

INTERVIEW, INTERVIEWER, INTERVIEWEE

TOPIC: Midwives

DATE: July 14, 2017

Interview Length: 57:57

Full Name (Interviewer): Tim McCleary

Full Name (Interviewee): Geneva Whiteman

Initials (Interviewer): TM

Initials (Interviewee): GW

Tim McCleary [TM]: So um, this is an NEH grant National Endowment for the Humanities...

Geneva Whiteman [GW]: Uh-huh.

TM: ...and what I'm doing is trying to find out about the last mid-wives in Crow.

GW: Oh yeah.

TM: In Crow? And umm so um why don't we start out with uh, you tell me your name, your Crow name and your clans and where you're from.

GW: My name is Geneva Whiteman. I'm a member of the Bad War Deeds and I'm a child of the uh Ties The Bundle clan.

TM: Um [a term used for 'yes,' and a polite way of acknowledgment that Tim is listening].

GW: What else was it you just said?

TM: Your Crow name.

GW: My Crow name is Holy Road [or Sacred Road]. It was given to me by my great uncle Mittoon [uncertain of spelling] Old Horse who was a blind man but he went to the school for deaf and blind in Great Falls, so he was educated.

TM: Umm.

GW: When I was a toddler, I uh, at that time, nobody had electricity or refrigeration, and we were living in Pryor at uh what was called The Camp. It was a bunch of log cabins all together and they had most of the people all had homes on their own lands but they uh had leased them out. And in the log cabins there'd be several families living together. And uh I guess I uh guess some corn on the cob were on the table and uh they were old and I got into it and I ate it and I nearly died. And my uncle

Mittoon was visiting my uh parents so he doctored me and, at that time, gave me my Indian name and prayed that I would come out of it but I guess I almost died. [Chuckle]

TM: Gee whiz...huh. Um do you of any mid-wives that worked in Pryor?

GW: Yes, it was my father's aunt, Matilda Round Face but her maiden name was Red Shirt.

TM: Oh uh-huh.

GW: That was uh my grandfather Harry Whiteman's uh uncle, I think. It was my grandfather Harry Whiteman and I don't know this Red Shirt's first name.

TM: Umm.

GW: Matilda's father, then there was uh a Singer, Adam Singer's father.

TM: Oh okay.

GW: They were all brothers, same other, different fathers.

TM: Umm.

GW: She delivered practically all the babies in Pryor and, at the time, it was uh considered taboo to go in the hospital.

TM: Umm.

GW: They didn't have any faith at all in the doctors and uh I remember that the women who were pregnant made sure that uh Matilda would be home. You know, they would keep checking.

TM: Um.

GW: And uh the Walls, I remember Alma Wall, she lived with my family and uh today, well, her first borne was Arthur Wall. And, then, my mom said that she had a bunch of children, a bunch of babies that she lost, you know, right after they were born. She didn't say whether they were stillborn or what happened but uh she uh prayed an awful lot and fasted and, finally, was able to uh bring children, you know, in to this world.

TM: Umm.

GW: And uh she was giving birth and they uh put a mattress right on the floor and, at that time, Arthur must have been 4 or 5 years old and uh I must have been about 6 or 7 and my brother, younger brother, Norman, he was there and they shooed us out of the house. [Laughter] And they went ahead and brought Matilda and uh after she was screaming and uh really in uh various times, she would be angry and she would cuss [Laughter] Bill Wall out, too. And, finally, she had the baby and it

was Josephine Wall who lives in the same housing unit where I live in Pryor now. And I remember they told us, "You can come in now, and Arthur and you can see the baby. You have a little sister." And we went in the house and we were looking at the baby and all of a sudden, Alma started screaming. I guess it was the after birth...

TM: Ohh, huh.

GW: Still in her stomach and it was trying to come out and Arthur said, "What is it, Mama, are you going to do it again?" [Laughter] But I was told by Matilda's daughters that she had a little notebook and she recorded all the babies that she delivered. And I was trying to find that but um I understand that her daughter-in-law Julia, who died recently, that she had it but that family is in a lot of turmoil right now. And the men in the family, there are three of them, they uh threw out the, their sister and then their sister-in-law. I guess they're drinking a lot since they lost Julia. So I wasn't able to get a hold of that notebook..

TM: Um.

