

NEVADA INDIAN COMMISSION

STEWART INDIAN SCHOOL ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

FROM THE RANCH TO CARSON CITY: AN INTERVIEW WITH RUPERT STEELE

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From the Ranch to Carson City: An Interview with Rupert Steele

Rupert Steele is a Goshute man from Ibapah, Utah. He attended Stewart Indian School 1968-1971, when he graduated. While away at Stewart, Rupert missed the natural world and his experiences in it, fiercely. He gained experience in carpentry at Stewart, and participated in basketball, football, tennis and track. After graduation, Rupert was drafted for the Vietnam War, but was seriously injured in boot camp so he was eventually discharged. He then attended Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute in Albuquerque for certification in civil engineering. He returned to Ibapah to start a welding enterprise for the Goshute Tribe with other former Stewart students and served as Tribal Chairman for years. He currently lives in Ibapah.

My name is Terri McBride. It is April 11, on a Tuesday, in 2017. We are at the home of Rupert Steele in Ivapah, Utah. The interview is with Rupert Steele, a former student at Stewart Indian School. We will be discussing his 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 State Library and Archives, and Special Collections at the University of Nevada, Reno.

Rupert, when were you born and where are you from?

I was born out here on the reservation and . . .

When?

June 3, 1953.

How many people were in your family?

Thirteen.

Thirteen?

Mm-hmm.

That includes your parents?

Mm- hmm.

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

Goshute. Goshute Shoshone.

Were there communication problems between the parents and the kids? Like a language difference?

No. No, it was spoken every day, so . . . so, there was no problems.

And did your family celebrate American Indian cultural ceremonies, like dances or pine-nutting or . . . you know, traditional American Indian things?

Yeah, everything was done all traditionally out here and, you know, families would group together at certain time and to pick pine nuts or go hunting, or whatever they need to do. They had bear dances and hand games and more, a lot of the traditional was, was done here.

Were any of your other family members educated at Stewart Indian School?

Yes. My brothers and sisters went to school there.

All of them? Most of them?

Most of them. Sister, brother . . .

When did you go to Stewart? Roughly what years?

Sixty-eight.

Sixty-eight to . . . ?

Seventy-one.

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

There was an elementary school that was down here. A Bureau of Indian Affairs school and you got to a certain age, there was no—at that time, the transportation, the high school, the next high school was in Wendover. So, it was hard for the parent, for the kids to go down there. You'd have to live in Wendover to go to school there, but the other alternative we had was to go to boarding school and which I think was part of the government's assimilation policy. You had to have your kids in school in order to qualify for state benefits. So, I, anyway . . . they took us to Stewart because at that time, I didn't know about it 'til later on when I got older, why did they send us a long ways away from home, and found out why later on, why they did that.

Well, explain that. Why—what did you find out?

Later I found out that, when we got over there, they forbade us, not to speak our language, and not to practice our Indian ways, and to get away from our Indian way of life. They had to get away from, take us away from the reservation setting and away from our parents and to make it easier to assimilate into the major society, including learning the English language, because when we're here on the reservation, we're constantly talkin' our own language. English is our second language.

How did you travel over to Carson City to go to school?

They would—parents would take us from here to Wendover and then they'd put us on a bus, a charter bus to take us all the way over there.

It was like a BIA bus?

BIA and there was a charter bus paid for by the BIA.

[recording paused, telephone ringing]

So, that first time you went to Stewart on the bus from Wendover, did you know where you were going?

No, I didn't.

Never been over there?

Never been over there, never been over there.

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

I didn't think—I didn't think too much of it! I knew my brothers and my cousins that were there. They were all goin' to school over there but, you know, they—they were already had the experience of being there so, you know, I kind of looked up to them and thought, "I'll be all right," so . . . But when they put us on the bus, there were a lot of young ones. You know, we didn't know where we were goin'. So, we traveled all night. They made, they made us travel at night time. Maybe there was a reason for it, I don't know, but they took us all the way over there to Carson.

So, you got there in the morning.

Got there in the morning.

