

Transcript of Oral History Interview with Royetta Thomas

Interviewed by Joann Penrod in Brigham City, March 24, 2012

2012 Brigham City Museum and Library

Acc # 2012.29.1 / MS 446

Joann Penrod: This is Joann Penrod, and I'm here interviewing students who attended the Intermountain Indian School. The person I'm going to interview is. . .

Royetta Thomas: Royetta Thomas. I come from South Arizona. At the time I was going to school here, our tribe was the Papago. We changed our name to Toho O'odham. I am also a Navajo and Pima descendent.

JP: That's wonderful. I'm going to have you write that down in a minute. What years did you go to the school?

RT: I attended my junior and senior years, which was '78-'79 and '79-'80. I graduated in 1980.

JP: How old were you when you came?

RT: About 16 years old.

JP: When you came, did you come with anyone you knew? Did you know anyone who was here?

RT: My brother had already gone to the school here a year. So I came his senior year, and I stayed for the two years. Then I stayed, and my senior year my younger brother came, and he stayed here four years. My older brother stayed here three years. So I had company because there were three other friends that I knew that had come to school here also.

JP: Do you remember what your first day here was like?

RT: My brother had already explained it to me. He was amazed when he first came home at how big the campus was. So I had that in the back of my mind – him saying that it was almost the size of our own village or maybe a little smaller – that there was a movie theater, a bowling alley, a skating rink and all these buildings almost as far as you could see. I didn't come up with all the other students. We all came on buses, and I came on the Greyhound bus about a week later.

As we went by, I was looking. I saw the sign at the south gate. We traveled up to the bus depot, and I got into the van with a few other students. My brother came to watch me from a distance. That was because my mom and called him and said, “You go over there and help your sister.”

She didn't know the van would be coming to pick us up with our bags, and so we traveled back, and I believe I went into Building 18. Just looking at all the students walking and how the area was, I thought, *This is really giant!* So that was my first day, and then getting to know the dorm staff and sharing a room. I just wasn't used to this, but I got used to it later on. Yeah, I got

homesick, but I had other people to keep me busy, too. My mom was just a phone call away – collect!

JP: Collect, of course. Wow! Did you develop any close friendships while you were here, other than those that you knew from your area?

RT: I got really close friendships with this Menominee girl. There were others because our tribe was so thick. We cover from Tuscan to Aho, Arizona, and our whole nation is in that land base. We have people there in Gila Bend which is near Tuscan. I got chummy with another girl, Lucinda Nunez. She was from Santa Veer, which I didn't know before I came to school. There were other people that I connected with, but they were the main ones that I got to know.

JP: What were the teachers like?

RT: The teachers were really, really nice. Mrs. Dorothy Thompson was our vocational instructor. She taught dressmaking in my senior year. In my junior year I took power sewing, and so we were taught how to run the big machine. We worked with corduroy and the thick material that you used to make drapes. I had made a little corduroy jacket with the fur inside of it. I kept that, and when I had my son, he wore it. He wore this jacket, and so I thought, *Oh, I can make this!*

We made animals, and we made a lot of little knick-knacks, and we sold them when we had a fair or something. I still have this pair of boots that we made for Christmas. I can't even think of the type of material. They were red, and were like Christmas boots. I still have them. I was thinking that I should have brought them. I put them out for Christmas, and my kids (my boys and then my grandkids) have worn them. They think that they're shoes or booties. But I said, "No, they're decorations! Take them off. They're older than you are!"

JP: Well, that was quite a craft then.

RT: Yes, it was. I still sew now and then, not a lot, but my mom sewed, so I just kind of carried it on. We were in a contest called Make It With Wool. We went to Idaho to whatever the next town is. I think it was to Tremonton to a fair.

JP: That's still in Utah. Was it the County Fair?

RT: No. I think it was competition among schools – Make It With Wool. So I entered that, and I made a jacket. The inside lining was the same as my blouse and then slacks. That was the only thing I ever made that was really big. I made my prom dress and my graduation dress. I was so proud of myself. Even my dorm counselor, Reese Quayle, was telling everybody, "She made a graduation dress! She made a graduation dress! Look at it!"