GW: But I'm going to keep trying to see if....so I can look through it because I would be in there, too, because she delivered me. And my uh father was working for the uh, it was one of the programs under Roosevelt, I think, CCC, Civil Conservation Corps, and they were building the road between uh St. Xavier and Pryor. And uh my father worked on the roads as did most of the men in Pryor and I guess my parents would, along with the other families, they would set up a tent and then, keep moving towards St. Xavier and when we were....when they were settled at Hay Creek, this is where the Landes live now, that's where I was born. In a tent.

TM: Ummm.

GW: And uh Maxine Russell LaForge, you know, the LaForge boys of, well, they're going by Enemy Hunter, but their mother was a young girl and she said that they hung around the tent when my mom was giving birth to me. Then, in the midst of a terrible rain storm, I was born. [Laughter] They always would tell me that whenever I say it.

TM: Ummm, when was Matilda uh a midwife, like what, what years was she a midwife?

GW: Um, probably all of her life and I was born in 1936.

TM: Umm.

GW: And she was the midwife then and uh my grandfather...I don't really know where he went to school. His name was Harry Whiteman, [not sure of translation] Flat Nose or Wide Nose, that was his Indian name. But he uh said that the uh, this I learned later, that the IHS or the BIA, somebody was interested in uh sending Matilda to uh, sending her away to get more training so that she would become a nurse but she wouldn't leave and her family wouldn't allow her to, to go.

TM: Umm.

GW: I remember she was uh a beautiful woman and, in those days, they had uh wooden coal stoves and uh she was one of the few women, aside from my grandmother, Sarah Goes Ahead, but for every meal, they would prepare uh biscuits in the oven. [Chuckle] And they were...it was a way of pleasing their husbands.

TM: Uh-huh. Huh.

GW: And, when we finally moved, uh out of the camp, that had to be right after World War II when my father came back. And uh we moved to ah my grandmother's house where my brother, Edward Jr. lives now. And it was a three-room log cabin. And, uh, those were, I guess, the best days of my life living there. Because we were close to the hills, you know, and my brother Norman and I would wander around [laughter] and uh I loved to fish back then and he'd follow me everywhere, my brother would. And then when he grew tired or hungry and wanted to go home, he'd start throwing things in to the creek. [Laughter]

TM: Ummm....

GW: There were ten in my family and I am the oldest. And the uh my, the girls that my mom lost, the babies, they were all girls. And then during World War II, I lost a two-year-old brother. Colin [or Owen] was his name. That was my first uh experience of losing someone and I took it hard.

TM: Yeah.

GW: Beause I would uh try to bring home things from school, you know, for him and it was really hard. We, he, went with double pneumonia. And uh the only car uh in Pryor during that war time was uh...and these people like John Smart Enemy and Owen Smells, Sr., they owned trucks and then my clan brother Simpson Sings Good, he always lived on his land, uh, past where Larry Falls Down lives now, the house is still there but uh he always owned a sedan. He was the, he and his wife were the ones who raised Willie Stewart.

TM: Oh okay.

GW: And my mother was given away when uh she was a toddler and uh my uh grandmother, she also raised me. The woman who adopted my mom? Her name was uh Good Magpie. But then in uh papers where I've seen her and in pictures, they uh always listed her as Sage Woman.

TM: Hmph.

GW: And that name is what's given to my brother's oldest daughter and she lives in uh think it's close to Mexico in California and she teaches Special Education there. That interest must be in the family because that was what I, I got my Masters in. I got my Masters in Special Ed at Eastern Montana College and then, I got another Masters in Religious Education at Loyola University in Chicago. I went there four summers and uh it was eh the priest who thought that it would be a very good thing for me to learn uh for major in Religious Education, that's Father Randolph, and uh he asked me before I went to, before I went away to uh study to teach uh Religion to the children at St. Charles. And I said, "I can't," He said, "Why?" And I said, "I don't feel qualified." So, he said, "Okay," and he left. Then,

a few days later he came back and he had a list of these Catholic schools and he asked me which one I'd like to go to and I chose Loyola.

TM: Ummm.

GW: So I went there four summers in a row to get my uh Masters. And it was really something because when I finally got it, you know, through the Retreats, the uh visits to all the various churches in Chicago and everything, I got, I felt I got back to where I started. [Laughter]

TM: Yeah.

GW: But I enjoyed all my time in Chicago.

TM: Ummm, do you know how Matilda learned to be a midwife?

