

Transcript of Oral History Interview with Arlie Pittman
Interviewed by Kathy Bradford May 14, 2009, Brigham City, Utah
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Kathy Bradford: Today is Thursday, May 14, 2009, and I'm speaking with Arlie Pittman at his home in Brigham City. He worked at Intermountain School for many years and will tell about his experiences there. First, Arlie, I would like you to tell me when and where you were born and a little bit your growing-up years and how you came to be at Intermountain School.

Arlie Pittman: I was born in Donna, Texas on January 25, 1937. My father and mother were Arlie and Lois Pittman. Donna is a small town with a population of about 4,000. I grew up in Donna, graduated from Donna High School, went to college at Southwest Texas State College in San Marcos, Texas, and graduated from there in business administration. I went to San Antonio and tried for about a week to find a job. Nobody would hire me, but when I got to the lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas, I got a call from Firestone Tire Rubber Company to come and work for them. I went and took a physical, and after taking it, I was talking about how bad my back was. They said, "Well, we can't hire you."

So I went back to Donna where my father was an electric and plumbing contractor, and I worked for him for several weeks. Then the Superintendent of Schools came by and said, "We need teachers to teach in the migrant worker program for students returning home after harvesting farm crops in the north."

I started working there in 1959. I went back to college in the summertime and picked up an elementary education degree. I had heard about Intermountain Indian School from my uncle and aunt, Joe and Wilma Baker, who taught in Brigham City, Utah. We'd come through here on several trips to visit relatives in California, and we stopped at Intermountain School to visit with them. After visiting with them, I was aware of the programs that they offered at the Indian School. But it was cold here in Utah and warm in Texas, so I decided to stay in Texas. I got a call back in 1963 to come to work at the school. They needed math teachers. I applied for a job at Intermountain School in 1963 and started working on July 29, 1963.

KB: What were your impressions? Was it like what you remembered from your visits?

AP: When I arrived at Intermountain School in 1963, the campus was very large with all the classrooms, dormitories and support buildings necessary for a school. It was like a small city. A new employee at the school could easily get lost going from one building to another in the enclosed ramps that connected each building.

KB: Were the students still all Navajo at that time?

AP: All the students attending Intermountain were Navajo. We had two campus shops – the boys' canteen and the girls' canteen. Students could earn tokens or use their spending money to go to the canteen to buy soft drinks and all kinds of food. Gradually, as the school progressed, they consolidated the boys' canteen and the girls' canteen into one canteen for both boys and girls to go into after school,

in the evenings, or on weekends to buy prepared food and soft drinks. Many of the students were hired to work and get experience working in the canteen. We had a four-lane bowling alley in Building 21 in the recreation department. Also above the bowling alley was a rec hall that had pool tables and pinball machines for the kids for to play. It also had a jukebox to play music, and we had a small kitchen. When I went to pick up my secondary education training so I could work in the other departments at Intermountain School, I took off during the daytime. I made up my time at night and ran the canteen for almost a year. On Saturdays the girls would come in, cook and fry the beans and make Navajo tacos, wrap them in foil and put them in the oven. That night when the kids would come to the canteen, they had Navajo tacos to sell, and then the kids would open up the Navajo taco and put in the lettuce, tomatoes, and sauce and sell it to the students.

KB: That sounds good! You're making me hungry!

AP: Oh, it was very good! Then they had a skating rink where the kids could go skating. They had inter-mural basketball, volleyball and softball programs for after-school activities. Basically whenever I got there, I went into the vocational department. These kids were juniors and seniors in the vocational-training program that were taking the academics part of it, and so I was teaching science. In that building we also had math, English, social studies, science and English as a second language. The kids would come to school mainly in the mornings, and then in the afternoons, they would go to their vocations throughout the campus. I taught science; a friend of mine taught reading; others taught social studies, English, English as a second language and math -- so it was just like a regular school.

KB: Did you have any problems at that point with the Navajo children not being able to speak English?

AP: When I first came there, the one main idea was to get the kids to speak in English, and so we always encouraged them to ask and answer questions. But the Navajo is the type of person who does not like to excel above his friends and his peers. Therefore, it was very difficult to get the kids to speak one-on-one by themselves in class. I still remember an experience I had. They told us, "Wait for the kids to respond when you ask them a question."

So I waited for this kid to respond, and he never responded. For six or seven minutes, he just sat there, and the bell rang. I was talking to some teachers later in the day and they said, "That kid is a stutterer. He stutters, and so he's not going to speak at all."

I got very upset and asked my supervisor, "Why don't they let us know about these kids that have problems -- epilepsy, stuttering, those who are not very good in speaking English. The teachers should know about these situations." Eventually we were able to get more information about the kids.

KB: How did the students do in science? Was that an interesting subject to them?

