

Interview with Lillian Heldreth

Native American Studies

Location: Marquette, Michigan

April 8, 2002

START OF INTERVIEW

Interviewer (I): Interview with Lillian Heldreth, April 8th, 2002, Northern Michigan University.

Lillian will you state your date of birth?

Lillian Heldreth (LH): 12/12/38.

I: Alright. Let's begin with, what was your first involvement with the Native Studies Department?

LH: Melissa Hearn and I, were sharing an office at the time when she decided to try to start the program.

I: And at that time were you, was it Melissa Hearn that was working on setting up the program and then you were just assisting with that?

LH: That is right, at that point I was simply, I was simply cheering her on from the sidelines

I: [Chuckles] When was your first, when did you first start teaching classes in the department, for the department?

LH: I think I started teaching in the first year, I am not a 100% certain which semester I started, but by that time Melissa had taught a couple of classes in EN315, and she felt like we needed the traditional oral literature class, we were hoping that people would take 314 first, at least the ones in the minor, nobody ever does but - [Chuckles] The idea was to have a background, at least

some background in Native American thought and philosophy and so forth because, otherwise, Melissa was spending most of her time explaining - that was the rationale. [Chuckles] So, I promised that I'd develop the course. And so I did.

I: And when did you first start teaching that class?

LH: That's, the day I cannot exactly remember. I would suspect you're gonna have to double check against Melissa's data. I can't even remember the year it started, I think it was about '89 or '90. Must have been '90 or '91.

I: And there wasn't a Native Studies Department at that time.

LH: There was nothing. There had been some work done about 10 years previously, maybe more than that, it was in the '70s. That was when we had a paper called Anishnaabe News, and that had been done pretty much extracurricularly, as extracurricular activities. But no actual program in the academic sector had been taught, some programs have been taught informally, like some language classes, I believe that the then-priest from Baraga, Bishop P _____ [both laugh], it would be appropriate, he after all worked the dictionary [?]. . . Trying to think what Father John Haskle [?] may have taught, I believe he taught, at least taught language through that informal program. And then Russ tried to start a program, I believe, and check that with Russ, I just remember hearing something about Russ trying to start a program and there was so much to do and so many varied, you know, people was varied opinions, I don't think even the administration was terribly friendly at that time to the idea, this was quite a while back, this would have been probably early '80s I guess, I wasn't even aware of that, that Russ was trying to try to do that. But every now and then it had occurred to me, even before Melissa brought it up, that we were neglecting our minority. I kind of got sensitized [?], you'll have to be very careful how you write this, when they started importing minority students from Detroit. And here we are with many

young people native to this area who need the help more. So I felt there was an injustice going on. And I still do, I still don't think we support Native students quite well enough. When we have a _____, when you see the program at Trent University you know what I mean by that, they do support their students very well, and they're serving their big minority. And I think we should serve our own minority in the UP first, and then deal with other people's minorities. We are not truly producing diversity. When we ignore the people who are native to this place and bring them in from outside to get diversity, it just doesn't make any sense. And if you quote me on that I'm very firm in that belief.

I: And so after that early '90s or so you continue teaching the EN316 [?]

LH: Yes, I think I have taught every semester except one semester I've taught it since then

I: And do you teach other classes for the department?

LH: I teach EN090, EN211B, Popular Culture, that's EN260, Women in Lit, occasionally, Images of Women in Literature, which is EN250, and I sometimes teach EN315.

I: And EN315 is the contemporary -

LH: The Contemporary Lit, I've got a class of that now.

I: And other than the 314 and 315 that are specific to Native literature. Do you incorporate Native literature in any of your other classes?

LH: In those classes I do not teach the writing classes as lit classes, I teach them as writing classes, and so I don't use a lot of literary material in those classes. I do however often sneak a little bit in every now and then on the side. It's not a lot programmed into it but -

I: And what is your interest in Native culture? Why is it that you teach this class? Why did Melissa go to you?