Did you enjoy being a student there?

Oh, I had problems in the first two weeks because I wasn't used to the setting or the environment. It was a culture shock to me, because of all the rules that they had, which the rules are different from . . . from being here on the reservation and being with my parents. It was more of a militaristic style of, uh, teaching over there.

Right. So, at first, you struggled.

Yeah, I struggled, uh, particularly, 'cuz I was only what, twelve years old at that time. It was, I was very young and the first thing that hit me was, my being away from my parents was hard. It was dramatic, I mean it had, it had an effect on me, in both—in my, in my welfare and in my well-being because, you know, I, you know, you go to eat and you gotta eat everything that

somebody else . . . you didn't choose what you ate, but here, our meals were different. When we got over there it was just totally—it wasn't something that—you know, I was—my body was readily accepting it. Kinda, it took time for my body to adjust to the different type of foods that they had there. So, that affected my thinking and everybody else and everything else.

Were you allowed to take anything from home with you when you went over to the school?

No.

Just clothes?

Just clothes. Just the bare stuff.

Maybe you've already mentioned this: What was the most difficult thing to leave behind then?

My, uh...

Thing, people, whatever.

My parents. My parents were the most, they were the main ones that I left behind and my environment. The . . . you know, out here, on the reservation, we're free to do anything. You know, we'll go over there and just explore and you know, in a practical way, you know, based on knowing what's out there. That's real, in reality and I mean real time. That's what I missed most, like hearing the birds and just goin' out, and not being enclosed, in a fence, and no one's sayin', "Hey, where you gonna go? What you gonna do?" I just wasn't used to that. So it was hard on me to . . . to know that, you know, I left all this stuff here and I can't have—I just can't have it.

Well, so, you talked about how hard it was for you to leave, how did, how did your parents feel about . . . was it hard for them to see all of you guys go over there?

They . . . it was very hard on them because there was one, two, shoot, outta my family probably about at one time, [counts on his fingers] one, two, three, four five, about six of us from this

family, my family, were over there and that, that put a hardship on my, my dad 'cuz there was really nobody around here to help him out. 'Cuz he had this land out here to take care of but all . . . all the . . . my, uh, younger siblings, they were the only ones here but, you know, there was a huge gap when we left. There was a huge gap here that nobody filled, but the cousins would try to come in but it's just not the same.

You mean a huge gap in age?

Age, yeah.

Yeah, Okay.

And that affected the teachings of—you know, community, so . . .

As far as campus life goes, what was living in the dorms like?

It was awful! It was awful, livin' in the dorm and, not knowing who, who your roommates are because, uh, they wouldn't place the same, same people like my brothers and my cousins in the same room because their thinkin' at that time was still, "We don't want them to talk. We want them to mingle with other people."

And at first you had a hard time with the food there, but what was eating just in the dining hall like? Was it a social time? Did you sit with certain kids?

We'd go over there and I think the government—their assimilation policy failed big time in that respect, because they let us go there as a group. You know, I'd go to eat with my brothers and my cousins and we'd go sit at the table like this and we'd talk. We'd talk, we'd talk to each other, but why they let us do that, I don't know, but the rest of the time they tried to split us apart but during the eating, during the lunch, breakfast, and dinner, they would let us sit together, which was good, which, you know, that's the way you, we are here at home, so . . .

So, it was a social time.

It was a social time.

Yeah, good. And the food? How was it?

The food, the—it was different, lot of vegetables, lot of carbohydrates, bread, pasta, very high carbo, carbohydrates. We were fed that as opposed to our eating here. We ate mostly—we ate some carbs but it wasn't that much, but mostly it was lean meat we had here. A lot of vegetables here.

Did you purchase items in the student store, Novake?

Yeah, yeah, we purchased some food over there like snacks. We'd get tired of the everyday, every day—they'd serve the same food every day, every day and you get tired of it. So, we'd go over there and get some candy or pop or sandwiches.

Did you have a favorite class?

Math was my favorite class.

Did they have vocational training when you were there?

