

Transcript of Interview with Eugene Kennington
Interviewed by Kathy Bradford May 23, 2009, Brigham City, Utah
© Brigham City Museum & Library
Acc # 09.21.1 | MS 376

Kathy Bradford: Today is Saturday May 23, 2009, and I'm speaking with Eugene Kennington at his home in Brigham City. I want to hear about your experiences working at Intermountain Indian School, but first I would like you tell me where and when you were born and briefly how you came to be working at the Indian school.

Eugene Kennington: I was born in Afton, Wyoming on August 26, 1930. I graduated from Utah State University. Just before I graduated from USU, I put in an application at Intermountain School for their Guidance Department as a counselor. I was accepted in November of 1965 and started working there, and I worked in the Guidance Department for three years.

KB: What did you do exactly?

EK: At the time I started, the counselor was in charge of either two or three dormitories. and most of the time there were about 70 to 80 students in each dormitory. We had a total of 28 dormitories at the most. There was one year when we had about 3,000 students.

KB: How many employees were doing what you did?

EK: When I first started, the guidance counselor was the supervisor of the dormitory, and he had under him a GS-5 who took care of the logistics of the dormitory – ordering supplies and scheduling people to work. Then there were five aides in each dormitory. The aides were GS-3 or 4 usually, and they worked on an 8-hour schedule 24 hours a day. They worked 8 hours, and then they were off 16, so you had to have about five or six to cover the total shift.

KB: What did they do?

EK: I was in a boys' dormitory, and they made sure that the boys got up on time, got off to school. They took care of any health problems, made sure that they got to the doctor when needed. There was a hospital right on campus, and there were three or four doctors and several nurses. They took care of the health of the boys and made sure the boys took care of themselves. The dorm mothers (as they used to call themselves) were very, very good at their jobs. They took care of the boys, and of course the girls in the girls' dorms did the same things.

KB: Were they women in both?

EK: Most of the ones I worked with were women. I think they had more women, but there were some men working as dormitory aides also in some of the dormitories.

KB: When you were a guidance counselor, did you talk to them when they had problems and help them adjust to difficult situations?

EK: That's exactly right. When they first came from home, there was some homesickness, but by the time they got to Intermountain, most of the kids had been several years away from home in Indian schools. A lot of them enjoyed it very much. Some of them came to school because it was a way to get away from home and they had a free vacation. They'd come and spend two or three months until Christmas and then go home and stay. Some of them treated it as a paid holiday. Most of them were very conscientious in getting their education. There were a lot of students that we would get who had never been to school before, and so they started them in the 7th grade.

KB: Did they speak English, or did they have to learn that?

EK: They had English as a second language classes for them. A lot of these kids that started in the 7th grade would go through 4, 5 or 6 years of school at Intermountain. Many of them, in those six years of school, would test at the senior level by the time they got out school. Sometimes you have to wonder if we aren't wasting our time in some of the public education.

For the boys especially, the curriculum was vocational-oriented. They had welding, woodworking, machine shops, electronics, metal working, car repair, upholstery. These were some I could think of, but there were probably many more than that.

KB: But you were involved in their adjustment to the school, right?

EK: That's right. I had to help them if they had academic problems in school or adjustments when they wouldn't go to school. Then presumably I was able to straighten them out. That was a hope more than a reality.

KB: Did you form some close relationships with the kids?

EK: I liked them very much. They were very good. I never lived on campus. I lived up in the northeast part of town on Shamrock Drive. I liked the kids – especially when I started. We had all Navajo students, and they were a delightful group of boys. Some of them, of course, would get in trouble, but by the time they were in Intermountain School, most of ones that didn't want an education had already dropped out. We had an advantage that way.

KB: Did they do quite well academically?

EK: About the same as in the public schools. There were some who excelled, and some had a difficult time going through, but most of them tried.

KB: I've noticed that they seem very creative in their visual arts and dancing.

EK: When I was in Student Enterprise, they had a program where we would buy their art and then sell it in one of the shops there. We had a lot of the student art that would come in and was sold through the campus shop. They were given some spending money that way, and some of the students earned money to spend through doing artwork. I didn't have much to do with their creative writing, so I don't know a

lot about that. But the ones I knew that wanted to could do almost anything. I've seen students – after somebody would throw away an old TV set or particularly a radio, that wasn't working -- dive in and after a few hours would have the radio operating. They would do a lot of radio repair and fix almost anything they wanted to.

