

NEVADA INDIAN COMMISSION

STEWART INDIAN SCHOOL ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

SHE HAD SCHOOL SPIRIT! AN INTERVIEW WITH REYNESE PETERSON

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She Had School Spirit! An Interview with Reynese Peterson

Reynese (Montoya) Peterson is a Hopi woman from Polacca, Arizona. She attended Stewart Indian School 1955-1962. She came from a large family and when her mother fell ill, Reynese was sent to Stewart along with her younger sister. Reynese became very active in school life, playing in the marching band, playing girls' basketball, and joining the student government. During her years at the school, she worked at the student store—she discusses the origin of the store name Novake in the interview—and lived on campus with the store operator, Mrs. Dietrich. After graduation from Stewart, Reynese went to Bacone College in Muskogee, Oklahoma, then married in Arizona, raised two children, and eventually returned to Carson City where she met her second husband. She lives in Carson City today.

My name is Terri McBride. It is Friday, June 2, 2017. We are at the home of Reynese Peterson in Carson City, Nevada. The interview is with Reynese Peterson, 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 in the Stewart Indian School Cultural Center, the Nevada State Library and Archives, and Special Collections at the University of Nevada, Reno. Reynese, when were you born and where are you from?

I'm from Polacca, Arizona.

And when were you born?

I was born in '43, 4-24-43.

How many people were in your family?

Oh, my gosh, there was nine of us. Uh, seven brothers and one sister.

Okay, so nine, there were nine of you children.

Nine of us, nine children.

And what language was spoken at home when you were a child?

English.

So, were there any communication problems between . . . ?

My grandmother spoke Tewa to me and I stayed with my grandmother until I was six years old, six or seven, and then she told me to go live with my mother 'cuz she was my mother.

And did you celebrate American Indian cultural ceremonies or other traditional things when you were growing up?

No, I did not participate but I went to the dances, all kinds of dances, Kachina dances and I did not participate.

But you went to watch?

I went to watch.

Were any of your family members educated at Stewart?

My brothers and my sister. I think my brothers after my sister were—went to Stewart also.

How many of your brothers?

I don't know. One, two, three, three that I know of. Four, four that I know of.

What years were you at Stewart?

I was there from '55 through '62.

So what grades were those?

Sixth through the twelfth grade.

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

I think my mother was sick and, uh, there was no high school there for my brothers to go to school and they went to Stewart. They're older than I was, two brothers, that were older than me and my sister was younger than I was, three years younger than I was. I think our mother was sick.

Did you want to go or do you think somebody made you go?

I think my mother, my mother, uh, asked us if we wanted to go.

How did you travel there when you first came?

By bus.

Was that a BIA [Bureau of Indian Affairs] bus?

No, it was a Greyhound bus, and the bus driver came and we loaded up the bus and everything else. They loaded up at Keams [Canyon] and came on to Polacca and we went on to the reservations. Tuba City was the last reservation.

And they picked up more children as they went along?

Mm-hmm.

And how long, do you remember how long it took you to get up here?

It took us about 24 hours.

Did you have any idea where you were going?

Yeah, yes.

Okay. So what was your first impression when you got off that bus at Stewart?

It was, wow! All the students and all the . . . everything. Just overwhelming us! Overwhelming me, rather, and my sister; I took care of my sister all along 'cuz she was younger than I was and she cried every time.

And so she came with you even though she was much younger? Were there third graders going to the school then?

There were, there were little kids that were going to school there and my sister was one of them.

In general, did you enjoy being a student at Stewart?

I sure did!

What did you like about it?

I liked the independence and the—oh, going places and doing things, and just independence, I guess. Going places and horseback riding, and everything else I liked about Stewart that we wouldn't have at home.

When you—when you went to Stewart that first time, did you take anything from home with you?

I took my dolls, my Kachina dolls. That's all.

They let you keep those?

They let me keep those, yes.

What was the most difficult thing to leave behind? Or person?

My mother, my mother and my brothers.

How do you think your family felt about you leaving?

I think my mother cried . . . My mother and my grandmother cried.

But they, they made the decision to send you so . . .

It was, it was their decision but we didn't have a school to go to. We had the school but then the—we had the education and the school and the, um, everything else that, what was the question?

Well, we were talking about how your family felt about you leaving, and you said that your mom was sad, probably because she knew that she was going to miss you terribly.

Right, terrible.