AP: Oh, I loved science; they loved science. I came there in 1963, checked into the main building, took the questionnaire and filled it out, took a photograph, was fingerprinted and went over to the other building. Elementary and vocational staff were in a meeting in Building 2. About that same time, my boss, whom I knew through my aunt, told two of the teachers that Farrell Truman and Ray Huff were going to have to go over to the high school because they had secondary certification to teach science and math. So they were losing these two teachers to go over to the regular program. I walked in, and

Mrs. Clarissa Lowery said, “You might as well stay here because no one is down in the lower department, which is the elementary department.” I was in the intermediate department, and so we had the vocational kids. I went into science. You've got to remember these kids were reading on a 3rd, 4th, 5th-grade level, and so some of the textbooks we had we couldn't use. I went and took the textbooks and wrote the program myself. I pulled out some words I used in science. I would share these words with the English and ESL teachers so that we could all work on these words that they were going to use in social studies, English, math – but mainly in science. I set up a unit of study where we'd study a unit for about two weeks.

KB: What kinds of things did they study at that level?

AP: Simple machines, earth science, electricity, weather, astronomy. I'd had weather, and so whenever we came to a weather unit, I got the weather information and divided up the kids. Once we got started, I put the vocabulary on the boards, and we had little puzzles to work. We used the words in class. We read about it, and then we broke off in groups. I always felt that the best way to learn was by doing. Some of them would build a wind vane. Some would build an anemometer. Some would build a barometer. Some would do a chart that we could record the weather every day. Some would do a little report on various equipment and these machines. Each day, as I had five or six classes each day, a group would go out and get the weather. They'd get the temperature; they'd get the clouds in the sky, the wind blowing. They'd take all these instruments that we made to gather the weather information and put it on this chart. After about two and a half or three weeks, I'd go into another unit of study. We did one on dinosaurs, earth science. We built dioramas; we built tyrannosaurus and all the pre-historic animals. The kids did reports on them with the diorama

KB: When they did the report, would they stand up and read it in front of the class?

AP: Yes, they'd get up in front of the class and give the report. All they'd have to do is say two or three words. If they were a little nervous, the other people could do the report. The Navajo kids loved to do artwork. They loved to work with their hands, so I just took what they loved to do and incorporated it into the program, and it was a natural. I had kids that would come there, and they would make papier-mâché animals and dioramas and so on. They would paint them, and we'd do our reports on them. The kids would just run into class and start their work, and it was a very difficult time as a teacher – keeping up with all the materials, getting all the supplies. That's where I relied on the electrical shop, the plumbing shop and the woodworking shops where we could go after school and get all the materials to work on the projects.

KB: It sounds like you were really an innovative teacher. I'm sure you were well-liked by your students.

AP: I really loved doing it. It was a lot of fun. I didn't teach any math, but in a way we did. Whenever we did machines, the kids made machines out of wood and pulleys and string. We did all these machines, and then I got the formula from the math teachers or the formulas out of the dictionary or the encyclopedias as to how figure pounds, how much you saved by using pulleys. We incorporated the math into that part of the program – where the kids could figure out if they pulled using a pulley how much foot pounds it would be, or if they had two pulleys how it would make it much easier and so on.

KB: They must have loved coming to your class.

AP: Well, we had a lot of fun. We also had a fun activity whenever we were studying electricity. We had a hand-cranked generator. The kids would come to class early, and we put on the door two wires that when the kids came in late and put their hand on the knob to open the door to go into the classroom, the kids inside would be generating electricity. They'd get shocked, and we'd stand outside and laugh.

KB: Did they take that well?

AP: They did. They'd get their hands shocked, and it was fun.

KB: Did you tell me earlier that you did some coaching?

AP: Yes, when Intermountain was shutting down, people were starting to leave to find other jobs. Some were going to Hill Field; some were going down to the Salt Lake area, and we were losing a lot of staff. I'd made the decision that I was going to stay no matter what until the end of the school year. They had a meeting with all the men, and I got invited to come over, and they said, "We want you to start helping with the athletic program."

So I went over to Building 22 where we had the meeting, and they said, "We're going to have these people help coach baseball. Would you help coach?"

I said, "Yes. I'd be glad to help coach." Well, come to find out, the guy that they thought was going to coach baseball withdrew his name, so I became the head junior varsity baseball coach. We had a regular baseball team, and we'd compete with Box Elder, Ogden and other teams in Region 1. If the kids did not make the varsity team, they got put on the junior varsity team. So I had probably 14 or 15 boys plus one girl. In fact, when she wasn't playing, she helped as my score keeper. I still remember one day I was talking to the coach during the ball game. I said, "Do you see that second baseman over there?"

He said, "Yes." I told him that's the only girl I have on the team." He was surprised to find out that I had a girl on the team, and he hadn't even noticed that she was on the team. That was a little funny thing, but we won a few games, and we lost a few. It was fun, and the kids were involved. If they didn't make the varsity team, they got on the junior varsity team, and that was fine with them. We had a large enrollment, so that enrollment threw us into a higher-level region.