He'd make everybody stop and look at my dress. I was so proud that day.

JP: So you had some pretty good interactions with the teachers.

RT: Yes. Everyone was really nice.

JP: What other classes can you remember?

RT: Just the regular academic classes. The only teacher I really remember was Mrs. Pohmajevich.

JP: Nearly everyone remembers her. Did you have her for English?

RT: Yes, and Mr. Preece was one of my teachers. Gosh, I can't even remember anyone else.

JP: That's good that you had a positive experience.

RT: Here?

JP: Yes.

RT: Yes, I did.

JP: With the teachers?

RT: Yes.

JP: Was there anything that was really hard, difficult for you at the school?

RT: I think it was just the distance from home.

JP: Homesick?

RT: Yes, my first year, my first semester I was, but I wanted to make sure that I'd do everything that I was told to do and not cause any problems or anything. I didn't want my parents to be upset with me because I asked my mom to come. I wanted to make sure everything was okay. Even then I had gone into the Honor Dorm.

JP: I hadn't heard about that.

RT: We had the Girls' Honor Dorm in Building 5. The Boy's Honor Dorm was Building 6. I don't know if we were recommended, but we got to go over there.

JP: That's fun to know. Did you participate in any of the school sports or events?

RT: I was the manager for the volleyball team and helped and then traveled with the team to different games. I believe that was my senior year because the first year I had to get the feel of everything. In my senior year I joined the volleyball team and traveled with them. I didn't play much inter-murals. I think we played some basketball, but I didn't play a whole lot.

JP: But you supported some of the teams that went out. Did you go to any of the games?

RT: Oh yes, I did. My brother played baseball and football, and we went down and watched them play. I was just with my classmates.

JP: You brought the team spirit.

RT: Yes.

JP: Did you ever speak your native language on campus?

RT: No, I didn't. My dad is Pima, and my mom is Navajo. I was raised as a Christian, in the Presbyterian Church. I know of the Navajo ways, and then when I came up here and it was inter-tribal, and we would be absorbed with all the other cultures. I got wind of that here.

Then I had my son and was going home for the traditional things we were supposed to do with our newborns, that opened my eyes to know that I had to instill that in my children. I don't speak my native language. I understand a little, and I try to do my best to instill it in my children and grandchildren.

JP: You said a little bit about your family. Who was left at home when you came here to the school?

RT: I had two younger sisters. If I was 16 when I came, they were 8 and 6, and so they weren't even close to coming to school yet.

JP: Where did they complete their schooling?

RT: At home at the high school, but they were always wanting to come to school here.

JP: They'd heard such fun stories.

RT: Yes.

JP: How well do you think coming to Intermountain prepared you for your future years?

RT: For life?

JP: Yes life is a better word.

RT: I became independent. I became responsible. The decisions that I made I had to live with. At home I was the oldest daughter. My mom was working, and she worked late. I had to be the surrogate mom and take care of the younger ones. My dad put food on the table, clothes on our backs and a roof over our heads, and so he was just as busy. I was the one to cook and clean,

wash clothes, take care of everybody with their assistance, you know.

When I came to school, I knew how to do things already. It's just that it was me. My brother was in his own dorm, and he already did his own things. So I've instilled that in my sons. I have two sons, and I told them, "You have to take care of yourselves. You have to do things that nobody else is going to do for you. You may get married and have a wife, but I want you to be able to take care of yourself. That's what helped me here, and if the opportunity is there, take it. Sometimes I did okay, and sometimes I didn't, but I was happy being here.

I liked meeting people. I wish I had done more. I wish I had come earlier, but I was a girl, and my mom wasn't going to let me go. I don't have a daughter, so I don't know, but I think that I would be overprotective and that I would rob her of some things because I probably wouldn't allow her to do them. I'm glad that my mom gave me this chance. I know she was really worried about me.

I told her, "I'm okay." But if I got in trouble, I would hear it from my brother, but that wasn't until my senior year.

JP: Well, can you think of anything else you want to share with the world?

