

Transcript of Oral History Interview with Damon James

Interviewed by Carol Tonnies in Brigham City March 24, 2012

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Carol Tonnies: I'm Carol Tonnies, and I am interviewing. . .

Damon James: Damon James.

CT: And what years were you at Intermountain School?

DJ: From 1964 to 1969.

CT: I'm going to ask you a few questions, Damon, and my first question is what caused you to come to Intermountain?

DJ: Well, it's sort of a long story. I went to various boarding schools on the reservation. After while you need to get a little higher into education and to go somewhere else. I was wanting to go to Sherman Institute in California. But I guess it's pretty popular because that place filled out already. I came to find out that all the other operating boarding schools were full, and the only place that was open was Intermountain. I wasn't sure what I was going to do, but I thought, *Oh, well. Why not?* That's how I ended up over here.

CT: How was it for you when you got here?

DJ: Well, the thing about me is that I was taken away from home when I was a little kid. It was a very dramatic thing. Think of it this way – you take a kid out of family life, who really doesn't understand English and really doesn't understand anything. He's plucked out of a family and put into another environment. That was the way I was taken away from home. One day I saw this car pull up, and there was something about it I didn't like when I was a little kid. Two people came out and grabbed hold of me. My mother was crying, and I was crying. That's the way they hauled me off to school. As a young man away from home, it seems to me like you grew up already. The first year you're beginning, and the second and third you're becoming accustomed to the environment that is like the military.

When I came to Intermountain, I could understand how the system ran. The only thing different about Intermountain was that there were a lot of kids, a lot of people. That's the only thing that really amazed me. When I got there, they told me where to go and where to line up, that sort of thing. It was so like the military. It's no surprise to me that later on, when I joined the military, I thought, *I've already been here. Intermountain was the same way.* I spent a year here, and somehow it just became a part of me, somewhere back here in my subconscious memory. The whole thing is still there. The whole thing is alive, like it happened yesterday. Sometimes I can lie down, close my eyes, and visualize everything like it was yesterday. I can remember the songs, the radios, and everything else.

What I'd really like to talk about is the latter part in 1968 and 1969. That was the best part of my life. In 1968 I had a friend named Peter Hayes. He had some money, so we went down to Ogden and bought a Chevy. He bought a '57 Chevy. It was a small cafe, and there was a car parked out in front with a For Sale sign. We bought that car. The guy who owned the car was in the back washing dishes. We bought that car for \$350. That was the last part of the school year. We had a good time. We drove that car around the campus. The car had a small radiator leak, and we had to add water to it every few days. So we managed to get a tow truck and tow that truck back to the chapel – that chapel right over there. That friend was like a brother. It saddens me to know he died just last month. Anyway, we drove that car, and parked the car there, but he went his way, and I went my way. That was 1968, and that was the greatest year of our lives. I believe that was partly because of a man who was was a dormitory attendant. He was a great guy. I loved that man. He was like a relative. I could talk to him; I could joke with him. I knew his family. We kept in touch. Times we came through, we stopped to see him. It really saddens me to know that he's not around anymore.

Coming back to '69, that was a big year in my life. The kids that were here, that was the greatest thing before we got to the heavy things in life – just the freedom. At Intermountain, we went through that era – and just the radio station KCPX out of Salt Lake City and KNAK, which was a sister station to KCPX. I remember Skinny Johnny Mitchell, and songs like his are still in my head. I would turn that radio on, and it would be on 24 hours. The only time I'd turn it off was when the night attendant would come around and turn it off. Then I'd turn it back on the next morning.

CT: Tell me about how it was when you first came here.

DJ: Well, when I first came, the style of the people was sort of still in the '50s. The songs, the style of clothing, the way of life were still kind of like the latter part of the '50s. So it started to change when I first came. Then, later on, country western music became popular, and most of the guys wanted to be cowboys. I kind of regret that back then, we didn't have a rodeo arena because what I find now is that the Navajo people are top cowboys. The Navajo people back then rode horses, and now some of the top cowboys are still in the area. A lot of the Navajos came from Fort Wingate, and they were cowboys. When I was growing up, I loved horses, and after I graduated, I raised and bred horses. So horses have been part of my life for the last 40 years. Back then, I always thought that if we had some kind of activity that pertained to rodeos, we would have had really good cowboys.

