

SOUTHEASTERN INDIAN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

INTERVIEWEE: Vonnie Oxendine, Jr.
INTERVIEWER: Lew Barton

DATE: October 1, 1975

B: This is October 1, 1975. I'm Lew Barton, interviewing for the University of Florida's History Department, American Indian Oral History Program. This afternoon I am at the library of the American Indian Studies Center, at 211 South Broadway in Baltimore, Maryland, 21231. With me is a gentleman who has kindly consented to give me an interview.
Would you mind telling us, sir, what your name is?

O: I'm Vonnie Oxendine, Jr.

B: You live here in Baltimore?

O: Yes, I do. I live in the northeast section of Baltimore.

B: I understand you're connected with the Center in some way. Would you mind telling us?

O: I have been connected with the Center. I served on the board of directors for the American Indian Studies Center in Baltimore, Maryland, since its beginning in 1968. One year as the vice-president, and all the other years as a board of directors member.

B: How old are you, Mr. Oxendine?

O: I'm forty-one years of age. I came to Baltimore in 1953. I'm not married, I'm single. My brother and I, he's slightly younger than I am, we share a home together here, of which we own.

B: What's his name?

O: His name is Craven Oxendine.

B: Is your father and mother living?

O: My father is deceased, twenty-seven years ago. My mother is living.

B: What was your father's name?

O: My father was Vonnie Oxendine, Sr.

B: And your mother?

O: My mother was Sadie May Locklear Oxendine.

- B: Who was she before she was married?
- O: She was the daughter of John V. Locklear and _____ Locklear of Robeson County--the Burnt Swamp Community.
- B: Well, not everybody enjoys married life, and I'll tell you there's a lot to be said for the bachelor state, of which I've recently forsook. But I guess each has its good points, doesn't it.
- O: It does.
- B: How long have you been working at the restaurant?
- O: I have been at the restaurant project here for the American Indian Studies Center _____ program--it's the work experience program through Manpower--for three months. I come to them from the Marriot Corporation, one of the largest chains of restaurants in the United States.
- : What position do you hold at the restaurant?
- O: I'm the manager-trainee for the restaurant project.
- B: And you're going to be training young people how to make out in the restaurant business?
- O: I'll be training...all of the employees of the restaurant, I'll have to work directly with--me and an assistant manager-trainee--cooking, waitresses, all our utility, cashiers, and over-all training, this whole entire establishment.
- B: Well, that sounds like a fascinating job, and a challenging one too. Of course, you love that kind of work, don't you?
- O: I do.
- B: And how long do you say you've been in the restaurant business?
- O: Seventeen years.
- B: That's great.
- O: I started with the Marriot Corporation seventeen years ago, first as a potwasher for them. I worked my way through the restaurant until the first cook's position. I worked all the cooks' positions in the kitchen. I worked at the first cook's position, and in my years in between, from 1965 on up to 1973, I travelled in

many different parts of the country, and trained cooks for them in their cafeteria division.

- B: Sounds fascinating. Do you have any special thing that you are going to feature over there, or any special plans for the restaurant. I understand it's called The Council Fire.
- O: Yes, the name of the restaurant is The Council Fire Restaurant. Our food will be cooked by native Americans, and the slogan for the restaurant will be "Native American cooking with a Southern accent." We'll feature some native American dishes that is well-known to the Lumbees, and some that relates to other tribes of Indians, particularly in the Southeastern part of the United States.
- B: That's great. I certainly wish you all of the best in the world. I am sure you are going to be very successful with that project. Having eaten some of your cooking already, I want you to know that I'm looking forward to eating over at The Council Fire.
- O: Thank you.
- B: And let's see now, I wanted to ask to ask you a few other questions. Like, have you encountered any problems since being here? Have you found being an Indian was a disadvantage, or an advantage, or maybe neither of these?
- O: Not really a disadvantage. I've had my share of disappointments, but I don't think I was disappointed because I was an Indian. It was more prejudices, I think, because I was an Indian.
- B: Well, I guess we've all encountered some of that, and some in different areas of the country. Do you think people are more prejudiced in the state of Maryland, or in the state of North Carolina against Indians?
- O: I don't think so. I think people try to understand us more here than they have in North Carolina. Maybe the present time is changing there.
- B: Do our people change when they come to the city? Do you think they have to undergo a lot of changes---the way they live, maybe think and act?
- O: I think some have changed. I think it's more or less up to the individual himself, of being an urban Indian. These days it should be different in living in the country from Robeson County from which we came, but I find that some pretty well are the same.