LH: When we were beginning the program, Joe Bittinger [?], a member of the Sault Ste. Marie tribe, had been working with the local people to develop an interracial ceremonial group. And Joe invited Melissa to go to the ceremony the first year that they made it public at all. And she said Melissa could bring a friend so Melissa invited me. And I went and I really felt comfortable with what went on and supportive of what went on. And I felt that I could do a respectful job, if not always the best informed one. So I chose as my first source for EN314 elder teachers, orally. Because I think you have to know how that works before you can understand what you find in a book at all. And I spent a lot of time watching Larry Matrius [?] teach. Larry is probably in Hannahville now. Yes, he is. And at that time he was in Hannahville so he would come up and do _____ teachings course in the wintertime. Larry was a big help, he was the first Native person who helped us support getting the program started. And we asked him with tobacco to advise us and help us, when we began the program Melissa held little gathering at her house and we asked to Larry to come and open it with prayer. That was very beautiful, and I think got us off to a good start. At one, now when we did get the program set up we decided that we needed a community advisory board, and so, especially helpful on that, there were many people on that board and I can put up a list on my computer. But I'd especially like mention Joe McGuanabee [?] and Rena McGuanabee [?], who came up from Hannahville and gave us advice, explained such elementary things that people need to know as how to offer tobacco, to the whole circle, it was a lot of people. And we've had, and so we used to have a meeting about once a year with the community advisory board, and those were always very interesting, and many people would speak. We held a couple of elders' conferences, at least one good elders' conference here. That hasn't been done since. But we had several people come in, mostly from Hannahville and Sault Ste. Marie, and they talked and we had dinner, and that was one of things we did. I know I'm

kind off the subject but I feel that just kind of lead to how, how we evolved the community. And that's how we did, we had the advisory board meeting, which, as I remember, had about 40 people at it the first time we did it. And then we had the elders' conference, and we then, of course, we brought in people to speak in classes and advertise that so that those could be community events as well.

I: How much a direct involvement have you had with the more administrative side of the Native Studies Department?

LH: I was the director for one year. Administration is not my best job but I got through it. That was the time we had the people from AIM [American Indian Movement?] come speak during the Keweenaw Bay troubles. We had rumors of possible disruptions and so forth. We even had the university police there to make sure that nothing went wrong. But nothing went wrong, had a good audience except that we didn't have a microphone, and I think I had requested one, too, I was not real happy about not having a microphone, but I don't remember. But yeah, there was a good lively, open discussion. Nobody said anything revolutionary. But the students got a feel for Native activism, which I think they needed, and which I think was a good thing to do, I'd like to see us get more controversial speakers once in a while again, that was just an opportunity, they were here to work with the people in Keweenaw Bay and were willing to come down. Let's see, as director what else did we do... That was one of the bigger things. And we had a _____ [sounds like "droughter"] come in and we had that year and mainly, the main work Melissa and I did that year and the reason I was director was that Melissa was the person in charge of the search for the new director, and we wanted to split that up so she didn't have, because it's actually against university rules for the person running a program to be the person in charge of hiring a successor, I could be part of the process as director, but I couldn't have been, I couldn't

have, or Melissa couldn't have as director, have done the main organizing of that search, which she did. And that was when we found Dennis [Tibbetts], and that was our big job during the year that I was director, basically we did concentrate on that because we knew if we didn't find a good director, and we knew it was definitely time for Native person to be directing it, and that was great deal of work, because we were hiring at department head-level, really. And that's a more intense process than hiring at instructor or professor level. It was a good education.

I: How much involvement did you have then with Dennis Tibbetts after he took over?

LH: Not a lot. We had faculty meetings fairly frequently, but I wasn't closely involved with Dennis.

I: How about Martin, the new director?