GW: Probably just by uh that there was no one else to do it, you know, and I think that she probably started in the family and she did so well that uh all the families insisted on having her when they were having babies. Then she was uh a great believer in uh praying in the sweat bath. She had two daughters, Hannah and June and then, Mickey, who lived with us until he married Julia Spotted Bear and Bobby. They're all gone and it's uh, with diabetes. I think it had a lot to do with their diet because uh they...Matilda cooked, you know, to please her husband, Eddie, and I remember they uh, not only had pan bread but they had a lot of fried bread, you know, and a lot of fried meat. It was mostly deer that everyone relied on back then.

TM: Uh-huh.

GW: But she was a good cook, too.

TM: Ummm, was there, were there any sort of, like, rules, like you said, that they made the children leave the house? Was there any kind of rules when the pers...when a woman was giving birth? Like who could be there.

GW: Oh yes. The children had to be out of the house and uh we'd go around and stand in front of the door or the windows and try to listen [laughter] to everything that was going on in the house.

TM: And do you know, did they, did the, you said they put the mattress on the floor. Did the woman lay down or did she kneel to give birth or do you know?

GW: The one giving birth laid down.

TM: Laid down. Okay.

GW: And I don't remember because I was, I had to leave, you know, if she stayed that way or not.

TM: Yeah. Umm, did she, do you know if she gave...

GW: No men.

TM: And no men, yeah.

GW: Uh-huh.

TM: Did she give them anything, any teas to drink or...anything like tea?

GW: Anything like tea? Like medicinal, like herbal tea or anything like that?

GW: I don't know. But what everybody had back then was peppermint tea.

TM: Uh-huh.

GW: And they, we had more of that than we had coffee. In fact, children weren't allowed coffee. And I never had coffee until I started college at Indianapolis.

TM: Huh, huh.

GW: And I found out that it woke me up so...[Laughter]

TM: Yeah. [Laughter]

GW: I started drinking at least two cups of coffee before my classes.

TM: Ummm, let's see, so when, did Matilda come around at any time before the child was born or after the child was born?

GW: Uh-huh.

TM: Or did they just go...

GW: And she uh I'm sure talked to the women who were pregnant, you know, about uh the importance of uh exercise and then going in to the sweat.

TM: Umm.

GW: Because I remember a lot of...even maybe today, it's still like that. Pregnant women went in the sweat.

TM: Does that help them give birth or just to keep them healthy?

GW: It's keeping them healthy.

TM: Is there any other practices that pregnant women should do or that they did?

GW: I can't really recall anything except that they uh had to do the usual work in the home, you know, that they weren't prevented from working.

TM: Uh-huh.

GW: And back then, a lot of uh...I can't recall anybody owning, owning a sewing machine. All the sewing was by hand.

TM: Uh-huh. Yeah. Uh-huh. Hmmph. And then after, after the child was born, did Matilda do anything then? I mean...

GW: She was also a doctor of colic, colicky babies.

TM: Oh okay.

GW: And, for that, she was...they went after her a lot, you know, and I can't recall the family giving her anything for delivering the babies but I know that when she doctored the uh...they all felt that they should give her something. And I can't recall that she smoked but she probably did because a lot of the women did.

TM: Do you know of any other midwives that were in Pryor or anywhere else on the reservation?

GW: She was the only one I knew.

TM: Umm.

GW: And she uh made it a point to visit the pregnant women, you know, to see how they were doing. That was important to her. And she uh, back then, everybody, all the women, including my mother, dressed in traditional Crow with the high top moccasins and wide belts and all. Then when I transferred from Indiana to uh the University in Missoula, I caught that Asian flu? And I landed in the hospital and my parents came up to uh stay in town and visit me until I got out of the hospital. I tried to withdraw from college and my father wouldn't hear of it but uh, then my mother uh arrived without her traditional Crow clothes and she never went back to it, except for, you know, powwows.

TM: Yeah. Huh.

GW: And they uh had...it was the Pryor people [a sound I couldn't understand], like a, uh, they used an old government warehouse. It was a two-story warehouse for their dances and things. And for their hand games, they used another log house that was smaller than the warehouse that they used for dances. But uh they really paid attention to the children and uh by that, I mean they would separate the girls, the little girls from the boys and then they would teach us how to dance. And then, you know, the way was for the girls to go and choose a partner and they taught us to do that and even the ones who found it hard to uh do the steps in dancing, an adult would completely take over or a woman or a man in showing them, showing us how to dance.

TM: Uh-huh.

GW: And that kind of attention I thought was really good and important. And later, as I uh finished high school and left, it seemed like they got away from that type of life in the community. It seemed like there was more crime and more drinking and everything when they gave up, you know, the things we used to do.

