

Transcript Summary

UAF Oral History Call No: 2024-01-02 PT. 1

Date of Recording: 02/16/1981

Length of Recording: 1:33:28

Narrator: Willie Hensley

Interviewer: N/A

Others Present: N/A

Recording Location: Presumed to be the University of Alaska Fairbanks Campus

Transcriber: Micki Sievers

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(00:00:13)

(Hensley primarily gives class instruction unrelated to that day's class topic.)

(00:04:56)

Hensley asks if anyone wants to discuss anything from the last class and references how he might have upset feminists because he gave the example of how Eskimo women wanted the men to make the survival decisions for the group. Then one student says he didn't mention how they do it in other regions. Hensley asks how is it done differently, and he doesn't know how others do it differently in other regions, and that they should ask future class speakers how their decisions are impacted by cultural restraints. He mentions in Southeast Alaska the process might be very different in how they decide leadership, and that it is likely reflected in the Sealaska corporate board.

(00:07:20)

Hensley mentions that his communities don't battle much in their region, there's some kind of loyal opposition, but they are constrained by our culture in a sense. It's very unlike his people to make direct accusations about one's performance, some do if they've lost their spirit and act like the normal American. What if someone was not being financially responsible or had extreme nepotism in a group that normally does not make direct accusations. In a way he is excited to discuss with regional leaders because these kinds of things interfere with how corporations are run and it could be better to hire a normal business-type man.

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A student asks aren't the corporations set up like all other corporations around the country, so wouldn't things like embezzling funds and more add to the benefit and goals of the corporation, would they have the same legal corporation as everywhere else? Hensley says yes and that corporations are strange where they are like every other business that had to meet the requirements of a lot of other corporations. Except he says they got an exemption from the Securities and Exchange Commission, where corporations are governed by if they are going out to merge or offer stock. Hensley mentions

how Koniag had been attempting a merger between most villages in the region to merge capital, land, and enterprises. One man in one village is taking on the merger saying there was no evaluation of the stocks and what is the value of the corporation. They're saying the Koniag are taking the position that they are not subject to this because they are protected by an amendment and because of their timber they believe they're stock is extremely important, but the state is arguing against this. Hensley says it's a complicated situation but nevertheless, the fact is the corporations are business corporations and they need to follow the laws like everybody else, except for the exemptions they are able to secure. They pay taxes, and have to live with the director's liability to borrow on their assets just like everybody else. Except tribal corporations where the tribal lands are nontaxable lands which are basically federal lands.

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A student asks about mineral rights. Hensley states in the case of lands held by regional corporations it's basically key land that you own everything below and above the land, where you own the minerals in the ground as well. He gives multiple quick examples about who decided to maintain their reservation land or agree to go under the Act.

(00:15:40)

Hensley begins discussing schools systems and asks about what some of the students backgrounds are with their school systems, and if they believed they got good educations in village high schools. He mentions how no one in the class is from Barrow which claims it has a great education and jokes did they all go to Hawaii. One student says most people didn't get their education in the village, and she mentions she went to school in Anchorage, and Hensley jokes no wonder she is Americanized. One student says they were from Bethel who says he had a good education, and he thinks the bilingual education is really helpful.

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Hensley mentions how Reagan plans to cut the budget for bilingual teaching and he believes in Alaska, whatever cutbacks are made at a national level, that then the state would need to focus on the funding in Alaska. A student mentions the intent is still alive to keep bilingual alive and mentions in the Aleutian there are no certified teachers who can teach both languages and believes it's absolutely impossible to meet these standards. The student mentions the tests are subjective because the people giving them would lead the children to answer how they wanted, he says not with wrong intent but the tests weren't given accurately. So the student says he believes Reagan is right and they should remove it from federal funding but make the villages maintain the program if they want it. Hensley says the student hit on a point they plan to discuss in the class in the future. Hensley has a speech planned to discuss and push on how he believes education has been completely wrong on how it approached Native people, and that the destruction of the Native people is intertwined.

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A student mentions going to a village that a faculty member he was with asked a little girl why she doesn't speak her language. The little girl replied, all you came here and said not to speak our language, and now you're back telling us to speak our language after you destroyed it. Hensley says this kind of thing didn't affect the response of the parents who experienced the times of people being abusive in education.

(00:24:10)

Hensley says people will disagree with him and see his views as impractical of what he proposes to do. Hensley says people are being destroyed because of the inability to communicate and mentions

teachers will get very defensive because he does not believe teachers should be responsible for maintaining a child's identity. A student disagrees and Hensley states in a sense it's true, but the community and people should be responsible for the transfer of value, identity, tradition and culture. The teachers should focus on teaching what is needed and help him feel proud of himself, but train him with tools and techniques. Unfortunately, the teacher has been at the forefront of the destruction which started with the missionaries.