Yeah, they had vocational training. They had a couple carpentry, auto mechanics, and, oh . . .

Did you do those?

I did, I took a, a semester in carpentry.

Okay.

They had painting. Yeah, that's the time of the industrial age.

Right, blue collar work.

Blue collar work, yep.

And how about the teachers? Did you have a favorite teacher?

I got along with . . . there was a math teacher. Her name was Weldene Tyler. She was a black lady, you know . . .

Weldene Tyler?

Tyler, yeah, Weldene, yeah.

I have heard of her. Other, other people have mentioned her too.

Yeah, and then her husband, was it Albert Tyler? I got along with him. I don't know whether it was they were black or what, but, you know, I—I got along with them.

You said you were in a carpentry class. Did you—were you involved in the school agriculture at all?

I, when I got there, it was during the—it was in the phase out. Agriculture was starting to phase out of there, so there was—I did not get involved in that, but they did have a ranch there, in Gardnerville.

Right, the Jack's Valley . . .

Jack's Valley, yeah. Yeah, we'd go over there and help them with hay.

Oh, Okay!

And, I don't know what they did with the hay. Most likely they sold it, yeah. Yeah, we'd go over there and go help 'em out.

So, you helped cut hay.

Yeah, bale hay.

And did you graduate from Stewart?

I graduated Stewart in 1971.

Graduated.

Yep, I graduated in 1971. How old was I? I was only 17 years old.

So, if you went there for three years, you were about 14 when you went?

Mm-hmm.



Rupert Steele, Ibapah, Utah. April 11, 2017.

Okay.

Yeah, well yeah, about 13, I think, goin' on 14.

Let's talk about the sports a little bit. What did the, what did the athletics at Stewart mean to you? Did you play?

I played, uh, I played all football, basketball, and track, tennis, and, uh . . .

Okay!

I tried to get involved in athletics because, you know, I like competition, so I try to remain active in it, and it taught me how to work with others.

Team player!

Team player, yeah, team player.

Yes! So out of those, which, which was your favorite or favorites?

I liked playing football and basketball, but basketball was probably my favorite.

What was it like to go watch the games? Like as a spectator. Did you go to any other . . . ?

Yeah, I'd sit up there like when I played varsity basketball. You know, I'd watch the junior varsity play.

Mm-hmm.

But I was fortunate because I was young and then I played junior varsity games, then I played in the varsity games, too. So I played—I played some good times and put in some good times playing both of those! (laughs)

Right, right. Well, I've heard that the crowds were pretty rowdy sometimes, um . . .

They were. They was always rowdy. I mean not sometimes, they was always rowdy.

(Laughs) Okay.

Yep, it was at, there was a lot of—during that time there was a lot of misunderstanding in all the other high schools, you know, they knew that we were all Indian kids, you know. They, they'd treat us mean. Like in Elko and Ely, the bus rolled in and they'd be throwin' eggs at us, that kind of treatment. Tryin' to scare us off, tell us to go home.

Well, what was—are you talking about when you guys were the away team and you would show up in Elko?

Yep. And, you know, they, they'd kick you when you ran, playing football—they'd kick you or pinch you or, you know, they were mean to us.

Well, what was it like for them to come to your home turf then?

They didn't like it. They didn't like it. Because when they'd come to our home turf, you know, well, like, you know, my cousin will be playin' one spot, my brother playin' another, I'll be playin' another, so, we talk to each others. And we'd say, "Yeah, you do this, you do that," but nobody understood us. We talked to each other like that just like the code talkers, you know? We did the same thing! (laughter) So, it was kinda neat.

Mm-hmm, that's cool. And what kinds of events or activities did you attend in that auditorium?

They had a lotta movies in that auditorium. We'd go over there and they'd have some school plays, some theatrical stuff that they would bring in. Go over there and go watch 'em.

Any musical performances?

They had some musical performances.

And did you attend any other social-type things with the other students? I'm thinking . . . I don't know, like dancing, dances?

They had a lotta dances on weekends, and we'd go hiking often in the mountains. For recreation stuff. We'd go to pow wows.