KB: What other things did you do in Student Enterprise?

EK: When I started in Student Enterprise in about 1968 when I'd been working there about three years, we had a boys' campus shop and a girls' campus shop. Right at the time when I started was when the student population started going down, and so they had to consolidate a lot of those different enterprises into one.

KB: What did they do at the campus shops?

EK: Well, at the girls' campus shop, for instance, they sold clothing, any personal items they needed. By the time I took over, the main thing we had was a movie theater. We would run shows three days a week, Friday nights, Saturday and Sunday. It was the same movie, which we showed three times. I think it cost a quarter for them to go to the movie. We would go down to Salt Lake in the fall and usually take a student with us (if they were on campus by that time), and then we would select the movies that were going to play throughout that year. They would ship the movies by the equivalent of UPS at that time. We would play the movies and then ship them back the same way. We had a student theater there where we showed the movies.

KB: Was that the one with the big eagle painted on the side facing Main Street?

EK: Yes, it was a very big building. They've taken it down now. It was one of the newer buildings on campus. I don't know why they got rid of it. After the City got it, they tore it down. But if the students wanted a particular type of movie, I can't remember any of them requesting any particular movies. These were not first-run movies. We couldn't afford them, so they were older movies, but you could see the same ones at the theaters in town – 35 mm. We hired a projectionist. He was one of the people in town. He ran the projectors, and he had an assistant, one of the students who would get paid. Then the cashier at the movie theater was a student.

KB: Did they work in the shop, too?

EK: There was a manager that was non-Indian employee. Sometimes there were Indians, and they ran the shops, but there were dozens of students that worked in the different shops for a little bit of spending money.

KB: What were other ways they spent their money?

EK: For hamburgers, pop, hot dogs. There was a campus shop there where you could go and buy a hamburger. It was open to anybody, but it was mostly the students who went there. It was open after school every day until about 9 o'clock at night. They could come in and get something to eat and talk. There was a jukebox, and they'd have dances there, and they could use some of their spending money

in the jukebox. They had student dances on weekends.

KB: I think of the Navajos as being so shy. Did they dance with the girls?

EK: Very much. It was very popular. One of the amazing things that I noticed was that the boys would form these bands. I never had anything to do with the dances other than schedule which band was going to play on which weekend. I can't ever remember a music class out there. I'm sure there must have been music teachers, but there were 10 or 12 of these student bands. They would imitate the popular music that they would hear off the records, and most of the time you couldn't tell the difference from them and the others. They were very talented in that way. The dances were just like in any high school. There were some boys that were willing to dance with the girls, but most of them stood around the outside.

KB: That's how it was when I was in high school.

EK: I don't think they were any different than anybody. There were a lot of them that would pair off and would be girlfriend and boyfriend. While I was in Student Enterprise, I was in charge of the movie theater and the campus shop. Then we had the gift shop where students could bring their artwork, or sometimes their parents would send them a rug that had been woven. We would buy that and sell it through the campus shop. Some of their parents would make jewelry, and where they didn't have money to send their kids for spending money, they could send items for them to sell. There were several thousands of dollars go through the different shops to help the kids. Then any profit that was made on some of these things, it would again be turned to the dormitories, and they'd buy special treats for the boys or girls. They'd take them to dinner downtown in a restaurant. They liked that. Anybody likes to get out and do something different.

One fall a couple of boys had come back to school, and when they got off the bus, I asked them about home and their parents. They said, "We didn't go home."

I said, "Well, I saw you get on the bus."

They said, "Yes, but as soon as we got off the bus near home in Arizona, we hitchhiked to a lot of places."

They'd hitchhiked down through Texas, down to Miami, Florida, up the east coast, clear up to Boston and over to Seattle. They got home the day the buses were there to bring them back to school, and so they never did get home to see their parents. They were not homesick-type people because by that age they had been away from home.

I said, "Well, how did you pay for everything?"

They said they would stop for a few days and work to get enough money to eat and move on. That would have scared me to death, but they had no fear or difficulty at all of just picking up and going anywhere that they wanted.