(00:26:36)

Hensley says he treads on gentle ground with the subject of missionaries, because so many people are enamored with them and see them as father figures, he calls it the great white father complex. He believes because the Native people could not communicate, the missionaries pushed their world onto the people and the Native people became submissive. He mentions how original missionary writings about the Eskimo displayed them as simple minded and they have been listening to the great white father for so long that it's hard to get out of that mode.

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A student asks what Hensley suggests for the process of transferring culture. Hensley says it is a disconnected thing and the people have lost the willpower to survive and maintain culture. Hensley says there has been so much of a force molding the minds of the children where they are looking at Eskimo or Indian culture the way Westerners do. It has effected the perception of their own people and they are looking at it like an outsider because it had been considered low class to speak your language, or handle the seals, and more. Hensley does believe this is coming to an end as more people are beginning to question what has been happening.

(00:31:21)

Hensley mentions how art is important in expressing the inner spirit, and various Native artists are doing that and that there's always been a question about if you're altering Native art if you're violating it. Hensley believes when it comes to survival, that people don't survive if they don't adapt. The environment in which we function we have to know what's happening and if someone is going to exclude you from the culture your people come from.

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Hensley says he will give them an example, first of all, if you're taking on an institution like a school system, it is an institution that is founded in the law. Through this system, they convey certain values and it frames the perception of people. (He draws an example on the board but doesn't describe how it looks). He says the institution we inherited hasn't changed much, but the board and control have. He asks what this means when it comes to schools. A student says he thinks the real question is if control has changed. Which Hensley states it hasn't changed hardly at all and the outright racism which was starting in around 1885 when Sheldon Jackson got a hold of it, being an old Indian missionary from the Plains, his plan was to disintegrate the Indian and the Eskimo.

(00:38:30)

Hensley discusses local control and how much is mandated by the government or society. He believes society at large has control over what ends up in your curriculum, and the whole effort in public education is to take the millions of foreigners and make them American. He asks where one student's family is from and the student responds by saying Ireland, Hensley says they also had to go through the machine to enjoy the bounty of all the land that had been secured by the military. They had to move in people with specific kinds of values, which the Puritans preferred, and move them into these lands.

These people came from specific societies with certain identities and ways of looking at the world, but as time went on, this disintegrating machine kept breaking down these human connections and social controls. Consequently, he believes this is a part of the social problems because economics has had a phenomenal effect on social systems. Now that both men and women need to work, what happens to the children?

(00:42:50)

Hensley discusses the boards of directors have not reflected any local control, and there have been no revolutionary changes in local control. Hensley prompts the class on the question and one student mentions how in Chevak or Hooper Bay took over their school system completely and are still waiting to evaluate how it's been working. Hensley mentions that is a contract school apart of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act. The student says it seems that they still have to answer to the law. Hensley says true but America does strange things because in the treaties between the Federal Government and the Indians, ultimately Congress started taking a heavy role. The smallest details of the Indian life have been dealt with by Congress, the law allows these contract schools, because whatever services were being done for Indian people, the tribe could contract. The level of disintegration that has occurred has led to grandchildren not being able to communicate with their grandparents, except for maybe in a minor way.

(00:46:22)

(No speaking/silence)

(00:47:02)

Hensley says the children are on their own and the community is being negatively impacted. Millions are being spent on education to destroy children, children are disconnected, and yet the society says well you're an Indian, and the boy doesn't know what that means and he might not feel like he is an Indian. The state is wanting to create an employee who is useful to the system, but they are creating people who have not learned real knowledge and have gone through the education system but are not successful.

(00:53:45)

Hensley says the way things are going and the systems in place are not working. A student says it seems Hensley, while using a specific community as an example, that in reality he is pointing to a more general problem that everybody seems to come out of the school system warped. Hensley jokingly says he hates to agree, but that's why he wants to discuss this because it effects all children, not just Indian kids. In a changing environment it's been hard for Native people to focus on values because the one's they have, haven't been the ones the major society is trying to replace. The elders in communities that have maintained their values are the most respected, and the ones that don't have their values, everybody knows who they are and that they'd sell their own grandmother for a few dollars. Hensley wants to challenge the boards to take a harder look at what they've been doing. The ways that have been done are not working and they need to look at why this isn't changing and who would need to be brought in to help change things.

(00:57:45)

Hensley states no American educator has ever been able to understand and know how to teach Native Alaskan languages in the ways the values had been, such as the concepts of numbers and measuring. Now that we see the problem, how do we begin to change the way things are done, and make sure children maintain a human connection to their culture, but run a business or be a professor. Hensley

says he was raised being taught it was incompatible, but he does not believe it is incompatible, but they need to change the way the system treats us. Hensley says elders and community members should be allowed to teach because they know the values needed, but that the system will say he has no credentials.