Pow wows? Where?

There, there, we'd just have little, little get-togethers.

Oh! Right there on school grounds?

Yeah, yep.

And were you in any groups or clubs?

Ah, Rodeo Club. I was in the band.

What'd you play in the band?

I had a trumpet.

And what was the first one you said? Another club?

Rodeo Club. Yeah, rodeo, Stewart Indian Rodeo Club.

Rodeo!

And they had a Pow Wow Club.

And regarding buildings on campus, any experiences in a particular building that stand out to you?

There, most of the dorms, you know, you'd experience some spirits in there and . . . but I never paid attention to them.

Did you get sick at Stewart or need medical attention at the infirmary?

Well, yeah, I got pneumonia when I was over there. I got real sick so, so I spent some time in the little hospital we had there.

Was the staff, did the staff treat you okay there?

Yeah, they treated me good.

So you had to stay for several days in bed?

Yeah! Yep. I was in bed for about, I don't know, what? I think it was about a week.

And did you go to church while you were at Stewart?

I went to, yeah, I went to, uh, the Mormon church, the LDS church that's still sittin' over there now.

So, you said earlier that you hiked on weekends. [recording paused, someone enters house] Rupert, did you leave campus on the weekends? Did you go into Carson City to fool around, to shop?

Yeah, they let us go on Saturdays, but you had to get on the van or a bus that goes down there.

Right.

Then if you missed that bus comin' back, you'd have to walk home. Yep.

Did you work in that area?

I, I . . . I did some lawn mowing for some people that—that were there in Carson City.

Oh, okay. So, how did that work? Did they just come, did they put a note up on campus looking for, you know, part-time yard work or whatever?

Yeah, yeah, they put out some notices.

And did you come back home in the summers?

Summers—yeah, we came back home on summers.

Okay, so you would help your parent—you would help your dad?

Right.

So you basically worked on the ranch while you were at home?

Mm-hmm.

Any classmates that you have memories of?

There's a guy, his name was Alfred Delores. He's a Pima guy out of . . . uh, I think he was Maric . . . no, out of Phoenix somewhere.

Mm-hmm. Was he your roommate or . . . ?

Yeah, he was my roommate!

Did you keep in touch with him after school?

Yeah, I kept in touch with him and I was hoping to see him at the . . . at the reunion [in Phoenix, November 2016] but he wasn't there.

Anyone else? Team mates?

Team mates! Joe Ramon, a big, big guy. Yeah, he was down at Phoenix at the reunion.

Joe Ramon?

Joe Ramon, yeah.

And he played football?

Basketball. Both basketball and football.

And, so that's someone you've kept in touch with, too?

Yeah.

Any teachers that you kept in touch with after school?

Huh-uh, nah.

I know that there were people that you knew from back home over at the school, because you mentioned that your cousins and your brothers were there.

Mm-hmm.

Anyone else from Ibabah that was there when you were there?

Yeah, there was a lot of us. I don't know, maybe close to twenty, maybe twenty-five of us. A bunch of us were there.

Really? Wow, so you had a whole contingency.

I had a whole contingency.

(Laughs) So what kind of student were you? Were you shy, happy, quiet?

I was quiet, uh . . .

Competitive, you said.

Yeah, I like to compete.

So what were your goals or future plans after school?

My immediate plan was to graduate and get the heck outta there as soon as I can!

(Laughter)

Graduate, ASAP, so . . .

But my . . . I was . . . at that time that draft was still on. My Selective Service card had number twelve on it.

Oh, okay.

So, that kinda bothered me, right? I knew I was gonna go right in as soon as I got outta school.

Yeah. So you really couldn't make any plans.

I couldn't make any plans. My plans were already set by the federal government. They wanted me to go fight. There was two of us, my cousin, too. His was thirteen and mine was twelve. We knew we was gonna go. So you know, with that kind of cloud hangin' over you, it was hard for you to make any concrete plans until you got that over with.

