**Oral History Interview**

**with**

**Claudine King**

Interview Conducted by

Julie Pearson-Little Thunder

April 2, 2018

Spotlighting Oklahoma

Oral History Project

**Oklahoma Oral History Research Program**

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**Interview History**

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The recording and transcript of this interview were processed at the Oklahoma State University Library in Stillwater, Oklahoma.

**Project Detail**

The purpose of the *Spotlighting Oklahoma Oral History Project* is to document the development of the state by recording its cultural and intellectual history.

This project was approved by the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board on April 15, 2009.

**Legal Status**

Scholarly use of the recordings and transcripts of the interview with Claudine King is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on April 2, 2018.

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**About Claudine King…**

Opened in 1884, Chilocco Indian School was one of the largest federally-funded boarding schools for Native American youth in the country. Located twenty miles north of Ponca City, Oklahoma, the school offered a half academic / half vocational curriculum, focused on assimilating Native students into the dominant culture. Like most boarding schools, Chilocco went through different phases of development, reflecting changes in the federal policy towards Native Americans. These changes were often prompted by the efforts of Native educators, community workers and activists, and shifting attitudes within the larger society. Throughout these shifts, however, the school’s status as a National Guard center as well as boarding school made it unique.

A federal retreat from funding such schools, and rising Native enrollment in public schools, ushered in the close of Chilocco in 1980. By the time of its closing, it had seen close to 18,000 students and had awarded more than 5,500 high school diplomas during its near-centennial history. Today, the school’s land is owned in trust by the Kaw, Ponca, Otoe-Missouria, Pawnee, Tonkawa and Cherokee Nations. While remaining Chilocco alumni do not always agree on the school’s long-term legacy, most share memories of friendships and often marriages that arose from attending the school. They consider themselves part of a Chilocco family, working to share the school’s history, good and bad, and to celebrate the accomplishments of its students.

Claudine Williford King was born in 1933 near Lebanon, Oklahoma, in a Native American community. Of Chickasaw heritage, she started at a boarding school when she was six years old, and in 1948 at the age of fourteen, she transferred to Chilocco. Awed by the number of students, the diversity of tribes and cultures, and the friendliness of everyone there, Claudine had no trouble acclimating to her new environment. She graduated as valedictorian in 1952, and then enrolled at Hill’s Business University to be an administrative secretary. After Hill’s, she moved back to Chilocco to join her husband, John David “Kahlon”, whom she met when she was a freshman there, and who was now working at the school. They started their family there and then moved to Stillwater where they stayed for eight years. Kahlon went back to work at Chilocco, so Claudine got a job in Newkirk, where they also lived. After eight years, in 1973 she became registrar at Chilocco, and she stayed there until the school’s closing in 1980.

During her time as a student and later as an employee at Chilocco, Claudine witnessed the success of numerous graduates, and she also witnessed the change of demographic within the school, the tapering-off of the enrollment, and the school’s eventual conclusion. With a special bond to the school as an alum, and because numerous members of her family and of Kahlon’s had also been Chilocco alums, the school’s ultimate demise was especially heartbreaking for her. Because of the couple’s dedication to the school, its students, and its employees, Claudine and Kahlon received the Chilocco National Alumni Association Citizenship Award in 2012. Claudine still lives in Newkirk, helping with reunion plans and activities when she can, and she treasures how the positive effects of Chilocco are unending and intergenerational.

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| **Claudine King**  Oral History Interview  Interviewed by Julie Pearson-Little Thunder  April 2, 2018  Newkirk, Oklahoma |  |

**Little Thunder** *Today is April 2, 2018, and I’m interviewing Claudine King as part of a collaboration between the Chilocco alumni group and the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program at Oklahoma State University. Claudine, you’re a Chickasaw tribal member and 1952 graduate of Chilocco. After graduation you worked at Oklahoma State University among other places, but you eventually returned to Chilocco with your husband, John David King. Both your contributions were recognized with the Citizenship Award from the Chilocco Alumni Association in 1972, and I look forward to learning more about your thirty-year history with the school. Thanks for taking the time to talk with me.*

**King** Thank you. I’m happy to do so.

**Little Thunder** *Where were you born, and where did you grow up?*

**King** I was born in an Indian community down close to the Red River near Lebanon, Oklahoma, about five miles north of there. Where I grew up—I went to boarding school when I was six years old, and I spent eight years at Carter Seminary. Of course, I was home, down in Marshall County, during the summers and at Christmas, but I grew up in a Chickasaw-Choctaw boarding school at Ardmore, Oklahoma.

