Yeah, Unit 6. It was cold, uncomfortable.

Did you have to share a room?

We lived outside the rooms in a big, like a horseshoe. All the beds were facing toward the windows. The rooms were inside. The rooms only had little closets or little things where you could put your stuff. I don't know what stuff we could put in there. It never stayed in there. Where they kept our clean clothes was in the front, at the entrance. They'd have all the clean clothes up there and they'd have boxes there. That's where we got our clothes. I don't think we kept anything in our designated area because it never stayed there.

Okay. What was eating in the dining hall like?

Like I said we had to march and we were the last ones there and there was not too much left when the big girls got through. So we were always hungry.

How was the food?

I liked one dish particularly. That was the gravy over bread. That was delicious! I don't remember too much . . . I remember on Sundays we had a sack lunch. The dining room was closed. It consisted of a bologna sandwich or a meat sandwich, and a jam sandwich. And my girlfriends and I, we would go . . . some of the girls didn't like the jam sandwiches and they'd throw them away we would go pick them up on Sunday because they'd just throw them away. But gee, we were so hungry we relished those sandwiches!

Was the student store there? Were you able to purchase little things there?

Uh-huh, if you had money! I remember if I had money, I'd get a Coke and a doughnut or peanuts and put it in my Coke.

Peanuts?

Peanuts! And then the doughnut I'd put around the lip of the . . . see we'd put it around there, like we'd chew it and drink. It was kind of a fad or something. (laughs)

Did you have a favorite class?

Maybe the fifth grade. I think that was about the Aztecs or South America. We learned how to sing their songs and chants. The teacher had a piano in there and we'd sing things from different cultures. That was fun!

So, you were too little to do the vocational classes?

No, I didn't do them.

Do you remember a favorite teacher, especially?

I don't know. They were all good. Mrs. Weber, Miss Hoaglund, I remember those two. Hoaglund, I think that was her name. I think she was the piano player. Mrs. Weber was the frontiersman class. Sixth grade, I don't know what we did then. I can't remember that.

Did you ever do anything on the farm?

No.

Okay. I know you didn't graduate.

No.

Did you play sports at all? The little girls?

No, over at the dormitory, we played teams. We'd play baseball, volleyball. And we played a lot on the sidewalks, playing hopscotch. That's what we did.

Okay. Did you go to the games, any of the football or basketball games?

I think we did, yes. I went to church a lot because they were kind and we got snacks there.

Which church did you go to?

The Baptist Church. And the missionaries were really good to us. I loved to go there because

she'd give us cider, apple cider and cookies. Oh, that was a treat! Then we played games that they had in their little, their rooms. That's what I enjoyed.

Did they have Sunday school then?

Uh-huh. We had to go to church, I think it was twice a week; I'm not sure now. I know everyone would be there. The whole Stewart School would be there, singing. I liked the singing. Then on Sundays, we'd go to Sunday school class. Later on, we'd come back for the snacks and card games.

Did you ever go to events in the auditorium?

Uh-huh.

What did you do there?

Let's see, what did we do there? I know we went there. I don't know what it was for, though.

Did you see plays?

I don't know what we saw there but I know going there.

Movies?

Maybe movies. I know we saw movies. I can't remember that.

Were you there when the boys had to sit on one side and the girls on the other side?

No, well, the little girls had to always stick together. And all the little boys.

Oh, right.

So, we were herded in there like sheep.

Regarding the other buildings on the campus, do you remember specific experiences in particular buildings?

Not really.

The little girls' dorm.

Yes.

Where were your classes?

In the old school building, which is no longer there. It's where the new gym is located.

The wooden one?

Yeah, I think it was wooden.

Was it two-story or one?

Two-story.

Okay. Did you go to that old gym, maybe, to watch games or a play, or something?

Yes, I think so.

Okay, so you used the gym; you lived in the dorm; did you ever go to the infirmary?

Oh, yes! I don't know if I was ill, but I got hit with a baseball bat in the head, so maybe I went there. We had to go there for our spoonful, tablespoonful, of, what is it called? Cod liver oil. Everyone had to line up for a tablespoonful of that and if you spit it out, you had to go back in line and take another tablespoon. I remember that!

Sounds like that wasn't very popular!

No! (laughs). They'd lure you with a glass of orange juice, if you could tolerate it.

Oh! Okay. You weren't in there for illness but you were in there because you got hit in the head.

I probably was in there. I remember being in there. But I can't remember if it was just getting hit in the head.

Were they nice in there?

Yes! Miss Hershey was there.

Was she the head nurse?

Yes.

You talked about the dining hall and the campus grounds. Mostly the little girls played outside during your free time.



1947 class photo. JoAnn is in the front row, farthest right. Courtesy of Nevada Indian Commission.

Right. But I knew the campus because I had lived there when I was smaller. Before I went to Stewart because my parents were there. So, I roamed all over there. Before I went to Stewart, my parents were there. We lived there. We had a little house there. I already knew the area.

Your parents worked at Stewart?

Uh-huh.

Were they faculty or were they BIA employees?

Probably BIA, I'm not sure. My dad, he ran the Stewart ranch.