You know, when we were going to school back then, we were pretty polite. What I mean by being pretty polite is that after the '60s, the culture kind of changed. People were more open, and they were willing to speak. The kids that came to the school later on were more open, and they were able to say what they wanted to say. Back then, we were pretty disciplined. We couldn't say certain because it was sort of impolite to say some things, and you really didn't want to offend the authorities. So there were a lot of things we didn't want to talk about or we didn't want to say. The kids that came later were more open and were more able to speak their mind.

CT: You say the younger kids were much free to speak openly. What were the things you wanted

to say if you felt freer to say them?

DJ: Well, some of the teachers and other people that worked there were able to really overpower you. You would make a snappy comeback if you were able to say what was on your mind. Being a coward was so overpowering that you'd just back down. We did that out of respect, too. Like for me, I didn't really want to say those things that would make them angry. So a lot of times they would have the last word. I would just hold it in, and then I would walk away so I wouldn't upset them. They couldn't handle what I wanted to say. Maybe it's the way people of that generation were. It was not only at the school, but the people of that era raised their kids like that. People in the early '60s – I kind of feel like that's the way they were with their families.

You know, the Indian power thing has a whole lot to do with the Indian Nation. For a while, the Indian Nation started to speak their mind, like how they really felt. It was not just here, but across the United States. I liked watching television when I was a kid. I still do today because all these TV series like *Wagon Train*. I know, now that I watch it today, that the directors would stereotype Indians. People were traveling, and the Indians would always have a gun in their hand, and they always had to look out for the Indians. They would say, "How!" For some reason, it was just the ideology that made people felt this way about the Native Americans. The little kids would play cowboys and Indians with the bows and arrows.

I liked playing cowboys and Indians, too, but somewhere in the game, I thought, *Wait a minute! There's something wrong here*. So the Hippie Generation and the Indian Power came around. It was like, all of a sudden, the Indian Nation was speaking out. You know, at one time the Indian tribes didn't like each other. Maybe they didn't understand the languages of the different tribes. Friends of mine, when the school became inter-tribal, separated themselves. They kind of kept to themselves. If you were a Navajo, you really didn't want to date some from a different tribe.

I read a book at one time about Custer. The guy that wrote that book talked about how Indians see themselves and other Indians. They were that tribe and that tribe and that tribe. When we went to the school here, it was all Navajos. We weren't exposed to other Indian tribes. I think at the school here we didn't integrate very well. There were kids out of high schools in Wyoming who didn't want to be part of the Indian tribes here at Intermountain. We had a lot of confrontation. Someone would say, "Hey, I understand you are the toughest guys around here."

So these guys from Wyoming would come down here and try to pick a fight with the Indians of the Navajo tribe. So at Intermountain, when you'd get off campus and walk around, it was like you had to look over your shoulder all the time. So I kind of feel that people really didn't accept us back then. I felt that at that time. I thought because this was a Mormon town, that the church leaders told the people in the town that they had to tolerate us. The Mormon Church had standards that they had to back up. They were told to be nice to the people and accept the students that were going to school here. That's the way I felt, but, like I said, but I'm a survivor. I learned how to see things. I would watch *Andy Griffith*. I would see how they acted and how they talked. You could look at it like *Andy Griffith* was kind of like a church. In *My Three Sons*, I could see how the father talked to his kids, I kind of picked that up and put it into my life. One way I do find out about about things is through my subconscious mind – the power of the

subconscious, the power to dream. Whatever you think, whatever you dream, it will come by.

I joined the military. I traveled a lot of places, and I saw a lot. I was really happy. I was in a radar crew, had security clearance, and I saw culture. I saw people who thought everything we did was wrong. They seemed to think they were better than the other people. I came back to America, and spent my last year in Alaska.

Coming back to Intermountain, it really stayed with you somewhere in the back of your mind. I can remember song titles, places. I can remember songs from that time. Like I was sitting in a bus depot in Fort Worth, Texas, and I heard a song. I took basic training down in San Antonio, and I noticed that people there just took you as another person. I liked that.

CT: Did you feel like you should have been treated differently at Intermountain? How did you think the teachers thought about you?

DJ: Well, the thing about Intermountain, like I said, the people that taught and were authorities at Intermountain, that was their way of teaching. The best thing they could do was teach us. The rest was up to us. A lot of people I know that have graduated have really good roles. They've become really good welders. They're boiler-makers, they're pipe-fitters; and they're making \$50 or \$60 an hour. I've come across a lot of people who went to Intermountain. So, in that way, it kind of opened up things for me. But, as far as what people from Brigham City thought about us. You know, over the generations, people change. I drive through Brigham City, and I feel very good about it. I've been successful. I bought a place. I built my own house. I actually contracted it. I'm retired. I had four children. I graduated out of college. My son has a really nice house. My kids see colors. My generation – I see colors. That's just the way it is.