(01:03:33)

Hensley mentions that the place, the school is the symbol of destruction is where everyone has been beaten in to become the same. So perhaps Native institutions could be set up in the small communities where educational lessons would occur, such as foods in the region and how to acquire them. By the end of the process, if you have dedication to convey very specific values, as well as the language, and knowledge about the environment, that is very valuable. Hensley believes it's possible to create a system where a damaged people can gain confidence and still end up with a very productive citizen, and that this really has not been done in America. It can be achieved if people understand that survival is their own responsibility more than anyone's.

(01:08:50)

Hensley discusses if this could be reversed, that it would give people a way out. There is suicide, drug use, and more, and religion is not working. The people had always been religious and spiritual people because of their relationship to the land and animals. So despite praying, it is not going to solve the problem and the perception of what has to be done has to come from within. There's been so much repression of the individual and the religion by a combination of government and religion. There's no necessity of placing blame and responsibility but it needs to be recognized and dealt with, so that Alaska can be a much happier place to live.

(1:11:25)

Hensley expresses this is what he will be mentioning to the bilingual teachers. Unfortunately, those bilingual teachers do get treated like dirt, no credentials but are meant to educate the ones with the credentials. Hensley gives an example of how a man back home was hired to run a television instructional service but the bilingual people are now needing to educate the man. The elders with no credentials know what needs to be done but the wrong people are in charge of hiring the teachers and the people in the community need to be interjected into the process.

(01:13:55)

A student asks what happens to the values that are in conflict, for example cooperate vs competitive, the hands that are raised vs the hands that aren't raised. Hensley answers jokingly that you can act like an American every once in a while, because he has had to do things that he would not normally do. In business there is a lot of confrontation and you have to do things like fire people, in a corporate system it's almost like the military where you have to make direction and tell people what to do. (Hensley is writing on the chalk board throughout this portion so some context is lost) Hensley states he does not like to see the destruction of the people and jokes that the pope has minimal effect on America, the people with the corporate power that have money aren't listening. The politician divides what the state has and decides who gets what, people only listen to the native community because of money.

(01:20:00)

Hensley explains that everything is intertwined for all human beings, but things are more intertwined for Indigenous people because of the supposed conflict between traditional and the modern is something they have to work their way out of. Hensley feels if it is done right, it should give children some perception of what needs to be done in those arenas. The reason we are sent through the system is so

you come out an affective human being who knows who you are, and if you are not just Americanized then you will become a more valuable person.

(01:22:25)

A student mentions a Bethel senator has a controversial issue going on about people selling their limited entry permits. Hensley agrees and says in the Southeast it's a big issue of fishing permits, fishing was birth right and everyone knew about fishing patterns and it was a part of life and now they're selling them. Hensley also mentions a village that paid a \$20,000 dollar capital distribution after a big timber sale, not everyone went to sell their timber, but it's almost irresistible. If there wasn't such a failure in trying to develop and create an incentive, why would anyone want to subject themselves to that when it is irrelevant to who you are. The only reason he can think of that creates incentive for young people, is to help take care of this problem because he can see them losing everything because they are not transferring anything to the young people.

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Hensley says this is what he sees and there needs to be change because every children that drops out of school is helping to destroy us to, because of all that state investment to educate a child. Unless we can provide an incentive, which is to survive politically and economically, if that doesn't work then nothing will except pure greed. Most people seek an education to make a living, which there's nothing wrong with that, but unfortunately it becomes the primary motivator. For Alaskans they like to believe they don't come to Alaska to get rich, but to enjoy the beauty of nature. Hensley jokes with the class about why they are in Alaska, for nature or money.

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Hensley states all this other stuff it helps, but it will do nothing without the spirit of your tribe, which is just the way of looking at the world. Everything else is an expression of that, if you have the language it helps, but you can pick up a language like you can pick up economics, if it's not connected. If you don't have the language, traditions, history, or culture then ultimately this problem effects every human being. If you are still fighting that battle as an individual then you are wasting a lot of energy, because you are unable to focus as a human being on anything. You'll be able to focus your energy in certain directions, if you have that then it's like a balancing mechanism that keeps you even, so with all the change in the world you don't have to get confused by it. There is a great deal of change that has been happening in the Native community, but accelerated because of the bombardment of media where you aren't sure what to believe or understand when you don't know who you are. Hensley began to see this involving corporate matters, what do we do with all this energy and capital that will make the best possible use of it as far as we are concerned. Hensley mentions the economic influence and that some have considered building casinos, but what does that do for your people and how would it impact your values and community. At least if you're going to lose a lot of money, try and lose it where it's going to do the most good.

(01:32:25)

(Hensley takes class break, then new recording begins but runs out of tape)