Also we really excelled in cross country because the grandparents were important in the family. They would get the kids up and have them run in the mornings across the reservation. That's what I was told – that they did a lot of running and did a lot of athletic activities that kept them running, so most of them were natural runners.

KB: The ones I met all seemed so strong and lean. Were most of them like that?

AP: Well, I think you have a cross variety of kids that came to our school. One thing that made our school a success was that we didn't look at the kids according to their size or what they looked like. We

took each kid individually. As an example, if you went down to Box Elder High School and looked at the Rockettes, every little gal there is neat, trim, haircut, very good figure and so on. When the girls came to our school, once we went inter-tribal, we had short big girls; we had tall skinny girls; we had all size girls. If you were willing to participate and follow the rules, you could get on a team. It was a good place for the Indian students, and the majority of the people I talked to didn't want it closed. They wanted it to remain. When you go look at the programs that we offered, you do not transfer a program from one school to another one that's so many miles away, like Phoenix or Riverside Indian schools. You do not transfer programs that were made here and developed and used here. This was not just the academic program or vocational program. We had a true vocational training program. As an example, if you came here as a freshman or sophomore, you took industrial arts. Industrial arts is where you learn to work with pliers, tin snips and build projects out of wood. You'd make all kinds of small items. You'd make shovels, small radios and become familiar with woodworking and metalworking tools.

KB: Is that the same thing we used to call shop in high school?

AP: Yes, just basic shop. Then at the end of your sophomore year, you chose a vocation. At one time, we had many, many vocations. I'm just going to try off the top of my head to list some of them. We had auto body and fender, auto mechanics where they worked on cars, drafting, house construction, electronics and welding. The girls had cosmetology, nurse's aide and sewing. These were some of the vocations that we had, and the kids selected one by the end of their sophomore year. When they went as juniors into the vocational training program, which-- if I remember right -- was about three hours in the afternoon, they would take their regular classes in the morning and then go to the vocation in the afternoon. They chose a vocation based on their aptitude and what they liked to do. One example was the welding shop up on the hill, and the kids would walk up there. It was run by Lex Baer and Varsal Jenx. They demanded that the kids get there on time, and so when the kids left their classrooms down there, they would try to catch a ride with someone going up the hill to make it in time for the class. They were very strict. During their junior year, the students learned basic welding skills. Using the welding skills learned as juniors, they built a variety of projects from metals. In the second year of their program, the students used their welding skills to build basketball standards, gas tanks, benches, trailers and other projects

Some sculptured rodeo figures using their welding skills. One sculpture I remember is a bull rider riding a bull, and three of the bull's feet were up in the air and one leg was on the ground. The rider was on top of the bull with a hat in his hand and his hand up in the air. It was beautiful work that the kids did!

KB: I know they had an arts and crafts shop. Did they sell their own things that they made in there?

AP: Not necessarily. These were items that were purchased through Student Enterprises. Part of Student Enterprises was running the canteens, but we had an arts and crafts shop that sold to the local people or visitors coming through. Mickey Nelson operated the Arts and Crafts Shop until the school closed in 1984.

KB: Arlie has a beautiful piece of art here and is going to tell about it.

AP: After Intermountain Inter-tribal School closed, we were cleaning up some of the classrooms, and I

ran across the old art room. When I was picking up these drawings and taking them out to the dumpster, I had one picture fall out on the floor. I went and carried them all out to the dumpster and threw them away, but when I came back in, the picture I have framed there was on the floor. It was water damaged, and it had a tear in the bottom of it. When I looked at it, I saw it was signed by the painter “James Yazzi, 1954.” If the year on the painting is true, I picked it up in 1984, so it had sat in that art room in a pile for 30 years. I decided to take it home and keep it as a souvenir.

KB: It's beautiful! That has to be of Monument Valley!

AP: It is Monument Valley with a Navajo boy chasing three horses, and he's riding another horse. I took the painting and was going to throw it away, and then I said, “Well, I'm just going to take it.”

KB: That's a treasure that your family will also cherish long after you're gone.

AP: Well, I the more I look at it, it really means a lot to me. In fact, this morning when I was opening up that box of things to show you, I felt chills going up my back.

KB: Did you feel the emotion that a lot of others did when the school closed?

AP: I was on the team that went down and tried to save the school by getting all the petitions signed from as many people as I could. But once Jim Hansen and the politicians back in Washington decided to close the school, it was out of our hands. I've got information about him telling us, “It's going to close. There's nothing you can do about it.”

I knew it was going to close. Gunn McKay was a Congressman who was always on the budget committee and always found money for Intermountain School. He was very supportive, but then Jim Hansen came along and said, “He's been in Congress too long! It's time to make a change!”