LH: Hasn't been here long enough except that I feel that he's easy to work with and very approachable and seems to be doing great job from the things we've had in meetings so far. And I guess the thing I'm really happy about with Martin is that he's from our area, and the people here, and he dances at powwows! And looks absolutely happy! And I am sure that that helps students feel very supported. And he has also *really* worked hard on developing the minor and I think most of his material has gone through _____. He will know again the right answer to that, but, and he's, you know, he's been very willing to work on structuring things and work with people. He's asked for input from Melissa or me when he needs it, and that's help to avoid doing the same thing over again. But I think Martin is going to really build this program. I hope this is off the record for _____ the administration listens to it.

I: Do you see it as a positive or negative aspect of the program that it is, or seems to be, turning its focus more towards the local community versus the Native community at large, like most of the classes now deal with Anishnaabe culture more so than... Do you see that or - ?

LH: I think that's our responsibility. We don't have anyone, see, Anishnaabe culture is my specialty, too, so we don't have anyone really qualified to work in depth with other cultures. And this is usually what I tell my students, I say we are gonna work, even my 314 classes about one full quarter of the class is Anishnaabe and then the rest is divided up among other groups. Because that's where I have talked to elders, that's where I've travelled over to Trent to see how Edna [?] and the other teachers there taught and what they taught, that was when we were developing program, that is one this I did, was take my spring break one year and spend a week going to classes at Trent. And that was very good experience, and they have something that I think we should get, if we have we can ever make it work, this is not Canada, unfortunately, I think it's easier to do this in Canada than it is in the U.S., we're credited by different institutions. But they have a system where Edna, for instance, who is now fourth degree _____ has the equivalent of a PhD in Native Studies, and anybody that's fourth degree _____ has jolly well got the equivalent of a PhD in terms of knowledge. They may not be scholarly writers, but they are the ones that carry that knowledge, they are the one who studied for years to gain it. And I think that is wonderful thing that we should, we need, I think, on this campus someone of Edna's caliber, a traditional teacher, because I think the students would be very _____ just have someone like that around and I'm hoping that will develop someday, that we'll have a resident elder who can, or, and they have two or three resident elders, actually, who are also teaching classes but are resident there and they open to the students and they also have something I would like to see, which is Native American people counseling Native American students and teaching classes, and there are lines at their doors. I had to wait in line to see one, to interview one of them [laughs]. And that was fine, I was really glad to see how much, let's see, that was Paul Bourgeois [?] And the students, you know, were lined up to see him, it was obvious that having Paul there

working primarily as a counselor, in other words he wasn't teaching a full course load, maybe teaching one class or two and then counseling for the rest of his time, you could see that that was helping those students, helping them gain the confidence they need. I was really impressed by their program, by how much, of course it's been, I think it's the oldest Native Studies program possibly North America, I'm not sure, but it's a very, very, it's had a long time to really develop and so they've got, what I went there to see was what do we need? And I wrote up a report on that and brought it back and... But it can't print it out for you... No maybe I can now... I'll have to get a fresh disc, and if you'd like to see that I think it would be, you'd like to read it anyway. I'll bring a fresh disc and copy it off that computer which doesn't connect in the department printers anymore since they abandoned Macs, and I've been using a Mac for years, and then I'll make a print out for you. [Mumbling] Because that way, I'll look for reports that you might want to read.

I: And, like you said, this is, Trent has one of the older programs and so by comparison this is a very new program, about 10 years old.

LH: But Trent shows us some real constructive goals to work for.

I: And do you see our program as heading at direction?

LH: I would certainly hope so. That's where I want to see it go, in the direction of a strong major. Maybe in another 15 or 20 years a graduate degree. It might be aimed toward, you know, there might be a graduate degree, it could be a graduate degree with some practical applications such as social work. But I can see all kinds of interesting things that could be done interdepartmentally if we can get some cooperation going. Like you might have a Native American Studies major with a focus on social work or nursing or any one of the other service professions which are the ones that our students tend to choose, and they have begun to say

“Why don’t we have courses in social work” and that’s why I’m really pleased that Marty’s getting tribal law and other important things, starting to get some courses on the books that are more spread out into areas where it will help our students work well

I: Yeah, some of the new courses that are being offered are more practical courses versus the more theoretical courses that were offered before.

