

Transcript of unedited tape
Interviews for Council Oak Tree Project.

Interview with Dr. Lawrence Martin: 11-04-09

Errol: Okay, sit over here.

Dr. Martin: Alright

Errol: we're doing... a oral, a oral history project for Dr. Mann's class and... we're kind of gathering history about the Oak tree so we can put it on archival, you know records so that we'll have it... so we are going around and asking people that have been involved with the tree or know about the tree...and you know the ceremonies that were presented at it or done you know keep or... and also this new thing that is going on with the tree trying to keep it and make sure they don't take it down. So um... I guess I'd like to interview you and ask you questions about the tree and you know what the significance is or that it might have for you an the people in this community and for the school. So I gave you the questions.

Errol: ahh, so what can you tell us about he council oak?

Dr. Martin: Well, you know I wasn't here when the old original council oak fell down, struck down but I heard a lot about it. And I wasn't here when the new one was planted. I came a little bit after that so I...I don't have personal knowledge of the ceremony that was conducted, I've heard a lot about it. I know of three of the main people from Indian communities who took part in it, two Ojibwa and one HoChunk. I know them all, and respect them. I don't think that they ahh... out to try to pull something. I really don't know who's initiative it was to ahh... bring them here for that ceremony. I never exactly heard exactly who... who's idea it was or who made the ah... who made the ahh... contact or anything like that. I would like to know that...um I know according to the story you know after the original tree went down, they tried several times to replant and it kept failing and then they consulted some Indian leaders who were umm...willing to give them some advice and then come here and do some kind of ceremony I guess. So it sounds to me like it was really the university's initiative. Perhaps, I am guessing because of the importance of the tree in terms of the university's history and the logo of course, which is all over the campus you see it and it is on every piece of literature published by the university, and most people don't know where that tree is, but umm...I am surprised that the university ahh...would have toyed with the idea of destroying that caused I presumed that the university was umm...It was the university's initiative to replant it I think and it certainly was...according to again and I wasn't here, but I heard that the university made a kind of commitment to keep the tree and ahh...therefore this would be...to get rid of been going back on that commitment, which we both know has happened to often in Indian country right.

Errol: Yes, umm... the second question was. What was your experience with the dedication ceremony, but since you had already mentioned that you were not there

Dr. Martin interjects: I was not there.

Errol: So you didn't see anything. So you didn't come for the 1991 dedication.

Dr. Martin: I was far away then. I was in Ohio teaching at that time. Some of my relatives were here actually and ahh...as well as people that are now my friends, but some relatives I knew then and they would probably told me about it but I don't really remember that.

Errol: Does the tree have any personal significance for you?

Dr. Martin: Well, yea it does you know, I mean ah...the tree is ah...the tree and the place, that the tree occupies, I mean the whole place here is sort of the meeting place between Dakota and Ojibwe in a peace making way right, I mean that's a powerful idea you know. I mean you and I have both read William Warren's History of the Ojibwe right, and it is just constant warfare around this; up and down this river between those two peoples and, but it wasn't constant you know, there were periods of peace. And ah... it's a kind of... you know... a kind of...it's a powerful place to be to move for peace among people who had that kind of problem with getting along. I don't know, the sense, the boundary is right here. I mean, every time that you cross the footbridge you're going from Ojibwe to Dakota territory. Do we know for sure that it was exactly that tree? I don't know if we do know that for sure, but um...presumably people thought that for a long time ah...that this was a place for treating making and that, that tree was a specific place where it happened and who could ever absolutely prove it, but that is a long standing tradition. Up on the um...fifth floor of the library, there are two huge paintings hanging up, whole wall size paintings, they're old paintings that were done...I looked, I did a little digging around one time to find out about them and they were done around the time the university was created I think or pretty shortly after that. Some artist was commissioned and one of them... they're both I think paintings of right here... this place. One of them depicts Louis Hennepin coming here. And we don't know if that's true either. Hennepin's journals talk about him coming up the river, up a river. I think most scholars think that it was the Chippewa River, but some people think it was the Buffalo River. And, How far did he come up? And, so these are all questions. But there is a painting that show him right over here...clearly...that cliff...that cliff that you can see as you cross the um...footbridge is in this painting. The other painting is this treaty making between the Ojibwe and the Dakota. And there isn't a ...there is all kinds of trees there I mean but I don't if it's about the tree but it's about the place you know. And so those paintings were done; commissioned I think in connection with the early history of the university. So I think that the tradition goes way back. I often took classes over there when I was teaching here. Um...just to sit around the tree and talk about this place; this meeting place; the Dakota and Ojibwe peace making and all that kind of stuff. I particularly did it often with first year classes, especially first year experienced classes. Not only my own but I was invited to do it with other classes sometimes. The FYE program is the kind of...one of the objective of the FYE program...I don't know it may have changed now...but one of the objectives was to really kind of introduce the students to the university and to university life and all that kind of stuff as well as what ever subject was being taught. Classes were kept small...and it was supposed to be a kind of enculturation of the students into the university. So I always liked to take the students