So for years Jim Hansen represented Utah, and eventually for some reason I still don't understand, he came in and said that we were going to close the school. And he got it done, and he got support from Jake Garn. That's my understanding. I have a lot of stuff in that box that you can read about the school closing – a lot of remarks by different people. It's quite interesting.

KB: I'll enjoy reading that. I was covering Intermountain for the Deseret News when it closed, and I interviewed several students who were all devastated about the closure.

AP: We had kids at the school who were really good friends during the school year. Then when the buses started to leave after that last school year, they'd jump up and grab each other and holler and scream. The bus drivers would try to drive away, and kids were hanging on. It was very touching. It's tough.

Intermountain Indian School had at least six programs, above and beyond its educational program that were unparalleled --- without peer – anywhere else in the United States, and were the only systematically-operated, integrally-related programs designed to meet the needs of the whole person:

A. The Solo Parent Program.

- B. The Vocational Training Program that was emasculated.
- C. In addition, there was the Treatment Team Program that provided campus-wide help for students with difficult behavior problems. I was a member of the evaluation team that evaluated this program, and it was a good program.
- D. The Care Center Program, which worked with students having alcohol and drug problems and also with difficult to manage students.
- E. The Intervention Dorm. This was a program to literally salvage kids who would otherwise be lost in society. These were youngsters with very difficult social and emotional problems.
- F. And lastly, the Intensive Residential Guidance Program. Children in this program made up 53% of the school's population, and were at the school because there was no place else to go. They were often court-referred, and "incorrigible", had severe social problems, and there were simply no programs on the reservation or elsewhere in the BIA system to serve them.

KB: Do you have any way of knowing what's happened to the students that went through all those programs?

AP: At one time, that was one big question that was asked, and there was really no way that I knew of tracking that. They kids came through the different agencies on the reservation to the school. After they were picked up by Intermountain, they came to the school, but after they went back, I don't think the agency ever tracked where they went or what they did. I was told that a lot of students who were proficient in welding went out to California and worked in the shipyards.

KB: Have you ever talked to any of them? Have they come through here to see you or anything?

AP: No, but I know people have mentioned some of the kids that have come through here every so often. I know that Bill Yates who used to live here but is now in Park City, told about kids coming through. Gary Romer told about some of that. Clair and Virginia Olsen have talked about a girl who has come to visit them. I've seen her visiting at the Olsen home years ago. Every so often, people at the library have told me that former students have come through and visited the school. We had some of them come through and redo the "T" on the hill above the school. I don't know if we could even go up there and do that now. It's a big project.

KB: I'm sure it would be, but having them say that just shows how emotional they feel about what was here and what they got from it.

AP: I get emotional every now and then just thinking what we've lost. Now you see articles in the newspaper about Indian education back in South Dakota, North Dakota and other areas stating that kids are dropping out. They don't function well; they don't compete well in school. Every time I see an article about education, I try to pull it out. There was a guy here in town who stated that Jim Hansen was a big supporter of the school.

I said, "Jim Hansen! He's the one that closed it down."

"Oh, no he wasn't."

So I came home and gathered information and made copies and took copies up to him so he could read

all the stuff about Jim Hansen. I have a lot of information here.

KB: I wanted to ask you how things changed when the all-Navajo student body changed to inter-tribal.

AP: We had some problems with the students mixing together and becoming one school, but the trouble makers were sent home, and we became an integrated student body as the school progressed.

KB: You mentioned earlier that one of the vocational programs was about houses construction. Did they actually build the homes?

AP: The students would build the house on campus, and it would be sold to anyone in the community that wanted to bid on the house. It was then moved to the buyer's building lot.

KB: Was the credit union affiliated with the school?

AP: It was. It was for employees of Intermountain School. You had to be an employee of Intermountain School to join the credit union. Then the credit union went county-wide, and we got permission to increase our area to recruit from, and we recruited from Box Elder County. When it went county-wide, we would recruit other people that worked or lived in Box Elder County.

KB: Were you ever sorry that you left Texas and came out here to work at Intermountain?

AP: No. I was able to come out here, get married and start a family and have now made this my permanent home. I have a small group of local guys that I do a lot of hunting and fishing with and take advantage of what Utah has to offer in recreational activities.

KB: How about Intermountain? Would you have chosen that path again?

AP: Yes I worked here for 21 years and thought I would complete my Government Service as a classroom teacher at the school I have a lot of fun now as a substitute teacher.

KB: Tell me about that.

AP: I limit myself to Box Elder High School and Box Elder Middle School. I go to one of those schools almost every day. There now are more people signing up as substitute teachers, and they've taken a class from Box Elder School District. Once you've taken the class, you can be called.

KB: Well you've come here and made this your adopted home, and look what you've given to the community. I think the whole county owes you a debt of gratitude, and I appreciate your talking with me.