RT: With the world!

JP: Mainly our world here.

RT: Here in Brigham? When I came, I didn't know what I was coming to. As time progressed, I met a lot of people, and the staff was really, really good. Miss Davis was one of our aides. One was Joann Ritter. She was also one of our aides, and Mr. Reese Quayle, was our dorm counselor. Mr. Quayle found out that I did summer work on the HIS telephone PBX system, and I knew about the government's FTS line. It's like a toll free line that you call. He found out, so I became a secretary, and I would help the girls make phone calls home. He'd trust me with his office key. I'd go in and make the call. The girls would be on the phone, and I'd go do my business, then I'd come back and check on them, lock up the office and give him back the key. He and I were cool. I really appreciated that – to have that trust in me.

JP: That's neat.

RT: There was a time when I felt really bad. I was down and out. I got a phone call from my mom, and things were going on. I said, "I'm going home, Mr. Quayle. I'm going home. I need to go home and take care of my family."

He reasoned with me. He said, "Royetta, I know how you feel, and what's going on at home is between your family at home. When you go home, what are you going to do? What part of that is yours?"

I said, "Well, I want to be there for my family. I'm going to go home and help with everything

like I used to do.”

Then he said, “Where are you going to stand in that? Are you going to take more responsibility for your family when you're there, when over here, you're okay?”

I'm like, “I still have to go home!”

I got upset with him, and I stomped out of his office. I went to my room and just cried. I thought about it and realized they'd have to pay for my trip home. I'd have to take everything back. I'm just going to make it worse where there's already enough of a load at home. I'd just add to it.

So that was what really helped me think, and we have to own our own responsibilities. We have to be able to look in the mirror and say, “What part of that is mine, and what part of that is somebody else's?”

It's easy to get into someone else's business; it's easy to get involved in someone else's problems if we allow ourselves to. But we have to take care of ourselves first before we can help someone else. With that I knew that I had to establish myself somehow here at school. I had to get that trust, get that understanding, and fix myself before I can do anything.

I became one of the officers for our dorm, and I became senior vice president of my senior class, and I tried to help wherever I could. I'm glad the school was this far away. The first time I saw it snow, I wondered how much snow was going to keep on falling. So we were all bundled up because we were from out in the desert. I come from the desert. We were as bundled up as the Abominable Snowman. So that was a real sight for me. It was so cold that when we would get food from home and people would come for meetings and bring food for us. We'd get tortillas, chili con carne with red chili, pinto beans and popovers, which the Navajos call fry bread. We would put that outside our window because it was so cold outside, we didn't have to run down and put it in the fridge.

When someone would get food from home, we would share it with everyone. We'd say, “Come over to my room, we have popovers.”

When my mom would send food, I'd give half to my brother, and I would keep half. We'd warm things up, and we'd go eat. We shared food; we shared everything.

At the place here, I didn't go explore a whole lot in town. You know, we would go with our classes and everything. I did on-the-job training for dressmaking at the shop, Sew What, the fabric store. Then there was another fabric store right here. I can't remember the name. I want to say it was Hand-Cut Fabrics. It was right here in this building, and I did on-the-job training here, and so I got a feel of the sales person field.

I took that all with me when I went home. I also worked at the campus shop, and I'd already been a waitress at home, too. So I went home and took that all with me.

I tell my kids, "Don't say that you can't do it because you can, but it's up to you what you're going to do with your lives." So they both became Marines. My oldest is a veteran. They both went to Iraq. They came home safely, but they still have things bothering them. So traditionally we've taken care of our men and women that have gone and recognized them and honored them just as we've honored all of our tribal members.

JP: It's a sacrifice. We are thankful for those that serve.

RT: And those that have passed on in our class, and we've found out here that some have gone on, it's sad. We still continue praying for them that their spirit is good.

JP: Good attitude. Royetta, it's been a pleasure to be with you. I hope you have a wonderful rest of your visit.

RT: Thank you. I do, too. I hope we will have another reunion, and just to be on the bandwagon, we will be back!

JP: And we may still be here. It's hard to say. Thank you, dear.