So, he maybe worked at the Stewart ranch.

And my mother, I think she worked at the laundry. It was located by the sanitorium. And my dad . . . before I went to Stewart and I was little, probably three-four, before we moved to the Colony, I remember. Then I ended back there at Stewart.

Right. But they lived in housing for staff there.

Yes.

Okay. Probably as a little girl you didn't leave campus very often or were you able to go and visit?

We walked to Carson City every weekend.

What'd you do there?

We'd just walk to town and come back. My sister worked in the, what is it, the Western Union office. I'd go there and try to bum money from her if she'd even have anything. Then there was a dime store next door on Main Street so we'd go and buy candy or whatever. But we went back again, walk back. We used to do that; it seemed like every weekend.

Did you walk along the tracks?

Yeah, it was a regular trail, road, there. Every weekend if we could.

When the weather was good?

Yeah. A lot of kids did that.

What did you do during the summers?

I went home. Well, the first time I went, my mother sent for me. She was in Suisun, California. One of my sisters, Violet, and her husband, came after me and took me to Suisun. My mother, she got a job there but she left me there at one of these camps, like one of these camps with a whole lot of people, run-down places. Me and my dog; I had a police dog named King, we stayed there. She never came to see us. I guess when school came, Violet came after me and took me back to Stewart. And then the next summer my dad came after me and I went with him, to where? Maybe to Auburn, California to where my Aunt Helen lived. I think I went there. But I did leave; I didn't stay there [at Stewart]. A lot of kids did stay there.

Maybe because your parents were closer?

Yeah. I never saw my mother for the next thirty years after that.

Wow! Talking about connections and relationships that you made at the school, do you have memories of classmates? Specific ones?

Well, not really. In the dorm, yes, I do. They have remained my friends all my life. Lifetime friends.

Oh, good! So you did make some long-time friends.

Yes! All over Nevada, it seems like. From Ely, Duckwater, Las Vegas, everywhere! California . . . And we see each other, "Oh yeah, hi JoAnn, nice seeing you!" It's nice to meet them again. I've met several over the years.

It seems that Stewart students have this connection with each other even if they didn't go at the same time.

Yes.

You've kept in touch with some of your classmates?

I kept in touch not really by mail, by letter, by talking. I just see them occasionally, like Nevada Day or some kind of doings. Nevada Day would be a big time for the Indian people in the early days. They'd all come to the Carson Indian Colony for the celebration. We had this little community hall that was just jam-packed with people. Everyone would be parked outside and they'd have hand games and card games and all kinds of activities. So, we'd meet there. That's where everybody came. It was such a small place but everyone came there.

Different tribes?

Yes. All over Nevada!

Were any friends from home at Stewart?

Yes. Not from Carson Colony but from Dresslerville, probably Woodfords, and all over. Reno, Fallon, McDermitt.

People that you knew already?

At Stewart? I didn't know anybody when I went there.

Oh, okay.

No, I didn't. I met them there.

And then they became your friends.

Yes.

Can I ask what kind of student you were? Were you shy, were you mischievous, were you quiet?

Probably that, quiet and shy.

Were you sad?

Yeah, I probably was because I missed my mother. I really did. My dad told me, "Don't you be crying about your mother. She's gone so you gotta forget about her." And I tried to do that. It did affect me for a long time because you bond with your mother, you know, and your siblings, my sisters. We all just fell apart and

never saw each other for a long time. My sister that lived in Carson, she worked at Western Union, then she married a man from Carson. But I didn't see her when I came out of Stewart. I didn't see her very much.

How much older was she?

Oh, probably ten years older. She lived in town here but I didn't see her. I just saw one sister, Violet, because she married somebody from Dresslerville. Then they divorced and she'd come around once in a while. But I just kind of lost track of them. Just my brothers, their mom died, so my dad took care of them and my aunt. So I was with my dad and my brothers most of my life.

What did you think you were going to grow up and be when you were a kid?

My dad used to tell me, "You've to make up your mind what you want to be. Do you want to be a secretary, do you want to be a nurse, do you want to be this?" He said, "You've got to think of what you want to be." I think a lot of what he said to me he learned at Stewart because, he said, "When you get married, oh and you're going to get married, you have to think about the kind of man you're going to marry. Is he a worker? Is he tall? Is he short?" I think that's where he got it from. 'Cuz he wouldn't, our people didn't . . . I don't think they—well they did tell you he's got to be a good hunter and all that. A provider. But it sounded like maybe he got indoctrinated by the staff at Stewart. That's why I think they probably told him. When I was going to school later on, he said, "You guys are going to be known as back alley kids." I asked why. He said, "Because there's no one here to supervise you at home." He was working after he got out of the service. I guess he learned his trade at Stewart, to be a carpenter. Then when he went into the service he did Seabees, carpentry, construction work, and he'd leave my brothers and I at home to fend for ourselves. He said, "You don't have to go to school because there's no one here but if you don't, you're going to be sorry. You have to do it on your

own." I always remember what he said. "You gonna be known as back alley kids." That's the term he used. We probably were, I don't know. I don't think any of us were bad. We didn't get in trouble or anything. I went to school all the time.