TM: Uh-huh. Ummm, what do you think is the reason that women started having babies in hospitals?

GW: What do I think...

TM: Why women started having babies in hospitals.

GW: I think because uh [chuckle] of the, eh, difficulty of going in to labor because even when you are in the hospital and you have a doctor and nurses right there, you know, birth is painful and I could see them thinking that it would be better to, to uh the hospital.

TM: Uh-huh. Do you of any time when government tried to stop Matilda from being a midwife?

GW: Not really. Maybe that was happened. I don't know if uh my grandfather prevailing upon uh Matilda to go and get more training, you know, I was too young to remember. But I know that he really tried hard but she just wouldn't leave home.

TM: Yeah.

GW: That was frowned up on. A married woman with children leaving home.

TM: Yeah.

GW: There's a, there's a story that I heard about um a Crow midwife in Pryor that delivered a white baby and that her name was On Top Of The House? She's the wife of Plain Bull, the first Plain Bull.

GW: That was the last name Plain Bull?

TM: Yeah. Her name, well, her husband was Plain Bull.

GW: Um.

TM: The original Plain Bull.

GW: Uh-huh.

TM: And then her name was On Top Of The House? On Top Of The House but they are on top of a lodge but there was a...the story is that there was a woman, a white woman, in Pryor and for whatever reason, the husband couldn't get her to Fromberg where the doctor was so they called on her and she delivered the baby.

GW: And she was a white woman?

TM: The woman that gave birth was white.

GW: Uh-huh.

TM: Yeah. Have you ever heard that?

GW: I've never heard of it.

TM: Because I'm trying to find out who that woman was. I know who the midwife is but I don't know...

GW: Uh-huh. Was it Matilda?

TM: No, the midwife was On Top Of The House.

GW: Ohhh, that's right.

TM: Yeah so it's got to be like early 1900's maybe.

GW: Matillda's uh Indian name was Kills Many Enemies.

TM: Hmph. Yeah.

GW: But I'll...I'd like to check that out to see if uh some of the elders...the problem is there's so few people now.

TM: Yeah. Yeah, I don't know what year that was.

GW: Uh-huh.

TM: But um, of course, Pryor was so isolated and I don't...

GW: Still is.

TM: Yeah...for uh even to get anywhere.

GW: Uh-huh.

TM: But I guess that woman said that...told her husband that they wouldn't make it to Fromberg.

GW: Uh-huh.

TM: So that's why he went after that midwife.

GW: There was a, uh doctor who lived in Pryor way back then. I can't recall the last name but uh that doctor had a son and he grew up uh in Pryor and he mastered the Crow language and was a good friend of uh the late Camel Big Hail and I remember because we lived up the road and uh the Big Hails lived a little further up, across the road from the Bull Tails, Alice and George Bull Tail. And uh I remember Art Obelander, that was his name and he came many years later to visit his friend Camel and it was really something to...for uh us, us kids then to see a white person master the Crow language and then he would uh, he would go to the various homes. He would kind of hit the door and then say his name and that was how they entered the homes, I guess, back then. Announce themselves. [Laughter]

TM: Yeah. [Chuckle] That's cool. Yeah. Well, do you have any other things that I didn't ask that you think are important?