CT: Did the teachers at Intermountain encourage you to speak the Navajo language, or did they require you to speak only English.

DJ: I really don't know because that was that time. That time only offered what it had, and we took advantage of that. You know, speaking English is really hard. Speaking Navajo is really hard. I speak Navajo fluently. Today I came across young Navajo kids that talk Navajo, but you don't understand it. It's sort of a pigeon language. They don't speak English either. Their English is kind of funny, and that's not just Navajos. Kids from other tribes do that, too. They have their own language. My grand kids come and talk, and I wonder, *Where did they go to school?* To really speak English, they'd need to have a real translation, I think – from Navajo to English. But actually the whole thing is a way of thinking. This is the way I want to be. I think imagination is a big part of success, because what you imagine and what you say are what you become. The things you imagine will stay in your mind. Subconscious is part of you, so anything you want to ask for is given to you already. All you have to do is think and imagine. Your subconscious will make it happen.

As far as religion is concerned. I've become Protestant; I've been LDS. When I went into the service I had to state my religion. I said, "You know, down in Southern Utah there's a mission called San Christopher."

He said, "You're a Roman Catholic." That's a good religion. It helps a lot of people. You're equal to anybody. It's just your mind. I don't know a whole lot about religion. It was just there. Sundays you knew you had to be at church, so we'd say, "Why don't we go to Protestant this week?" So we'd go over there, and they'd talk about religion. Really when you're younger, you don't think a whole lot about religion. You're too busy thinking about something to play with, something to eat, those kinds of things. I just wanted to be free. I went to Southern California one summer in the '60s, and I lived with these guys from San Diego. They were surfers. Their house was open. They were really good people. There were hippies who were traveling through here. That was a wonderful time.

I like music. The soul music – I really love the soul music. Even when I was a little kid, I had a box radio, and I could hear a particular song, and I would remember. Today I heard a repeat of that song, and I was fine. Most of the songs were country western music when I first came – and a little bit of rock and roll and soul music. About 1968, I started seeing different music, bands come to the school. They weren't Navajos. There was a group that came later, who were called The Other Guys. They were a really good band, and I said, "I know those guys."

There was another band called the Foregone Conclusion. It was a really good band. They'd hold a dance at the skating rink. You had to be there Friday night. At the same time, in the gym, they'd have a different dance. We'd dance the best way we could, but now there is the two-steps, and it's real easy to learn how to dance. Not Indian dance. There was a hippie group called the Bitter End. There's a whole lot of music in my memory. My kids play guitar. I like music. I heard it on the radio. There was a station out of Oklahoma that was a really popular radio station.. Sometimes at night you could take a little transistor and play that big station.

CT: Did you have a lot to do at the boarding school?

DJ: Yes, they had a lot of things to do. There was free time when you didn't have to work or anything. Then you could walk down to the canteen, or you could walk over to the girls' side. They'd kind of stroll, and the girls would look out there and see the guys walk back and forth – those kinds of things. Other than that, you were at your room. I'd lie down, close my eyes and imagine things. I closed my eyes and thought about a new car, and I would think about 1972 in California. In 1962 I bought a GMC with the same wheels. The license plate said 219 G.

Another thing was money. You had to have money. Back in those days, 10 cents was a lot of money. The movie cost 10 cents.

CT: At the school?

DJ: At the school, yes. Back then in 1967. Where did you get 10 cents? You had to work for something. If you had a dollar, that was a lot of money. A cup of cocoa I believe was 10 cents, and a cherry pie costs 15 cents. So for 25 cents, you could have a pretty good snack. When I would get up early in the morning, I would get picked for kitchen duty. For kitchen duty you would get up at 3 o'clock in the morning. It would be like jury duty. Do you ever wonder why

they picked your name there? It was the same thing. You'd wonder, *Why did I get picked for this?* You really don't want to, but you don't have a choice. Kitchen duty was the same way. You'd get up in the morning, and for all these people it was a work day. You sort of help them.

I remember back there, they'd peel potatoes. There was a whole bag of potatoes, and you'd have to peel them. Then you'd walk back there and see the meat locker – a big meat locker. I looked up there, and I said, “What are those things?”