When you were a student there, at Stewart, was there a sense of camaraderie amongst you girls? Like, united against the. . .

Yeah, I think so because we'd say, "Uh oh, here she comes," or "that mean girl" so we'd straighten up what we'd think we were doing wrong.

Watch out for each other?

Yes.

What was it like for so many different people from different tribes to all be there together in one school?

I didn't see any difference although they talked their language but they never shunned us, the Paiute or Shoshone girls, or Navajos. We all got along. In the Unit 6.

Where did you go after leaving Stewart?

I went to Reno to live with my Aunt Bernice there and went to school at Southside Elementary School, seventh grade. Then back to Carson in eighth grade 'til eleventh grade. Twelfth grade I went to Douglas in Gardnerville [Nevada] and graduated from there.

Why did you move down there your last year?

Because my dad got a job as a ranch manager for the Washoe tribe. I didn't want to go because I went here!

Right! You wanted to graduate with your friends!

Yeah! I went from kindergarten here to the fourth grade, half of fourth grade. So, I sort of felt, well, my roots are here. But I had no choice in the matter. I didn't like that but I had to listen to my dad.

So, you graduated from Douglas?

Yeah.

What did you do for a living when you got out of school?

I went to Bacone College, in Oklahoma.

Oh! To study what?

Just general. They weren't an accredited college there yet. The reason I went there was Lana [Hicks, her cousin] went there.

Your cousin?

Yeah, so her mother said, "Take her along too." My dad said he didn't have no money to send me there. "Oh, don't worry about it, send her anyway." So, I went along with them.

So, how did you pay? Was there a scholarship or what?

I had to work.

Did you get married?

Yes. A couple times. Once too many.

Do you think attending Stewart specifically—I mean you finished school and then you went on to college—did attending Stewart affect your life?

I think it did. I always thought about it. It was a sad time for me. I really do think that but I had to get over that. I don't think it kept me down. It's just the memory is not good, although I don't try to think of it. I think of the place and I was born there at Stewart and I'd look up at the mountains and I feel like I'm really at home there. You know, like I belong there, because I was born there.

Right. So, you have a connection to the location.

Yes, I do. I feel real strong about that.

Can you talk about your worst memories at Stewart? Like what are the more bad ones?

I think being cold all the time.

Did you get in trouble? Were you disciplined?

No. I was never disciplined. If you did something wrong, what you'd have to do is everybody would go into the big room, the entrance to the . . . on the east side there's a big room there, in the office there, if you got into trouble and you did something, you had to go through the paddle line. Everyone, you'd have to get down and crawl through their legs and they'd hit you.

With their hand?

With their hand.

That's humiliating.

Yeah, they did that to people. I don't think I went through there. I probably hit some girls, but I don't know. Probably.

But you saw it.

Yeah.

What are some of the better memories? Can you think of . . . ?

I think the school was. It was interesting to me. The classes, because we did a lot of activities.

Do you talk about your memories of Stewart with your family?

No. My family today does not know because they did not go there but the girls that I did go with say, "Remember Stewart, remember what we did?" We talk about that and we laugh.

So, you share them with other former students.

Uh-huh. "Remember this, remember that? Remember we used to play this?" So that's what we did.

I know you've been to the campus since you left because I've seen you there!

Yes! (laughs)

What, JoAnn, more than anything, needs to be told to visitors who aren't familiar with Stewart as part of the overall Stewart picture?

Experience?

Yeah. I mean, what really needs to come through as we try to explain the site to tourists?

Well, I think it was a good thing for people that were orphans. You know, like they had no place to go. They were poor and when they went there they were provided with food and clothing and learning; otherwise they would not get it if they lived in their homes in McDermitt or those isolated places. I do think that it was good for them because they provided what they needed. They just didn't have the love there by the matrons, the matrons that were there. Of course, they had all these girls to deal with. I heard stories from other girls about how this matron was real mean to them. I said, "I don't remember them being mean." I knew some of them that were in my dorm. They knew me. They knew my dad and my mother but they didn't mistreat me. They always treated me good. What I heard from other girls is this matron was real mean. "You remember?" I said, "No, I don't remember her being that way." "Well, she was to me!"

Well, everyone has their own experience.

Yeah. I don't have a . . . I think the matrons were pretty good.

You talked earlier about your father maybe being indoctrinated in that American, you know, worker mentality. Do you think that's part of the story that needs to be told? About the government? You know--

Yeah. They had to wear uniforms, too, when he went there. I have pictures of him and my mother at Stewart.

Oh, you do?

Uh-huh. When they were ice skating, when they were out here. When he went to school, he played football. I have my mother's graduation

picture from Stewart and some other little pictures.

Neat! So, any other thoughts?

No, I don't really think about it. I didn't stay there that long but my recollection has not been very good. My experiences, I think, was bad for me because of the way I was brought up before that and then going into that environment was completely different.

Right.

I don't know if maybe I was spoiled a little bit or something, but I could have been. I don't know. I don't remember having everything; just my paper doll collection and my funny books that I had. That's all. (laughs)

JoAnn, thank you very much for sharing your memories with me. This is a really important project so I'm glad you got to be a part of it.