But she also made the decision that you should go so, maybe she felt that that was just the best alternative.

Mm-hmm.

So there was no high school there?

There was no high school there.

In Polacca?

Polacca, Arizona.

Right, so when you finished grade school, there was no . . . ?

There was nothing. Not, not for our grade school we went to junior high, I guess. I don't know. I don't know because we went to junior high. I mean I went to junior high at Stewart.

So, did every kid in that community, once they hit sixth grade, they had to go somewhere else to go school if they wanted to continue?

If they wanted to continue, yes. I think then, back then, but now they closed the schools. They have the grade schools now and everything else is . . .

And high schools now, so they can stay.

Yeah, so they can stay.

So, do you think that kids from Polacca to different boarding schools around the West?

Yes, they went to Phoenix and different places.

Riverside?

Yeah, I don't know of any; I know Phoenix. (laughs)

For sure, yeah. Okay, so what was living in the dorms like?

The dorms were great!

So, when you got there were you in the big girls' . . . ?

No, I was in the junior high, I guess, Units 5 and 4, 4 and 3, 2, 3, 4, at first, yeah, 2, 3, and 4 or somewhere out there.

And so, did you have roommates? Did you sleep in one big room?

We had five girls a room. Five girls to a room. There was, uh, two bunk beds and a single, single There were three Hopis; I stayed with three Hopi girls and two Navajo girls, and myself.

What was eating in the dining hall like?

Eating in the dining hall was great. We had everything that we could

So, the food was good?

Food was good, yeah.

Did you have to march over to the dining hall?

Yes, after the little girls went, after Unit 6 went and then we would march over there. Uh, we didn't march; they would let us go whenever we felt like it. After the little girls went, after the Unit 6. The little girls went. We didn't march. We didn't march at all, we just went.

Okay, and was it kind of a social time during the school day when you could just sit and talk with your friends?

Mm-hmm. I played, I played the flute. I played an instrument, and the flute and I would practice on my flute.

In the dining hall?

In the dining hall? No, in the, in the regular hall.

In the evenings?

In the evenings or something, yeah.

So, there was also time for chatting, friendships after, just after dinner was done and you were back in the dorms?

Right, and then I went to the hospital to work at the hospital. I worked at the hospital.



Reynese's Stewart Senior Class Photo, 1962. Courtesy of Reynese Peterson.

Well, I'm going to ask you about that in a minute. So you went to the student store . . .

Mm-hmm.

Tell me about that.

Student store was great! We went to the ECA store, called the ECA store and it was down . . . and then we went to Novake, then Novake opened. "Novake" is a Hopi word for "lots of food in the house" or um, Novake . . .

That's a Hopi word, I did not know that!

Uh-huh, it's a Hopi word and then my sister-in-law won the um, oh, I guess a talent show for that, for naming the, the store, "novake," "full of food."

What does "ECA" stand for?

ECA was, uh, was something about, uh, ECA was ECA store.

Does it have anything to do with "candy anytime"?

No! (laughs)

Okay!

Somethin' about the recreational, or some commercial something. I don't know, ECA store, association or something.

Did you work at the student store?

No. I worked at Novake. I worked at Novake for Mrs. Dietrich and I was in the eighth grade when I went to work there.

Did you have a favorite class?

My favorite class was English . . . and math.

What about vocational training?

Vocational training was nurses' training and I fainted every time, and my . . . (laughs)

You fainted every time?

Fainted each time. They would, they would draw like, like on the board and we would—I would do all that but when it came to seeing what they had done, the first sight of blood, I would faint.

So that was probably a big learning experience that you probably weren't going to be a nurse!

I won't be a nurse! (laughs) Yeah, 'cuz then they'd pick me up off the floor and laid me down and everything else! I didn't come to, 'til later on!

So, did you do any other—did you work in the dining hall or . . . ?

I worked in the dining hall as um, in the dining hall, I didn't work as—we worked in the dining hall as parents—they had, um, students on each side, the boy and the girl would sit and do like the, like the parents do, whatever, and the would serve everything from the left side and take dinner from the left side, right side and different . . . we set the tables up, set the tables for the. . .

Right. So did you end up, did you take any like business classes like typing or anything like that?

No, I did typing. I did typing for the, uh, because I wasn't in, um, typing school. It was in college. I can't remember now. Everything is all mixed up.

Right, because you went on to continue your training . . .