LH: That’s where we had to start but I am very glad to see us begin, see that Marty feels we’re at a place where he can start do that. And then he, of course, he’s qualified to teach in those areas.

I: Do you feel that the administration has been supportive of the program over the years or is becoming more supportive?

LH: I think we’ve raised the administration’s consciousness slowly. In the beginning it was struggle. Mainly because the administration, administrations in general, are resistant to giving special consideration to special students and know that Native students have some particular needs of their own and that they deserve some respect and other things in a sense that, and they need support from their own people. And I don’t think we are there yet. And I don’t think we’ve been supported enough in that respect. We need Native American counselors counseling Native American students, advising Native American students. We need Native American recruiters. And we need support after the students get here, which is why we need the counselors. Because this is a different culture than students, particularly ones coming from the reservation, are used to. And it poses them a lot of difficulty sometimes and they can get through it with help, but without any reasonable help they feel abandoned. I would too. And so I think that that’s where we’re weakest right now is in student support. We need more Native people in staff. I shouldn’t be teaching the class I’m teaching, kind of hanging there till I retire or hoping that that will be an incentive for the English department to hire a Native American teacher. Because are some darn

good Native American writers out there that could be hired and they could teach in the writing program and some the courses that Melissa and I have been teaching. It would be very good culture diversity for the English department. These courses are now _____ under English. And so that's another direction like to see us going is to replace teachers who are currently teaching who are not Native with teachers who are. And I think that's a good goal.

I: Shirley Brozzo has mentioned that they have the goal of, I'm not sure if you're involved with this, the goal of a Native American residential house in the next few years. Are you involved with that program at all?

LH: I'm not directly involved but I support it. Yeah, I've heard some things about it and heard rumors that the administration is actually, maybe, going to do the something. It might not be what we make as our first choice it'll be better than no choice. I'd like to see us have another thing that Trent has which is really nice, is that they have a Native American students meeting room, which is a circle. It's set up oriented to the directions and the students can meet there for social events but they can also hold small ceremony events there. That would be really nice. And that required building something because most buildings don't come equipped. They built it within a large room in the building that houses Native Studies there. It's a good meet place and the good place for them to hold events. It seats probably 150, I would guess. Still with open space in center. And I would like to see a space like that close to wherever the Native residence, students' residence would be. And of course that's something an elder in residence could look after. You know, after seeing Trent I started to dream bigger. And I think that Marty's the one who can lead us toward those things over the years.

I: And beyond benefit for Native students, do you see the Native Studies Department as being beneficial for general community?

LH: Absolutely. So many of my students, because you can't teach culture or literature without teaching history, too. And the phrase "I never knew" "Why didn't they teach me this in high school?", "Why they didn't teach us this in grade school?" "I never knew what happened." It's consciousness-raising. We point out things like racism is still with us in the U.P., and, you know, it's a good place to push programs like the tuition waiver. Which I don't want to bashedly [?] say in class. That's our rent. Pay it and shut up. [Laughs] I don't want to pay it, I don't want to pay it. We promised this rent, we should make good on it, and we should do it willingly. Seems to me like it's only fair. I forget where I was going with that, oh yes, to benefit –but it does benefit to students' attitudes to change a lot in the classes that they take, and many of them also take EN204 and that's certainly an eye-opener for those students. So I think it's very beneficial because frankly right now the majority of students taking the classes are non-Native. And I guess it's my hope that I can help build a better climate for the program as it goes on.