KB: Did you see a big change when the other tribes came in?

EK: It was very different. The Navajos considered themselves different from the other Indian tribes. In fact, in some cases, they didn't consider themselves Indians. The other tribes were Indians, but they would say, "I'm not an Indian; I'm a Navajo."

There was some resentment from the other Indian tribes because of that, but they didn't feel that they were the same. They were delightful people. When they came to the shops, the students from the different tribes would intermingle. Usually there weren't enough students from one tribe to make a clique, so they all hung together. Towards the end there were more of them than Navajos, and the Navajos didn't come any more. My personal feeling was that I enjoyed the Navajos a little better. Maybe that was because I got to know them better. Some of the other tribes were of more mixed blood than the Navajos. You'd have a lot of Caucasian mixture in the other tribes. If you met some of the girls and boys from the other tribes on the street, you wouldn't know that they were from Intermountain School. Some of them had lived in cities, but some of them were from reservations, like up in Blackfoot or up in Montana.

KB: Did you council children other than Navajo or had you moved on from Guidance to Student Enterprise by the time they came?

EK: I counseled student from all the tribes. I was in counseling for three years, and then I went into Student Enterprise. Then I went back into counseling for the last six or eight years that I was at Intermountain School.

KB: Which did you prefer?

EK: I much preferred the counseling because it was closer interaction with the students. Even though I worked with the students in Student Enterprises, it was on a more business-like basis – how many hours did a student work, things like that. I didn't supervise their work. There were other people who supervised their work, but I had to pay their wages, make sure they were paid and hire them. If they had difficulty, sometimes they were fired or let go. There were times they just didn't want to work anymore, and then you'd have to get somebody else. I found the counseling to be more satisfying.

I remember one time in group counseling, I had an office that was almost as big as this room here, and my desk was in one end, and I had 10 or 15 chairs around the room with girls sitting there. (We were in a girls' dormitory at the time.) One of the instructional aides came in and said that one of the girls was missing. We had a procedure at that time that if a girl was gone, that for her protection, we would let the police know that she was missing and to watch out for her so she wouldn't get into any trouble.

When I called the police, they said, "What does she look like?"

I thought that was the dumbest question. I said, "Well, she's about 5'6" and has black eyes and black hair and dark skin."

I hung up and started talking to the girls again. They looked at me like I was crazy and said, "She does

not have black hair!”

I said, “What do you mean?”

They said, “She's blond.”

I looked at her and pointed to each one of the girls and asked, “What color of hair has she got?” To me all of them had black hair, and they went through each of the girls, and from their perspective not one of them had black hair. They'd say, “She's blond, brown, brunette.” They could differentiate the shades of black. It still amazes me that they did not see black as I see black. That was one of the most enlightening experiences I had. Every one of them looked identical to me, but every one of them looked different to them.

KB: What things did you talk about in group counseling?

EK: I had a counselor from Harvard University, and he wanted some students to come to Harvard. I said, “Well, these kids don't have much money.”

He said, “We'll take care of the money.”

I said, “Well, they're not really the top academically.”

He said, “If we get them in our school, we'll get them through.”

So I had the group of kids in and tried to talk them into filling out an application to go to Harvard, and I could not get one student to volunteer to try to get to Harvard. They were all Navajos at that time, but we could never get any of them interested in that.

KB: What were your main discussion topics in group counseling?

EK: What are going to do when you get out? Where are going to work? What kind of job would you like after you graduate from school? How are your parents doing? These types of questions.

One autumn day I was walking with two or three teachers, and all of the students would say, “Hi, Mr. Kennington.” Every one of them would speak to me, and I'd say hi to them. After we'd passed the group of students, one of the teachers turned to me and said, “How come the kids will talk to you, and they won't talk to me. Every one of them acknowledges you.”

I said, “Well, the only thing I can figure is that in the dormitory you have 180 to 200 kids, and there's no way on earth that you can know the names of every student. So to every student I see in the hallway, I say, 'Hi. How are you? How was your summer?' Within a month's time, the students knew that I was going to talk to them, and so every one of them started talking to me.”

It worked out well that way, and that was just self-defense because I did not know a lot of their names. If I passed a boy in the hall, I didn't know if came from my dormitory or somebody else's, and I wasn't

about to let him think that I didn't know him. I started saying hello to everybody, and they started saying hi to me.