Yeah, right.

. . . after Stewart.

After Stewart, yeah.

So you did nursing, you worked in the dining hall; did you have to raise chickens or anything like that?

No, the boys did that. Agriculture, yeah. We went down to the—we went all over, everywhere else, you know, and went up to Lake Tahoe in the bus and the basketball and everywhere else. I was involved in all that.

So were you in the band?

I was in the band, yes.

Okay, you were in the band.

And I played the flute. We marched on Nevada Day.

So did you have to play, did you play at games? At the, at the boy's . . . like basketball games and stuff?

No, we didn't, huh-uh. We did marching.

When you went to the away games to see the boys play up at Tahoe, were you in the cheerleading squad?

No, I was a cheerleader for about a year. I wouldn't even put that down.

Did you have a favorite teacher?

Oh, yes!

Who was that?

My favorite teacher was Mr., uh, oh I can't remember his name.

What did he teach?

He taught English.

Was it Mr. Tyler?

No, Mr. Tyler was our math teacher and he was one of our great, great, great, great teachers! (laughs) Mr. Talbot, Talbot was our English, T-A-L-B-O-T, was the English teacher, and . . .

[Interview paused, Reynese showing pictures of people in the yearbook]

Did you graduate from Stewart, Reynese?

Yes, I did.

Let's talk about the sports at Stewart. So you were—you went to the games to be a spectator?

I went to basketball and I was on the basketball team, not very long.

You were on the girls' basketball team?

Mm-hmm.

So you played.

Right. I wasn't very good.

It's okay! It's all for fun anyway, right?

Yeah.

So you went to the games and . . . let's talk a little bit about your marching band; so did you travel with the band? Where did you . . . ?

We traveled, we went to Reno and we went to, um, Reno . . .

And you were in the Nevada Day Parade.

Nevada Day Parade, Nevada Reno.

Did you compete in that Fallon [regional marching band competition] . . . ?

We went to, oh, we went to the . . . UNR to the . . . we did, uh, part of the UNR, I think.

Did you have to compete against other marching bands?

No, no, we didn't compete.

And who was the band leader?

Laird, Mr. Laird, that was our teacher.

What kinds of events or activities did you attend in the auditorium on campus?

In the auditorium?

Yeah, you know, with the stage and the seats.

We didn't have that.

You didn't have that at Stewart?

We just had, no, we didn't have that.

You didn't see movies in there?

We saw at the auditorium. We saw movies in the auditorium. We didn't; we had seats, but movies was all we would go to.

So just movies?

Just movies, yeah, in the auditorium, yeah.

Did they have school assemblies or anything in there?

Assemblies, yeah. We had assemblies, and we had . . . movies and assemblies . . . what did we have in the auditorium? That's all. Just movies and assemblies.

Did the band ever play in there?

No, we played in the gymnasium, old gym.

Did you attend—well, did you belong to other social clubs or—you know, I see in your yearbook, your senior year, your class photo talks about: you were Treasurer, and you were Dorm President, and you were Secretary, and you were on Student Council.

Dorm Secretary, yearbook, and Secretary, Vice President, GAA [Girl's Athletic Association?], dorm secretary. We were just all in dormitories. These were all the dorm, FHA [?] block, yeah, I was President from block—a secretary . . . yeah, that was all in the school.

Okay, so you were in student government.

Yeah, student government. Yeah, that's what that was, student government.

Was there an Indian club when you were there?

There was but I didn't participate. Other kids did, a lot. I didn't.

Regarding other buildings on campus, do you have any memories that stand out in your mind?



Reynese Peterson, Carson City. June 2, 2017.

Um, Forbusch. He had the—oh, where we made hearts and everything else out of plastic stuff. We made everything out of plastic stuff. Forbusch.

Fred Forbusch. He was the arts and crafts guy.

Arts and crafts, yeah.

And so—did he—was that a specific shop out there?

Yeah.

Okay. So you remember doing projects in there with him.

Projects in there, yeah, with him.

Did you get sick at Stewart and have to go to the infirmary?

No. I had a cold one time and . . . (laughs)

They just give you medicine and send you to bed?

Yeah, send you to bed. I had a girlfriend that—I went and did the temperature thing, put my temperature [thermometer] in her mouth, so she could go to the infirmary like I could, with me! (laughs)

So it looked like she had a fever too.

Mm-hmm.

Did you attend church at Stewart?