[SIDE A ENDS]

[SIDE B BEGINS]

LH: [Audio cuts in] ...you know, I'm opinionated, you can take or leave my opinion, that's fine, but I can't teach this without having opinions, so... And we do wind up even in the, well, especially in the Native American Literature class, you get into politics. You can't read Sherman Alexi or Louise Erdrich and not get a feeling for the history and the politics and the various sundry cultural conflicts, so in the classes I teach these are very much to the floor [?], they're not the primary subject matter, but it certainly comes in and it certainly serves to help build a more, I hope to help build a more... what do I want to say, I don't want to say tolerant because that sounds like it's an effort... Just a more open atmosphere in general.

INT: Is there anything else that you would like to add, any other thoughts about the department or - ?

LH: Only that I'm, you know, 10 years ago Melissa and I had no idea whether this would go or not, and I think Melissa was very brave because initially the responsibility was all hers. All that I did was help her, well, I wrote up the EN314, and this is kind of off the record, we don't want to mention names here, but I wrote up the EN314 proposal, the initial one, before we _____ the courses, Melissa had been teaching the Lit course as one of our plug-in the title courses, which you can do for two years before you have to run it through the Committee of Undergraduate Programs, and so we were putting together the 314 and I wrote up a rationale for it and got back an objection from a resident anthropologist who shall remain nameless [laughs] of course we've only got one [laughs] that, "how could it be traditional oral literature if it was anything after 1600? And how could you have oral literature anyway?" So I wrote back a reply, which I guess fried the paper more than I thought it did, because some of the people at _____ said, "Oh, you were really angry!" [Laughs] And basically what I said was, oral tradition, all literature is based on oral tradition, that's where it comes from, where do you think Homer's stories came from? He didn't write them, he had them written down, and then I said, as for tradition, tradition is what the people do, and they determine it. So, so far as I'm concerned, bright beads and ribbon shirts are just as authentic as buckskin, they're what the people want, that's what they're doing, that's the tradition. What scholar is to tell somebody, what scholar from outside the tradition has any business telling somebody else what's traditional who's living in that tradition? I was rather furious, actually and also found out something rather disrespectful that that particular anthropologist had done and so at that point I had no patience with her at all. [Laughs] Actually it was...Oh, I'm still mad about that. What she did was record a traditional dance with a hidden

recorder when she'd been told not to. And here these people had let her witness the ceremony. I kind of wish they'd caught her. I went to the M_____ one time over at Sudbury as a visitor and while we were waiting to go in for the first general gathering ceremony I saw a German guy, I could tell by his accent he was German, walking around with a notebook and a pencil and I thought, "Should I say something to him? Or just wait and see what happens?" Well, by the time I got up my courage to say something to him, their _____ people at the door had figured him out and he was gone! Who would come in here with a note – you know, I would no more set foot there with a notebook or a tape recording device... It's just... You know. That's... There's a word to describe that I can't remember it now, can't bring it to mind... But disrespectful comes to mind first. And so I didn't see the German man again. And I looked for him several times, "Wonder if he's still here, wonder if he agreed not to take notes." I don't know if they gave him the option. Their call, it's their ceremony. But I thought it was kind of funny, "you've come here without any knowledge of what you're getting into, haven't you mister? I think it isn't going to go well for you." It didn't. But, I guess I feel, I guess one of my strongest feelings is Native American culture is defined by Native American people. It is not defined by scholars. And when I'm teaching I tend to say, "Scholars say this but the elders will tell you that." I've heard a lot of people say we didn't come from across any land bridge, we were here. Therefore you know most things, that's it. That's it. I think that's about it, it's been, working with the program has been definitely the highlight of my career as a teacher. I've really enjoyed doing it and I've enjoyed meeting all the students. And I'm really grateful to the Native students who've been willing to share things in my classes. I don't single people out and call on them as authorities, I let them speak if they feel like they've got, you know, I want them to speak if they've got something to say. People who have felt like saying something have been a real help. But it's probably the most

fun I've ever had teaching, simply because I care about the topic. I care about teaching in general, but this has seemed to me for the last 10 years to be the most important thing I've been doing in terms of my academic work. And I intend to continue to support the program even after I retire, if there's anything I can do.

INT: Alright, thank you.