over there, these brand fresh students...fresh to the university and take them over there and sit around the tree and talk about it. So those students knew the story. Now people say most people, most students around here don't know what that tree on the...what the council oak tree ...what the tree on the university publication is, that's probably true, but those students I took over there...they knew very well what it was. And, frankly I do feel a little bit guilty that I didn't maybe while I was directing American Indian Studies find some way to get that message to a larger audience, You know, because it meant a lot to me. I thought that it was an important message and I thought that the university wanted it to be an important message, which is why they use that logo. And, now I wish I would have found some way to reach more people with the story. But I, you know reached quite a few with the way that I just described.

Errol: So if the tree stays, do you think that students of today and of the future should be educated about it, and of its presence.

Dr. Martin: I do think so. I do think so. Yea, and I think the best way to do it is in that way, taking students and classes over there and talking about it. The other way of course is to put up a sign and stuff like that. Which personally I think is kind of not so personal...I would...wouldn't probably favor that unless it reached more people. Yea, I would do that too. But, I think it would be better to do it in...through the oral tradition. Get students over sitting around the tree and I am not talking about doing ceremonies. I didn't do ceremonies with these kids. I just went over there and talked about the tree. I did a ceremony, when they were going to tear it down. I did say a prayer. It got in the paper, but that was because a group of us got together, it wasn't a university function. And, also we were desperate, because they were going to cut the tree down. I usually didn't do that with students. I just went over there and we just sat around the tree and talked I think; pretty much.

Errol: What did you think about this recent protest or what went on?

Dr. Martin: Well, I was...I was upset when they were going to cut the tree down. Practically, I was amazed. I had retired very recently, so I wasn't in touch with the day to day doing at the university. So nobody could blame me for not knowing that they were going to cut the tree down until it suddenly came to my attention and then yea, I was astounded because how could the university using that logo...ah...want to obliterate it...I just couldn't believe it. I was just amazed.

Errol: According to the University, they said they let people know in the summer.

Dr. Martin: Well I know they did. But, you know the summer around here...well first of all that doesn't apply to me because I am retired. But even so, even before I was retired when I was around here in the summer, most people weren't around here. Nobody knew what was going on in the summertime. I mean few people did but not that many. So I don't think that...that is very much an argument.

Errol: How, or has your community's opinion of the tree change over the years? I guess...um what were asking about that question is you know, since you are native, how is your native opinion and how is the community here the non-native community.

Dr.Martin: Yea, that's a good question, and you know, I don't know if a great many natives know about the function of the tree.

Errol: I guess we are talking about the ones that were here, that were doing the ceremony.

Dr.Martin: Yea, the students that were here I think we used to...like when we used to have ah...a Native American Awareness Week or when it used to be Native American Awareness Month and then it was a week or whatever that was, it was in the spring, culminated into the pow wow. We used to have a gathering around the tree to kick that week off and stuff like that. It seems to me it did mean a lot to the native students at that time. Um...you know...but I don't know for sure what it meant to them, but they seemed to find that it kind of...was a recognition of um...of Indian presence in this place.