- B: Do you think there will always be an Indian community in Baltimore?
- O: I think so.
- B: Some people are fixed pretty permanently, aren't they?
- O: Yes, they are.
- B: I've heard other people say that they plan to go back to North Carolina some day. Do you think you'll ever return?
- O: Yes, I'm making preparations now. I'm glad you asked me that question. I do plan to go back to North Carolina; my family has quite a large chunk of land there, and my brother and I being the only sons in the family, the land is left in charge to us. I think for that reason and that...if I live to get in later years, approximately fifty or fifty-five years old, I would like to return there, because I have six sisters there, and I enjoy being with them.
- B: Well, North Carolina must have some good points in its favor after all.
- O: It does.
- B: It's home; that's one thing.
- O: I'll always say that Robeson County is home.
- B: Well, I've enjoyed it since I've been here. And I plan to return for about three months; I think I'll be in Carolina, or I might be back here. Of course, that depends on the board of directors, and other things. I have to complete my book, a couple of books, and get it out of the way, and then I'll have a free hand to work. I've enjoyed it very much since I've been here, and I'm encouraged to see our people going on as well as they are. Their financial condition is better here, wouldn't you say?
- O: Yes, it is.
- B: Are you the only one of your brothers that live here?
- O: I have another brother that lives with me.
- B: It is just you two from North Carolina?
- O: Just we two, the only two boys.

B: I see. And how do you manage to stay unhitched?

O: Well, it hasn't been no problem. I just never let nobody get that close to me, I guess.

B: Well, I understand there are lots of eligible women around.

O: There is. I have lots of friends.

B: Maybe you'll change your mind some day.

O: Well, they....

B: I thought my son would never change his mind. He was about as confirmed a bachelor as anybody I've known, I guess, but he met a sweet little girl (and this was Bruce,) and so a few months ago he was married. I liked her very much. I always said, "You and I are going to work to trap that old bachelor!" (Laughter) She said, "You'd better help me!" Anyway, they were married a few weeks ago, and they seem to be very happy. Married Miss Barbara Carter, and they seem to be very happy.

Of course, I tried it again. Two of my sons got married within the past two months. It was Roger Dale, and Bruce, and I--I think we got married, all three of us, in the same month. Can you beat that?

O: No, that's wonderful.

B: So I says, "Well, the Bartons must be on a marriage spree."

O: Hmm.

B: I suppose it's whatever you are used to, comfortable with, a wife.

Do you think migration is increasing in this direction, or staying about the same? Do you think more people are coming to Baltimore, or...?

O: I don't think so. I think it's staying about the same, and some people are returning to Robeson County about now.

B: About how many people are working with you at The Council Fire?

O: We have hired to this date thirteen people, but in all, the restaurant will hire approximately twenty-four people.

B: Now, when you get the present people trained, will they be on

permanently, or will you take others on, or what?

- O: Some will be permanently. After a year's time, if there is any wants to leave and seek employment elsewhere, we should hope that they will be prepared by the knowledge and experience they have gained, the training in our restaurant, to go somewhere else and work. But we will keep a staff of the employees that we have hired.
- B: I like the name. I wonder who came up with that name.
- O: The name Council Fire, a young Lumbee lady named Mary Taylor named the restaurant.
- B: Is this the very pretty girl who plays on the Lumbee Indian Girls' Softball Team?
- O: I'm not sure that she plays on the softball team, but she is a young, pretty girl.
- B: This is, she's about fifteen or sixteen, somewhere in there?
- O: Right in that age bracket.
- B: Uh, huh. Yes, I know her. I like the name very much. Wonder if we're going to have Miss American Indian of Baltimore again this year? Have you heard any talk about that?
- O: Mrs. _____ has been working on that. I do hope we can get that pageant going. It shouldn't be dropped; it was very interesting.
- B: Yes, I thought so. Yes, we do need somebody to represent us. Do you find any great differences between living here and living back in the Carolinas?
- O: I don't think I would find now any great differences from that I lived there. When I came to Baltimore, it was much different then. There was a great difference at that time, the working conditions for which I did come here for. But I don't think there would be that much difference now; in fact, I think I would enjoy living there now.
- B: Mostly your problem was a problem of training, wasn't it?
- O: Right.
- B: Now that you've got your training, you are training other young

people, and I think that's just great.

O: Thank you.

B: You don't have a time set when you are going to open up?

O: Not an exact date, but as it stands now, we should be completed in approximately two weeks.