Right, right. Yeah. Do you feel like that there was a sense of connection between students, maybe especially since you left Stewart and it's now in your past? Is there a connection with other fellow Stewart students?

Yeah, there is. (sighs) We . . . the connection is that most of it is our, how we, how we learned from Stewart as Indian kids and what was our struggle over there too, you know. That affects our . . .

[Phone ringing, recording paused]

So, what was it like for so many people from so many different tribes to be all together at Stewart?

It was a learning session. I mean learning, learning, learning experience for me because, you know, I wasn't exposed to other tribes when

I left from here, and the only tribe that I knew was us guys here. So, when I got over there and started listenin' to all their different languages over there, it was kinda interesting. "What are they talkin' about?" So, I couldn't understand any of them, you know, so when I started makin' friends, I tried to find out, you know, what they were talkin' about. "What is this word?" "What did you guys talk about," and thinkin' that they were talkin' bad about me, but . . .

So after leaving Stewart you were drafted.

I was drafted, yeah. I came here. At age seventeen, I was here.

Okay.

And then, uh, I stayed here for, I don't know, eight months, helped my dad out. Then when I turned eighteen, that's when they came knockin' on the door.

Right. So, where did you end up going?

Fort Douglas over here in Salt Lake. Both of us went there.

And then, after the military, after your service, what did you do?

I did, uh, I went in and I busted my elbow, and busted my collarbone. Yeah, so, they wouldn't take me 'til I healed up. Took a long time.

Um-hmm.

And then . . . but they kept a eye on me and I would go back and doctors keep sayin, "No, can't go, can't go."

Right, well, so then—so were you then discharged, or you just served out your four years . . . ?

No, they tried to keep me in there but they couldn't because they wouldn't take me back in there because I was all busted by that time, yeah.

So then what did you do?

Then I came back here and went to a school down there. It's called Southwestern Indian

Polytechnic Institute in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Oh, yes.

So, I went down there—my brother and I went down there.

Say the name of that school again.

Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute. They call it SIPI. S-I-P-I.

You can get undergraduate degrees there, or was it like a certification thing or . . . ?

It was a certification thing.

And so, what did you . . . ?

I was, I went as . . . I was, I went there as a civil engineer.

Did you marry somebody from Stewart Indian School or . . . ?

Yeah.

You did?

Yep.

What was her maiden name?

Catalina Querta.

Where's she from?

Hualapai Tribe, Peach Springs, Arizona.

Ah, yes, I visited them two weeks ago.

Did you talk to her?

Huh-uh.

No? You shoulda talked to her. A lotta them down there from Stewart.

She wasn't there. Olivia was there and then a woma—I'd have to look at my list—a woman that went there in the '60's. She was older than everybody. Oh, so you met your spouse, your future spouse at the Stewart Indian School.

I didn't even know her.

Oh.

I didn't know her.

At school, you didn't know her.

Hmm-mm.

So, how did you . . . ?

Down there near Flagstaff. I went to Flagstaff. We went from, well, Albuquerque over to Northern Arizona University.

Oh, okay.

That's where.

Then . . .

Yeah, Northern Arizona University.

And that's where you met Catalina.

Yep. In Peach Springs, yeah.

So, do you think attending Stewart affected your life in any significant way?

Yeah, it taught me how to have respect for other people, other tribes, and not to be judgmental about 'em because they had their own beliefs, they had their own ways, they had their own language, and I respected that.

Do you think your career choice or your goals in life changed?

Yeah, yep, it did. After I got over that . . . the cloud hangin' over me—the draft—then I started thinkin' what I'm gonna do. But it was—because it was hard for me, you know. I was thinking I'm gonna spend four years in the Army, you know, maybe, maybe I won't make it back. At that time, Vietnam was goin' on. So, I was thinkin' like that and I really didn't make any plans 'til we got all that settled and that's when I said, "I'm going to school." So, that's when I took off.

What's a bad memory you have of Stewart?

Getting into fights, needlessly. I mean, why, why get into fights? I don't know.

With other kids?

Other kids. That was not good.

Yeah. How about some of the better ones? Better memories of Stewart?