Errol: How about since the news has been the or... it has been in the news and stuff of the community around here.

Dr. Martin: Oh,

Errol: Have people talked about it to you? Or...have they seen you in the paper.

Dr. Martin: Oh yea, sure the paper. A lot of them had seen the paper and I do have a reputation for being a person who is seen at a lot of demonstrations...I'm not like that...so yea, I'm amazed at people...and...I have to say that everybody that has come up to me has been positive. They have been saying good for you for standing up for the tree. I mean it has happened quite a bit you know. Now in the paper of course, somebody said I should be arrested for praying at the tree...whatever...but I don't know who those people were...I mean...but personal contact has been very favorable yea.

Errol: How do you believe the council oak will be viewed in the future?

Dr. Martin: Well...um

Errol: I guess after everything that just happened see.

Dr. Martin: Yea... I mean you know...I hope that more students will know about its significance. I think they will now...I mean I think something will get done about that I believe and I hope there's more of a connection made between the tree and the...and the logo and the council oak rooms and all that kind of stuff, that it get to be more part of peoples experience and part of the university's um what...um you know sense of pride and history that sort of thing. Were getting up to one hundred years I think that this university...that this would be a time to you know...do something about that.

Errol: Alright, well thank you.

Dr. Martin: Yea.

End of Interview : 12:30

Interview with Dr. James Oberly 10-06-09

Council Oak Tree Project

Errol: Were doing an oral interview project a history project for Dr. Mann's class and I guess it's to preserve the council tree oak history...the history of the oak tree I mean and its going to be archived and used for you know when anybody needs it I guess. We're doing the history for his class, the oral history part of it.

Dr. Oberly: Okay...Okay, how can I help.

Errol: Um...We have some questions that we wanted to ask you about the Oak tree.

Dr. Oberly: Okay, I will do my best to answer them.

Errol: Okay, um...first question, um...What can you tell us about the Oak tree, or the Council Oak? Sorry.

Dr. Oberly: Alright, well there is two uh...council oaks...um...there was a tree that was...probably took root in the late seventeenth century no one knows for sure, but we do know it was a very large tree in the twentieth century. And um...I started at the university in 1983 and the Council Oak was very prominent then. In the area in back of Davies Center, there was a new building on the other side of the nursing school that just opened ah...recently before that. So it was a very prominent tree and then it was knocked over in...people call it a local windstorm, I remember it as a tornado in 1986 and that was the demise of the Council Oak Tree. There was uh...strong sense on campus that it should be replanted and there were some efforts to do that at first unsuccessful and then I believe in 1990 on Earth Day, there was a tree planted that did take root, so that tree is now nineteen years old and looks to be very healthy and growing and it's the one you see out in the same area between Davies Center, the library and the nursing school.

Errol: What was your experience with the dedication ceremony if you were part of it?

Dr. Oberly: Well there were two that I can recall. I recall first, great sadness, when the tree blew down in um...that tornado. And, I may have the dates wrong whether I guess it was 87 not 86 but I remember great sadness then. Our chancellor at the time was Larry Schnack, and various faculty at the time went to him and said you know we've got to remember the Council Oak, and there were different ways of doing that. One was to start a um...special part of the found...university foundation to raise money for scholarships in excellence and that was called the Council Oak Society and there were many people who rallied to that and said I want to support the university and um...students studying there and have them remember the importance of the Council Oak. So, that was one that the tree was remembered was through scholarships.

Dr. Oberly: Second way, was to plant a new tree. And, I recall um...at least two possibly three tree planting ceremonies. One in the day time, with a chancellor there ah...very prominently and um...buildings and grounds facilities management it is called today. I