B: Well, I certainly hope everything works out. Now Mr. Barley Grimm is the director of the _____ project in this area, isn't he?

O: Yes, he is.

B: Mr. Oxendine, if there was some thing you could do, anything you could change about Indian people or in connection with the Indian community, what would it be? What would you like to see changed, or whether we're talking about the Indian community here or the Indian community at large? Is there any pet wish you wish you could make for Indian people in the world?

O: Yes, I would like to see Indian people try to work closely together in harmony with each other for the benefit of all Indians everywhere. One thing I'd especially like to see is the Indian people encourage their youth, their children. Whether be your children or not, encourage young native Americans to go to school for a better education.

B: That's great; that's certainly a good wish. Do you think schools are better here or back in Carolina.

O: I haven't been in the school system there since twenty-three years ago when I left school, but I think our school standards in North Carolina would be about the same as here now.

B: That's good. The school system back home is changing, improving, I'm sure. I wonder if there is something that you would like to add to what you have already said about the restaurant operation? If you'd tell us anything you'd like to tell in your own way, we'd appreciate it. Very interesting project.

O: Our restaurant will feature many different selections of food, of which we gave some very fancy names to. Our distinguished president of the council of the American Indian Studies Center, Mr. Herbert H. Locklear, and I, Vonnice Oxendine, Jr., we worked

on the menus for quite some time. We'll have such items on the menu as Blue Dumplings, a recipe of the Creek Indians from Oklahoma; cornbread pudding, a recipe of the Creek Indians of Oklahoma; and our own recipe favorite among the Lumbee Indians, chicken and pasta, which will be a dinner special on Sunday. Many of our recipes have been tested by me, Vonnie Oxendine, in my home, at my own cost. That is my donation to the restaurant, my knowledge of food through the years that I've gained, and I'm delighted that I can come and share it with my people.

- B: That's certainly great. How about your prices, Mr. Oxendine? Are they going to compare favorably with the prices at other eating establishments?
- O: Yes, they will, Mr. Barton. Our prices will be right in the range with other eating establishments in the area. Some of the items will be slightly higher; we took that in consideration of our restaurant being a very good-class restaurant, that our prices might be slightly higher.
- B: Well, you might have some items that were actually lower too, though?
- O: We do. We do have some items that are very low-priced, and in the event that someone didn't have two dollars to spend for lunch or dinner, they could get a satisfactory meal in the neighborhood of \$1.25.
- B: Well, that's great. That's very great. If I come to your place and look around and try to get me some collard greens, which I dearly love, am I going to be able to get collard greens?
- O: Yes, you will. They won't be on the menu every day, because people might get tired of them every day, but they will be on the menu from time to time.
- B: Have you ever seen anybody cook collards the way we cook them back home?
- O: Yes, I have.
- B: I have been disappointed with collard greens when I go in the restaurants, because they just don't seem to know what to do with them. You know, like boiling them without any seasoning, or anything like that.
- O: Some restaurants don't cook them the way that we Lumbees do.

They steamed them sometimes. I know for a fact that they steamed the greens with only some very light seasoning over them, but they are not like we Lumbees know how to cook them with the seasoning, or fry the collards the way that we are noted for through the years.

- B: Well, they're certainly very popular back home among Indian people. I think collards are something that sort of grow on you, though, more or less, don't you? For example, children don't usually like them very much, but the older they get, the more they like collard greens.
- O: I guess.
- B: I love them. I could eat them for breakfast, really.
- O: I loved them also. I recall how, in my years as a child, seeing my mother give them to very small children, some of the grandchildren, when they would visit them occasionally. I recall seeing her feeding them collard greens, or cabbage with some cornbread, and they seemed to love them.
- B: Yeah, they really are tasty. They're better...you know when they are best to me is in the fall of the year, when the frost first falls and hits your collard greens.
- O: That's an old saying I've heard through the years among our people. It seems to make them sweeter. The bitterness leaves them, after the frost hits them.
- B: It's a very valuable vegetable, too because you can grow it all the year round. You can keep collard greens the year round, except when there is snow on the ground, probably.
- O: Right.
- B: And even then they sometimes survive the snow.
- O: That's true.
- B: Well, you've been very kind to give us your time, and I know the time is running out. Very shortly now, people will be going home, I don't want to detain you unduly. I appreciate so much this opportunity of talking with you, and of you sharing your experiences with us along these lines. And I want to wish you good luck and Godspeed in all your endeavors, both as a member of the tribal council and in your works.
- O: Thank you kindly, Mr. Barton. It's been a pleasure.
- B: Thank you very much.