GW: Oh, the uh example I could mention is that uh that this old couple, Sage Woman and her husband, they uh had a, a daughter and uh the daughter married Charlie Ten Bear who used to live here in Crow. And he, he had thirteen wives and, during dances, he would come and stay at our house and he would go to the dances and he would go up to the drummers and sing his uh "Throwing away wives" and he'd uh have them sing his song and he would carry thirteen sticks, you know, the kind that they use in hand games and uh he would dance completely around the drummers and he'd throw away these sticks. I guess I was young then but I really didn't like that and I didn't like him. And uh, he had one of our rooms off to the side that was for my brother, Joseph Bull Tail, and it had an oil stove in there so when my grandmother came, it was Dolly, Dora but everyone knew her as Dolly. And her father was Irish [laughter] and uh she'd uh share the room with uh Charlie and uh my brother, Joe, would still be in there too. And they'd fight over the oil stove because the old man would turn it way up high and then, my grandmother would turn it way down [laughter]. But uh I remember poor uh Charlie Ten Bear, he would uh have uh everything done for him. He liked it, you know, like Crow men back that time, he had to put his plate right in front of him and silverware and then, making his bed and we didn't have that type of room so uh for many beds but we had roll away beds. And they uh one, one night after a dance, we came home and uh he did this thing with the sticks and uh then we got home and my Mom said uh, "Geneva, make up your grandfather's bed," you know, fix his bed for him. And I said, "No, I'm not going to do it." And my dad says, "How come?" And I said, "Well, I think it's about time he called on his sticks." [Laughter] As young as I was, I resented his throwing away the women and he had all these wives and, yet, when the couple who adopted by mother lost their daughter, he came in on her estate. And they had a daughter and she passed away. And, so, back then, it was the thing to do if you had a loss, especially a child or a baby, you took somebody else's. You would go and ask and it was taboo to turn them down, especially at a time that they had lost. And uh so that was how they uh got my mother. Because her uh family was Sarah, I can't remember his, her maiden name but uh she was half white, too, and you could really tell, you know, that she had brown hair, kind of curly hair and uh she uh married Decrane, Alexander Decrane whose picture is in the uh Pryor Clinic. He was a handsome man. And uh then after uh Decrane passed away, while she was in the process of marrying uh George Goes Ahead, then, the family all stepped in and took the Decrane children. And so, she was relieved of having to raise any of the Decrane children. I guess, back then, that was the way to do it, like uh, when Alec Plain Feather was marrying Rose Hugs, Rose had uh Star and Aileen Not Afraid and uh Alec was uh, his mother was from the Rocky Boy reservation, the Cree, and so uh the kids uh mother, Big Eyes uh was, must have had a lot of children and the Plain Feathers lost what children they were, they had for the...so they adopted Alec and so the uh Office names of the Plain Feathers who live in Pryor now is still Wood Tick [chuckle] but uh, they pretty much um made up for the loss of a child by taking another, especially one that was the same age, the same sex and then, just taking them and uh, in place of the one they lost. That isn't practiced so much anymore.

TM: Uh-huh.

GW: I remember that, when eh we lost my uh younger brother, Colin, during World War II, it was awful because there were no men, you know, everybody was serving, and in the service, and uh we, my mom, when she was in the hospital, Maxine LaForge was in there, too, I guess and had Daniel, who recently passed away so I remember my mother and my father being close to Daniel because he was the same age as the brother that I lost. And those type of things would...people, I don't think practice that so much anymore.

TM: U-huh.

GW: They were good in a way, you know, and it just seems like as the families were no longer nuclear, the uh relationships that they practiced way back then, you know, we've lost, too.

TM: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Well?

GW: But uh, what is it called now? In the dances, dances that they used to do in Pryor uh, "Retrieve the Hat", the War Bonnet Dance, yes, they uh used to have leaders and uh they even had the uh women do that, that dance and then they, when they uh, they take turns, the first one would tell a story of something good, a deed, a good deed, or if she couldn't do it, an elder was called upon to do for them, and they would give away, you know, before they sat down. And uh my sister uh Carol Good Luck and Matilda's granddaughter, Deanne Round Face, did that dance and they were selected and my mother and uh Deanne's mother, Hannah, were really proud that their daughters were in that dance. And, here, George Bull Tail was the leader and they were scared, they didn't want to participate and I guess my mom and Hannah had told them, "You just watch George and you do everything that he does," you know, and George had uh, he was getting on in years and he had trouble with one leg so he limped and, while he was leading the dance, he was limping along and, so, Carol and Deanne limped right along [laughter]. And I haven't seen that dance in a long time. Maybe they do it during the Crow Fair, I don't know.

TM: Yeah, they did it at Native Days.

GM: Uh-huh.

TM: Maybe two years ago? Yeah.

GM: And then, you know, we have had a lot of deaths in Pryor. And uh they were...the way to stop that, according to the elders, is to have "Day Time Dance." And they have been uh, people, two people who would be responsible for, who owned the right to do that, were Spooky Goes Ahead and Heywood Big Day. And I know that some of the people went to them but they haven't done it yet.

TM: Ummm, Huh. Ummm So there's a, with the project, there's a \$100 honorarium for you and \$50 travel. So I need you to fill out a W-9 and then...

GW: Okay.

TM: So the top part there, your name and...

GW: I don't think I brought my glasses.

TM: Okay do you want me to just, I'll do it if you just tell me.

GW: Okay.

TM: So, um, ok. Your name.

GW: Geneva Whiteman.

TM: Whiteman and then individual , oh, I'll turn this off.