Yeah.

Which one?

Baptist Church. And I got baptized there with Reverend Ward.

Reverend Ward?

Reverend Ward baptized me and we used to ring the bell and . . . let's see, rang the bell . . . my daughter got married up there and, um, that's all. We just rang the bell, went to church. Reverend Ward was our pastor.

And did you leave campus to come into—to go into town to do anything on the weekends?

Yeah, I lived . . . I went downtown and saw the movies downtown and went to the museum and my boyfriend at the time worked at the, at Safeway, and we went up to Safeway and got some olives, olives and crackers. (laughs) I love olives and crackers! And that's all.

Did you work during those weekends, like the outing program?

I worked during the week.

Okay, doing what?

I worked at the school store, the school store and I worked there and then, um, I worked cleaning houses there, just two days a week and maybe just a weekend. Mrs. Dietrich said, "No!" she said, "Just stay with me," and I stayed and worked in the store, and then I can stay with her, and then I lived with her just as a daughter or as a, just . . . Maw Dietrich was her name.

Maude Dietrich?

Maw-M-A-W, D-I-E-T-R-I-C-H.

Oh! So did she live on campus there in a house?

She lived in a Quonset hut, she lived in a house. It was behind the Quonset huts. She lived in a house back there, and it's no longer there and, um, she and Raymond lived there, Ray Dietrich.

And you moved in with them?

I moved in with them.

And what year was that? Your junior year, your senior year?

I don't know. Junior or senior year. Somewhere around there. I don't know. I don't remember but I moved in with them and then . . .

And the school was fine—the school officials were okay . . . ?

It was okay with them 'cuz she was a teacher. She was a—well, the school—the store owner or worked at the store, the school store and we would do the inventory and everything else that . . . made the popcorn and everything else that . . . sold everything that . . . and I worked there.

So she took you under her wing.

Her wing, yeah.

That's nice. It's good to have somebody like that so far away from home. So you did work a job. You tried working in town. Did you work during the summers in-between?

I worked with Mrs. Dietrich. I stayed with her during the summertimes. Not all the time but maybe the sophomore, junior, senior years.

Do you have memories of classmates that you went to school with?

Mm-hmm.

Like who?

Like Lois Eschiff. L-O-I-S E-S-C-H-I-F-F, or somethin' else, and Madrey McDonald and, uh, "Boy" Pavatea. We called him Boy but his name was Floyd Pavatea . . . Mary Garcia, Elnora Howard, Vivian Garfield. Oh my gosh, a lotta friends!

Well do you still keep in touch with any of them?

No, I don't . . . Mary Garcia is dead, I think, and Zazu is dead and, uh, Mary (Garcia) Dallas, I think is still alive, I don't know. Um, Elnora Howard is dead, Zazu is dead, Marilyn, Marilyn Rides at the Door now, is her name, Rides at the Door. She's from Ft. Duchesne, Utah. She worked at Ibapah, Ibapah, Utah, and Marilyn, Marilyn Steele is her name. Steele, I still write to her.

I know some of the Steele's, yes. Okay, good. And you did remain friends with Mrs. Dietrich after school, correct, until she passed?

Until she passed.

In the '80's?

Eighties, somethin' around there.

Well, still, that's a nice friendship.

Yup.

So did you know anybody from back home when you came to Stewart?

Floyd Pavatea, and from back home was—I was just thinking about that—was uh, Hootie (?) Carl's brother, we called him, what is his name? I don't know what his English name is.

But you did know some kids.

I just knew them and my brothers, my brother from back here, my brothers from back there. My two brothers and one still lives in Silver Springs and one is in Texas and then Tennessee, Tennessee.

What kind of student were you, were you shy? Were you mischievous? Happy? Quiet?

I was happy and quiet.

What were your goals?

My goals? I don't . . .

What were your plans? What were you gonna do?

My plans were just to get married and to be a housewife and just, just um—I wanted to be a nurse. My mother was a nurse and I wanted to be a nurse, but I couldn't be a nurse because I fainted every time and, um, I wanted to be a secretary and to anybody, whatever it was, and then I was and then, okay, that's all. (laughs)

Okay, and do you think there was a sense of camaraderie between students at Stewart, like that you had a special thing going compared to other, you know, Reno High School students or maybe even now, today, when you see each other at events where there's former students? Does it feel like there's a connection there?