KB: Did you do any one-on-one counseling?

EK: Some of it. If they had a particular problem, there was a lot of one-on-one counseling. Our intent was to help them educationally, but by the time they got out of school, we were not in the Education Department, and they were like I was. I didn't want to do much with schooling that was out of class.

KB: Did you form bonds with them, or did they ever come to your home?

EK: They didn't encourage that much. There were occasions when students came to the home, but they didn't encourage us to take them home. I lived clear on the other side of town with my wife and two children.

KB: Were they involved with the school at all?

EK: One summer my son was hired by a guy who had a summer school for one year. He had a bunch of candy machines that he kept at various locations at the school, and he needed somebody to fill those candy machines so he wouldn't have to come up and do it. He asked me if I knew anyone that could do it, and so he hired my son for a few weeks one summer. That's the only involvement that any of my family had with the school.

KB: Did you feel that the people of Brigham accepted those students?

EK: I don't know. There was a program where if you needed someone to work in your yard or out on the farms even, you could call and request a certain number of boys or girls to come and work. I'm sure some of the girls worked with the same individuals week in and week out – maybe year in and year out. I'm sure there were some that took care of children.

Then on the religious aspect, there were several different churches around, and they encouraged the children. They had church activities.

KB: Were they required to go to church?

EK: They were encouraged if they wanted to, but there was no requirement to go to church.

KB: Did most of them go?

EK: I don't know. I worked on Sunday, but as federal employees we were highly discouraged from inquiring about religion at all, so you didn't. I remember taking a group of students on a field trip once, and we had stopped to buy a pop for the kids. All they had was there Coke. The instructional aide asked one of the girls if she'd like one, and she said, "No, I don't drink Coke. I'm a Mormon." That quite impressed me at that time. They were very, very good students.

KB: Were you there when it closed down?

EK: No, I left in 1980, and it closed within a couple of years or so.

KB: How did you feel about the closure? Did you think it was time?

EK: I think it was good that the tribes pitched in and were educating the kids on the reservation closer to their homes, but it was mainly because of money. They wanted the money that was being spent on the school to be spent closer to home. I've seen both types. You talk about whether they get a better education at home or on the reservation. And if a student wants an education they'll get an education.

KB: I think you're right, but all these programs you've talked about – vocational training and work experiences and your campus shops – wouldn't be available on the reservation, would they?

EK: Not that I know of. It would be very difficult to replicate. I don't know whether they could, but they said they wanted to keep their children closer to home. Even on the tribal schools that I knew of, they were not home. The Navajo reservation is a huge reservation. They had dormitories at some of these schools that I'm aware of. There might be other schools. They schools for younger children would be closer to the homes, but the high schools were as far away from home as they would be here at Intermountain. I can't see how they could replicate what they had here or how many opportunities they got to go to work.

KB: Have they ever done a study to compare how the students from here did as compared to those from schools on the reservation?

EK: I've never heard of that. I don't know that it's ever been done. I had an opportunity to visit an Indian school at Albuquerque, New Mexico. Those kids were mostly Navajos, and they were far away from home. The programs they had there were mostly identical to what they were here. At the time Intermountain was closed, there were still a schools operating at Eugene, Oregon. There was one in Oklahoma, one at Fort Wind gate and a couple more in New Mexico. If they want to go to school, they can.

KB: What was the rationale for closing Intermountain when they still operated all these other school?

EK: The other schools had been established longer. That's the only criteria that I know of. My own personal belief is that if Gunn MacKay had not been defeated in Congress, Intermountain School would have still existed. I think there was a lot of politics involved; money is what it comes down to.

KB: Would you have done it all again?

EK: When I first started at Intermountain School, I thought *How can they pay me for a job that I would willingly do for nothing?* It was that enjoyable. When they brought the mixed tribes in, there was a little bit of difficulty because there was an Indian movement among the tribes. They wanted to close down the various schools and wanted the kids back on the reservation. There was quite a bit of difficulty at that time, and it wasn't quite as enjoyable. But looking back, I would have done it again. It was a very

delightful experience.

KB: Well, you've given me a lot of good information. Thank you for your time.