“They are meat on the hoofs.” All black legs and everything.

I said, “What is that?”

They said, “It's buffaloes. Do you know buffaloes?”

I said, “No, I didn't notice. It tastes just like steak.”

You'd do your kitchen duty until pretty close to the morning class. Then you would run back and quickly change your clothes before class time. I'd run over there trying to adjust myself. You know how people look at you and say, “What's wrong with you?”

I'd say, “Here I am.” I would smell of onion from the kitchen.” So you'd go to school until lunch time. That was intermediate. They only changed me in three or four classes. You went to elementary, and then it was high school.

CT: How old were the elementary students?

DJ: Maybe 13.

CT: How about the high school age?

DJ: Maybe 15 or 16. The thing about ours – I didn't go to school until I was 11 years old. I didn't know how to speak English when I was 11 years old. You know, my folks didn't speak English. I love my folks. They wanted me to go to school. They'd say, “This kid's got to go to school.”

CT: So someone would come in a car and pick you up for school?

DJ: Yes, that was at the school in Arizona. That's when I was 11. Then I went to another boarding school. I went to two more boarding schools. Let's see, I was a beginner. I went to those schools in first, second, and third grades. One year I didn't go to school because I didn't want to. Then later on – I think it was 1964 – I found out the schools down there didn't go to higher classes. That's when they asked me to go somewhere. I needed to go off the reservation to go to school. That's when I thought, *I want to go to Sherman*. That's in California. I lived in Victorville for three years. I know where San Bernardino, Lucern Valley, Capone Pass. They had a truckers' place there. I really liked that place. They had an Air Force Base. I know the place pretty well.

CT: You mentioned when you came here, you didn't speak English very well.

DJ: No. Like I said, I wanted to speak English. I spoke Navajo, but when the Navajo kids spoke, they put English and Navajo together. You know, it's kind of like a pigeon language. I can look at pictures, and see how they talked, and really want to pick it up. I want to translate it. Do you see what I'm saying?

CT: Yes.

DJ: English is a hard language. English is not easy. Navajo is fairly hard, too. Speech is where your heart is. It's how people can relate. Like they say, language is only 40% of communication, but body language is 60%. Body language is what you really see from the inside. So when I work with horses, horses look at you, and they pick up body language. If you look at them sideways, they look at you like, *You don't trust me*. It's the same way with humans. These things I kind of pick up.

When we first got here, everybody talked Navajo. The only time the dorm attendant came up, we talked to him. I can see that he tried his best to get the word across. That's the way I look at the language. Nobody really said, "You can't in Navajo here." I didn't see that. The only prejudice that I saw was the ideology – how people look at another group of people, and how we look at each other. The non-Navajos might want to pick a fight.

CT: How did you communicate with the teachers?

DJ: That's the way they were taught, and that's the way they expressed themselves. They did the best way they could and tried to teach us. Once in a while, you would have people that were really nice and acted like they liked you. The teacher who taught the welding class was like that. The things that he taught were attitude and responsibility. He said, "These two things will carry you a long ways – responsibility and attitude. Wherever you go, those two things mean a lot."

The class was actually to learn how to weld, but those other two things he talked about matter a whole lot.

CT: Is this where you met your wife?

DJ: Well, my wife went to school here, and we were in the same class. When we graduated and left, my wife said, "I'll see you later, but I don't see you in my future." So I went my own way, and she went her way. She went to college and graduated, and we didn't see each other for a couple of year, but then we finally went back together. We ran across each other. That's how we started up again. We have four kids – all good kids. They all did really good. As a matter of fact, my daughter-in-law is in Germany right now. She's going to go to Africa, and next week she'll be back. My youngest daughter is a senior in college now. My oldest daughter works for the college and travels to Washington. My kids are doing really good.

I will say that it's truly good to be here, that I was here. It's a good thing that I came by the

school. I experienced a lot of things here, and there were a lot of good times. There were bad times, but most of the kids were nice, and you developed relationships. I've crossed the paths of a lot of good people. They say something to me. It was a great experience that I'll always remember. I'll say that 1969 was a great year. There were a lot of kids that I went to school with living here. There were a lot of great songs I remember hearing here. I had a good time; I had a great time. A lot of people touched my life, and I learned something! We walked out of there, and we made better lives for ourselves.

It was a good year; I liked this school. Right now it's good to be here.