think it was buildings and grounds then. With a giant tree planter chugging up with a lot of diesel fumes and everyone in a circle and very impressed. Regrettably, that tree died I believe. And, um...then I recall the second...at least when I was there the second attempt was on Earth Day 1990 and that was one where again many university people were present. It was very early in the morning. There was a dawn gathering at 6:00 am. I think it was April 19th 1990 something like that. And, um...first everyone gathered at the site and there were some prayers said in Ojibwe, which I didn't understand. And then um... a group of runners were sent on a three-mile run carrying the American flag and an Eagle staff. And, I was a runner in those days ah...not a marathoner, but I would run a five mile, ten kilometer races so I was very enthusiastic about that, and recall running with the president of the LCO Ojibwe Community College, John Little bird Anderson and with the Tribal Judge from Lac Du Flambeau Ernie St. Germaine. And, I remember it was a great honor when one or the other would pass me the Eagle staff, which I carried for...about a hundred yards. But, it was a thrill to be at the front and an honor. And then, after three miles we came back to the site, we were greeted with refreshments by um...supporters, and then we all gathered around the site and planted the new Council Oak Tree on Earth Day 1990. And, um...there were many prayers said. It was a long ceremony. I didn't understand the prayers because they were in another language. But, I remembered then what was said in English, was also what was said at one of the earlier tree plantings, which is we who are here pledge our honor too protect this tree. We want it to live for seven generations, for three hundred years. And um...we regard this as an solemn undertaking of the university. That this is an historic site. So, it was a deeply moving ceremony. As was the one...even with the belching diesel...cap tractor was still a moving ceremony when the university, which is otherwise a pretty new school, were not even one hundred years old. We realize that we are in a historic site here that ah...for several hundred years and I think that made an impression on everyone, that this was very much part of our identity, as a meeting ground for different people with different ideas, that's what the university is about. So, um...it was important then and everyone knew it was important.

Errol: Does the tree have any personal significance for you?

Dr.Oberly: Well were talking about both the old tree as to say, I felt a deep sadness when it was blown over in the tornado. Um...and...shocked and saddened by that and impressed by the power of the wind, but also determined as with many other people that we should rebuild. Um...to remember it and reconsicrate a tree, and the new one has meaning for me because I was there at the replanting. I was one of the ones who pledged to protect this tree for the next seven generations or at least my one-seventh of that time.

Errol: Has your communities opinions ah...yea of the tree changed over the years.

Dr.Oberly: Well, my community would be the...the university community. I'm...I have been at UW-Eau Claire for twenty-seven years. I was a youngster then um...when it blew down. I had only been here only three or four years and I was still a young faculty member in 1990 when it was replanted. But, I would say my cohorts who were there then who...who were similarly impressed with the importance of the new tree. And, I noticed this year, when we found out that it was threatened with destruction by the plans for the student center that we rallied around the tree. And, all of us pretty much remember the

same thing, that it was a significant undertaking and that we had pledged, the university would protect this tree and we are the university, that's our community.

Errol: So what about...it's been in the news lately, and do you have any positive or negative views of the tree now, within the community, the whole community, that you have heard.

Dr. Oberly: Oh, I think that everyone's very proud of the tree that it's...first of all that it is living, thriving, I think that's the first, that is satisfaction is how healthy the tree is. And, um...it's...it's everywhere, it's on or logo, we...we still have the Council Oak Society. It's an important part of who we are. And um...I think people would be deeply saddened if it was harmed in any way. So, I think people were...everyone in my community, which I consider the faculty, student university community was delighted when the chancellor announced that the tree would be saved. The building would be redesigned around the it, and that one seemed to me to be what the chancellor would call a win/win. We honor the tree, we keep faith with the promises made in 1990 to protect it and nurture it for seven generations. And, um...we have a new student center and it's a better student center for not destroying the past. So, I'm very positive about the tree and how the issue was resolved this year.

Errol: Um...how do you believe the Council Oak will be viewed in the future?

Dr. Oberly: Oh, I think it will be central to our identity, that we are, a place were people come...who are different people, much as when it was a meeting ground for different tribes who had...not just differences, but were at war with one another. This would be a place of peace, discussion, debate, resolution, um...the best traditions of what a university is. I think will continue. It is who we are.

Errol: Okay, um... we kind of left the questions open-ended, I mean is there anything that you want to add maybe, that I didn't ask.

Dr. Oberly: Nope, you covered it all.

Errol: Okay, I want to thank you for your time.

Dr. Oberly: Thank you for asking me.

End of interview: