

Interviewer: Good? Okay, so the first question, I'd like to ask you if you could introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about where you're from and your involvement in the film industry.

Steve: Okay. My name is Steve Heiser. I live in Banks, Oregon, and I have been a film director for, golly, [chuckles] how far back was 1969? [chuckles] What is it?

Interviewer: 46?

Steve: 47 years. I'll start over again. My name is Steve Heiser. I live in Banks, Oregon and I have been a filmmaker, a film director for-- [chuckles] We have all kinds of interruptions, and I have been a film director for 47 years.

Interviewer: Can you tell me where you grew up and how you came to be in this part of the country?

Steve: I grew up in Illinois, and I went to school, met my wife in Los Angeles. And after working back in Chicago for seven or eight years, we moved to Oregon and I have been here ever since.

Interviewer: Can tell me a little bit about your professional background?

Steve: Yes. I went to work for Odyssey Productions in 1975. And I had a-- Forgive me. I went to work for Odyssey Productions in 1975. We did commercials, corporate films, but I had previously done a pilot for a series that I sold to Encyclopedia Britannica Films. They gave me a contract to do three more films, which included *Lucy*, the film about Lucy Covington and as representing the Indian community.

Interviewer: How about the new capitalist?

Steve: In 1983, we received a grant from the Murdock Trust, and did a one hour primetime PBS special with the old newsman, Eric Sevareid. We filmed on, I believe it was 23 or 24 Indian reservations around the United States and Alaska. No, that is part of the United States. We filmed on 23 or 24 Indian reservations in the continental, the United States and Alaska.

Interviewer: Can you maybe just mention the topics for a couple of them?

Steve: Well the theme of the film was the economic development on, this was in the 80's, of course, but some of the tribes had mastered natural resources, resorts, casinos had not yet come into the picture. In fact, we chose not to address high-stakes Bingo because Tulalip had a high-stakes Bingo parlor, so did Seminole and so did Cherokee, North Carolina. And now, because of the federal gaming laws and the advent of state lotteries, many of the tribes have casinos.

Interviewer: You're one of the few people that's left available for us to interview about *Lucy*, that actually knew her and got a chance to work with her. Can you tell me about the first time you met her?

Steve: Yeah. The first time I met Lucy was in Portland. And she had a very good friend whose husband, who was also Native American. And we met at her house-- her friend's house in North East Portland. I was very impressed by this woman who had such a grasp of her own people's history. And that she was a monumentally unique person in that she had been imbued with leadership capabilities or leadership qualities that came through her grandmother, Mary Moses, and because she had experienced history, from the treaties on via Chief Moses, her husband. So Lucy Covington was Chief Moses' granddaughter. And she had her head filled with principles about being Indian, and Indian sovereignty, and Indian rights, and she acted on them.

Interviewer: When you say she acted on them, can you talk a little bit about, maybe events or times that you saw her acting on them and how she brought those into being?

Steve: Well I knew Lucy after termination had come during the Eisenhower administration, but her husband John Covington, was killed in a car accident or actually in a truck accident. Lucy threw herself into fighting termination, because it was anathema to everything that she had learned from Chief Moses through Mary Moses. And she would say things like, "If Indian doesn't have land, Indian is not Indian."

She felt that the key to Indian identity was through the land. No, I was-- I did not see her during her work on termination. Lucy told me about fighting termination and how she would organize house parties to invite people over and win over against the people that were agreeable to termination in the tribe. And she felt that the short term influx of money was not sufficient to justify termination, and so she organized all of the people and basically fended off the people that she called "the terminators" within the tribe and won them over.

We were going out to an overlook along the Columbia River and Lucy was-- We said, "We knew where the turnoff was and we would just head out before she got dressed." She needed to change clothes and she said "Okay, I'll be along." We left and we were headed out there and she roared by us in her big Cadillac, I believe she had, and she just roared by us and we said, "That is Lucy. She is a leader. She is a born leader. She cannot stand to come in-- to be a follower." Okay.

One of the stories that I remember about Lucy was that she told us was about when-- She was a companion to Mary Moses. Mary Moses being her grandmother and she was to be a companion to help Mary get around the house and make meals and so on. And conversely Mary was a companion to Lucy. She was sort of like a daughter.

Lucy could remember riding horseback when she was nine years old and Mary was 92 years old, and they rode from Nespelem to Yakima, not following any roads going across country and camping along the way. So here was a nine year old and a 92 year old riding

horseback, 180 miles. I don't know how far it is to Yakima, but many miles and many days to Yakima and back. That kind of self-sufficiency kind of spoke for Mary.

She was a superb horsewoman and she was very proud of the fact that she won lots of races and rodeos and powwows, and that she was still in the film that, that we did about her in 1978, 77 or eight. There is one scene where we had her ride her horse into the old summer house that the family had had on the summer range for cattle. And she was obviously a superb horsewoman even at age 67 or eight when we filmed her. So she was very proud of that fact that she was-- She was a-- had all of the-- What's the--? Trying to think of the word. She had all of the abilities of leadership.

So Lucy was a strong chairwoman for the tribe, but she was also a strong advocate for her people. The day after we finished filming Lucy, she was leaving for Nebraska for a big conference and hearing on tribal water rights and land rights and so on and tribal sovereignty. And she was going there to lobby for preferential rates for electricity and water, irrigation water, from Grand Coulee dam because the dam had been built on Colville land, and so she was trying, advocating for preferential rates for electricity and irrigation water that came from the dam as a result.

Interviewer: Talking a little bit about horsemanship and that part of her community and I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the pictures inside the-- You were talking about was something with where Slim Pickens was the MC.

Steve: The film that we produced *Lucy Covington: Native American* won an award from the National Cowboy Hall of Fame. And so Lucy and her sister, Emily and I traveled back to, flew back to Oklahoma City and we received the award, which were lovely bronze castings of a horseman. And we were the host while the MC was a Slim Pickens. So we had our pictures taken with him, our photographs taken with him. That was a very nice time. It was very exciting.

Interviewer: Do you remember how long after the production was released that that happened?

Steve: It had to have been within the first year, so it must have been 1978 or '79? It was selected as the outstanding documentary.

Interviewer: Slim Pickens wasn't supposed to be the MC, I understand?

Steve: No, no, [chuckles] no. He wasn't. I'm trying to think of the guy who was-- I can't remember the name of the guy, but he was drunk, so Slim Pickens filled in for him and Slim Pickens was a much better MC anyway.

Interviewer: I was mentioning to you a little bit earlier that a lot of people, my generation and the generation following me, they may know the name, but they don't really know the kinds of work that Lucy was involved in. And I was just going to see from your perspective, what kinds of things do you think people from her community should know about Lucy?

Steve: Lucy Covington was a great lady. And she was-- Even though she was two generations from Chief Moses, of Moses mountain, of Moses Lake, and you know I think that she put into perspective what Chief Moses was and that he invited Chief Joseph to come back from exile or imprisonment and incarceration in Oklahoma, in Indian territory. She carried a lot of the qualities of Chief Moses. I don't know whether they jumped a generation. I don't have any idea, but she was Chief Moses two generations later. And she was a great woman. She was a great leader. She was an advocate for her people and she was a terrific chairwoman as well of the tribe. She almost single-handedly fended off termination of the tribe, a just terrible injustice to Indian people.

Interviewer: You had mentioned earlier something about dinner parties or house parties to try and get the word out or when she was trying to meet and work with people from her community to educate them about termination. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Steve: Again, I only know what Lucy said that she had done, but my understanding is that Lucy organized house parties in different parts of the reservation and she would bring together people of those communities so that they would understand the fallacy of termination, the dire consequences of doing it, where for a cash settlement that would go to individual families, that they would lose their land. They would lose their sovereignty, that they would lose their oneness as a people.

She organized, she went from person to person just like she was campaigning for an office, but she was campaigning for a cause in this case. And she won over the tribe and they successfully refused [chuckles] to be terminated. I would say that-- I would tell students, tribal students, that were considering going on to further education, that that is something that Lucy would have wanted.

Lucy encouraged young people to further their education on behalf of not only themselves but the tribe. I have found that having done a lot of work for Warm Springs and for Tulalip, that they would agree wholeheartedly. That it is the educated leaders of the tribes that are going to make them strong, that are going to make them successful in business and in cultural preservation, in furthering language skills. I pre-interviewed her and a number of Indian women from Umatilla, Yakima, and Colville. And Lucy was far and away the most articulate and the most capable spokesperson for her tribe.

Interviewer: From a leadership perspective, there's a lot of discussion about where leadership comes from. Is it a trait that you have? Is it qualities that you have? Is it an ability to bring people together? One of the things I'm hearing from you is that her grandmother was a really important part of that many of those qualities came from her. Did you hear Lucy ever talk about the other people that might have shared things with her or?

Steve: I know Lucy valued the traditional perspectives and the traditional skills that, say her sister Emily had mastered, but Lucy was a different kind of person. And having been raised by Mary Moses and having had Chief Moses whispered in her ear and principles

that he stood for, Lucy absorbed those and Lucy became who she was because of Mary Moses.

You can consider this off the record because I'm surmising it, but I don't think Lucy's mother and father had as much influence on her as Mary Moses did. Mary Moses was like an audio clip of Chief Moses because she was married to the man and she knew what he thought. So Lucy-- and she even talked about her-- She told the story about how she was from the chief's line from Moses and she told the origin story of the wolf that ate the heart of the deer.

Lucy's story of how the chief's lineage came into her family is an heroic saga.

And it's a great story because she was that person. She was-- Her brother may not have been able to fulfill their hereditary chief position of the Moses' band, but Lucy did. Lucy embodied that. I think that she had such high principles that she was reared with, that she had a hard time tolerating people that disagreed with those principles.

And I don't mean that she was-- she was frank. She was just very frank and she would talk about the terminators as the terminators [chuckles] and as basically as sellouts that didn't have-- They weren't considering their own history. They weren't considering what God had created them to be. And so she was intolerant in a good way. [laughs] I would say Lucy made a profound impression on me because she knew precisely who she was. She knew precisely what she needed to do in life.

She had a lot of-- you know her husband died just before termination and so there was a terrible sense of grief and loss over losing her husband, but she threw herself-- She was unencumbered then by having to care for someone else. It was almost like she was liberated. The mayor of Metlakatla Indian community an island, the only reservation in Alaska was just a wonderful man. And he was as principled a person as Lucy was and a fellow at Cherokee.

He was married to a tribal member, but he wasn't Indian himself. And he formed a number of tribal enterprises that were solely for the benefit of the tribe and just an amazing person. And I know that he rubbed a lot of people the wrong way, but Peterson Zah of Navajo was the tribal chairman at Navajo in the mid-'80s, through the '80s I guess. He was an educator by background. He was a teacher and ran the tribal education program, but he was very outspoken. He was a Lucy-- another Lucy. [chuckles]

She made a profound impact on me because I was a young man then [laughs] and I was probably 35 years old. It reminded me to be what I'm supposed to be. So anyway, yes, she had a profound effect on me personally.

Interviewer: If you could talk to me about any projects that you might have worked on involving Pauline.

Steve: Okay. We-- Odyssey produced a series of films for the presence of tradition gallery at the Museum of Arts and Culture in Spokane. And part of that was working with tribal

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storytellers. And I worked with-- The first name that came up was Pauline Flett, a Spokane tribal member, and she ran the language program for the tribes on behalf of the tribe from head-start through elementary school, through the high school program. And she personally taught at Eastern Washington University.

And Pauline and I-- Pauline told me a number of stories most of which are illustrated. Pauline told me the origin stories, a number of the Coyote as the Speelya. Anyway, Pauline narrated in Spokane-Salish and then translated into English a number of stories that we did for the Museum of Arts and Culture. And Pauline was a dear lady.

In her own way, she was a powerful presence in her tribe because my understanding is that she almost single-handedly preserved the Spokane-Salish language by starting the language program that ran all the way from head-start to college. She was a great lady. She was a genius because she could speak in Salish and tell that part of the story and then she'd translate for herself.

The only program isn't, that Pauline didn't translate herself, she had actually translated it to English. And Garrison Keillor read it when *Prairie Home Companion* was visiting Spokane. And Pauline must have been live on the program and he read the English translation for it. And it's lovely.

[00:36:46] [END OF AUDIO]