Uh-huh, uh-huh, like Linda [Eben], Linda, the ones that you met in Arizona, those girls, and—I don't, I don't have anything from Reno and the girls over at Washoe. I connect with them. That's all.

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

Oh, there were fights, generally, there were fights with the girls and boys. I never got involved, involved with all that stuff. There were girls, Pima girls, that fought the Apaches and the Navajos and the boys fought the, um, Navajos and the Apaches and everything else. They fought everybody. I didn't get involved in all that stuff.

So they brought some of their tribal rivalries?

I just heard, yeah. I just heard, just heard all that stuff. I didn't participate.

So, where did you go after leaving Stewart?

I went to Bacone Junior College.

Okay, and how long were you there?

I was there for one and a half years.

And what'd you study there?

I studied there; I studied English and math and I studied choir, the singin', and, oh, let me see . . . just English and math, I guess, were the hardest things that I could, that I wanted to really, really accomplish.

So then after that?

I got married.

You got married, and where did you get married?

I got married in Arizona. I got married to Wallace Wilson, Jr. Had two kids.

Okay, did you work during that time?

No, no, I didn't work. My husband didn't want me to work. I worked in banking . . .

So you raised your two children, you said?

Mm-hmm.

And where in Arizona?

In Phoenix and in Tucson, and then Missouri.

What brought you out to Missouri?

Missouri was my husband. He and friends that—he was a truck driver, or wanted to be a truck driver, wanted to be in Missouri to be with his friends. We went to be with our friends and that's how we got to Missouri.

How'd you like the Midwest?

I loved it!

Really? Good for you!

It was . . . I, I, just acclimate to everything.

Good for you!

(Laughs) I just . . . I'm, we would go in the summertime when it was real hot and muggy, go in the car and we had a garage, and we'd get in the garage and we'd get in the car and go where we wanted to go, go to the mall and then we would stay at the mall and then come home, and go back into the, into the house. That's all it was, just went back and forth, that's all it was.

Stayed in the air conditioning.

Mm-hmm!

So . . . and then let me just ask a follow-up question. So how did you end back up in Carson City then?

In Carson City? My brother was here and I wanted to move back here; we got divorced. I was divorced and I moved back here and I thought, well, my brother was here and I says, "Well," they were gonna close the school in '80 and so I moved back here in '79, and I moved back here, and then my brother helped me move down here, and I just came to live out here.

Do you think attending Stewart affected your life after?

Did it affect my life? Yeah it did, a real good way.

In a good way.

In a good way, uh-huh.

Was it because of that independence?

Probably. My husband is white right now, and my first husband was white too, and my second husband is white and I just, I just live.

[Interview interrupted; Reynese begins talking about some of the Indian artwork in her home]

Do you have some bad memories about Stewart?

No, I don't have any bad memories.

Okay well, what about some of the best?

The bad memories are my sister and me; leaving her, and she was crying when she was little. The bad memories, that has nothing to do with Stewart.

Right, it's just about your sister.

It's about my sister, yeah.

But what were some of the best memories?

Best memories of the, of Stewart? The pow wows . . . now, the pow wows and seeing all the friends, all the friends and relatives, just friends at Stewart.

Do you share your memories of Stewart with your kids or other family members?

They're not around. My son's not around to share anything with, and he just . . . and my daughter is, uh, my daughter's dead. I just had two children. My son, my granddaughter, my grandson is dead. I don't have any grandchildren.

Okay. So I know that you visited the campus since you left because you go to the pow wows.

Uh, huh!

And, finally, Reynese, what, more than anything, needs to be told to visitors who aren't familiar with Stewart or Indian boarding schools; wWhat do we need to make sure to get across to them as we, as we explain the campus to them?

Stewart, long time ago, was military run or something. They had military . . . and now it isn't that way. It was independence and just growing and, ah, just growth and independence.

So it changed over time.

Yeah, it changed over time. Yeah, it did.

And so, when you went there—when you went there, it was a positive experience?

Mm-hmm.

So, in those later years, in the '50's and '60's, okay.

Still '50's and '60's and it was still positive at that time. I was real quiet and shy. I didn't do too much. I didn't go [order? unintelligible] too much. I didn't do things too much. I was kinda quiet and shy in a lotta ways, I was, you know.

And any other thoughts?

No. (laughs)

No? Thank you very much for sharing your experiences with me, Reynese.

Thank you! I didn't do anything!