Learning how to get along with other tribal members and, uh, if we had problems, you know, we'd discuss it, you know, because other tribes, you know, they have similar situation like us and then we'd have, sit down and talk about it: "How did you guys go about doin' this?" and we started learning and found out that everybody had the same problems. Same problem that was here, we're havin' the same problem somewhere else. So, it was kind of, kind of an eye opener for me. I said, "Whoa! We're not the only ones that are goin' through this stuff. Everybody else is," and that was the bad stuff, you said? And the other one was, seeing some of the treatment that they imposed on us, like, you had to be in bed at a certain time, you gotta get up a certain time, you gotta wash the clothes a certain time. Those kinda of . . . that, it was a harsh, harsh guidelines that we had to live through and if you didn't do it, you know, they'd impose some restriction on us and we'd be out there moppin' floor or cleaning toilet bowls, not goin' to the movie. They restricted you.

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

Yeah! Yep.

What do you tell 'em?

I tell 'em that, if you guys want to go to boarding school, there's still some left out there. There's Chemawa, there's Sherman, if you guys want to experience what it's like rather than going to public school. You know, it's . . . I encourage them to do that because you get to learn other tribes that are out there.

Hmm! So, I saw you on the campus recently. When's the last time you visited the campus before that?

Last, uh . . . that's the last time I was there. That was last month?

Was it February?

February, yeah. February, it was . . .

So, before that, when was your last time?

Ahhh, I think I was over there in November.

Good! So, you come fairly regularly.

Yep, yeah. I try to make it every year.

And what, more than anything, needs to be told to visitors who aren't familiar with Stewart as part of the whole Stewart story? What do we need to get across to them?

We need to let 'em know that the school played important, an important role in the improvement of the children, of the Indian student's education and also that, that to me, it was . . . it just proved to me that the assimilation policy of the government was dead before it even started. See, it was already something that was . . . was dying. It was dying, during my time.

Right. So, it wasn't working anymore.

It wasn't workin' anymore. It wasn't workin' anymore, because Stewart was stuck in Industrial Age and then when the computer information technology—computer—came on board, Stewart was left behind. Couldn't continue it and I think that was one of the main reasons that they . . . that they felt the students were falling behind because of the boarding school. Well, I really don't know, really don't know the reasons why they closed it down other than funding, but I think there was some deep-lying issues there that need to be brought up to the surface. I always thought about that. Like all of us went to school over there. We were welders, we were carpenters. I mean, we were . . . we learned a lot, you know, from the trade over there. And then when we got over here, then we were stuck in that mindset and then they opened up this welding shop here. It was perfect for all of us, because we already had training.

So, we made a good living with that, you know; they paid us good wages and then our mindset was, we would live through that forever. We were wrong, big time! Computers came on, what happened. We're still stuck in that age. Some of us out here still scared of the computer. Some won't even turn it on. So, that's what I'm talkin' about. Maybe something like that. Was it the reason that Stewart closed? I don't know.

Might have been just too much money for them to invest.

Could be, I don't know, but you know, personally, I learned some things but I guess that it's my attitude too, you know. I'm not—I'm one of those guys who like to learn, say watch and learn things and even though at my age, you know, I still learn. I learn from the young ones and I learn from the old ones. I learn from my grandkids! They have a lot of things to teach you but, we need to, you know, pay more attention to them and they're living in a different, different era and it's all technology. That takes away from the practical. If we're walkin' around out there seeing what's out there . . . there's a snake out there, a mouse out there, they don't do that no more. So, that thinking is gone. So, it's, it's a tough world. How do we get around that? But I always think about that. What—what if they went back to Stewart, would they be stuck in that Industrial Age, even today? I always think about that, even if they were still open or would they have changed? I don't know. It's something that, that, what if? So, it's, what if Stewart was open? How would it be today?

So, any other thoughts?

Yeah, I, I enjoyed goin' to Stewart even though I had to live under strict regulations. Made new friends.

Rupert, thank you very much for sharing your experiences with me.

Mm-hmm.