**Little Thunder** *What did your folks do for a living?*

**King** At the time I went to school when I was six, Dad didn’t—very few people had jobs. It was the Depression era. My dad was finally able to get on with the WPA, but they lived in a rural community. Very few people had any income. Mom was a housewife, as everyone else was then*.*

**Little Thunder** *Any brothers or sisters?*

**King** Just the one sister. She went to Carter Seminary, also. In 1943, I believe, Dad was able to get a job working at Tinker Field in Oklahoma City. They moved there, and I continued to be enrolled in the boarding school. Was home in the summertime. Made lifelong friends at that Carter Seminary boarding school. I still hear from old roommates and friends from there on my birthday, on their birthdays. Learned a lot there.

**Little Thunder** *That’s special. What was your exposure to Chickasaw language and culture growing up?*

**King** Well, very little. My grandmother married Rich Williford. He was a white man. She spoke Chickasaw, and she used a lot of the phrases. When her cousins would come, and her sisters, they would sit all of us down out on the front porch, and they would singChickasaw hymns. I learned a lot of those. Speaking every day, we all spoke English, but we could understand at that time. When I was little I could understand a lot of what they said, but that’s gone away, most of it. However, one year when we went to a Chilocco reunion in Oklahoma City after the school closed, we were walking down the hall to leave the reunion. It was Sunday morning, and they had a church service going. There was a Chickasaw friend of mine up at the podium, and she was leading a song in Chickasaw. I stopped at the doorway, and I remembered all the words. They came back to me, and I was really surprised. Been a long time, but….

**Little Thunder** *How did you end up going to Chilocco?*

**King** In the grade school boarding school, they asked you about a preference of where you wanted to go to school. There was Haskell [Indian Nations University] and Chilocco and Sequoyah [Boarding School], a few schools, but all of my relatives, all of the Willifords, had gone to Chilocco beginning in 1924 through the years. I still had three aunts in school up there at the time I was in the eighth grade at Carter, and I wanted to go to Chilocco because they told such wonderful stories about the place.

**Little Thunder** *How old were you when you arrived there?*

**King** Fourteen.

**Little Thunder** *What were your first impressions?*

**King** How friendly everyone was. Everyone spoke to you. There were twelve to thirteen hundred students there—I don’t know that year. Our senior year, that’s how many there were. I don’t know about 1948, the fall, when I went there. I don’t really know about the number, but it was pretty…. There were lots and lots of students from many, many different tribes, bringing all of their own cultures, and it was a different world for me. I had not even at that point heard of a lot of the tribes that were there. (Laughter) Led a sheltered life.

**Little Thunder** *A really intertribal education.*

**King** We learned to get along.

**Little Thunder** *I was wondering what one of the hardest adjustments you had to make to Chilocco was?*

**King** I don’t really remember any because I had so looked forward to going. The harder adjustment was when I went to Carter Seminary. You know, at night it was the cows’ coming home time in the evening. It was lonesome. By the time I went to Carter, that’s the way my life was. Anyway, I had lots of friend and relatives already there.

**Little Thunder** *I was wondering if you had relatives already there.*

**King** Yes, several of my aunts, one of whom was two years older than me, and one was another two, and another two. A lot of the Carter Seminary girls that made the choice for Chilocco were there, also, and they were almost like sisters. I don’t remember any major adjustment. I was just awed by how many students there were and all the facilities that were available and the activities. It was okay.

**Little Thunder** *A big campus.*

**King** Yes, very big campus. There were over a hundred buildings there, I learned later. It was like a small town because it was isolated, and we had a power plant and a fire department. They provided the power and lights for the place. We had a swimming pool and tennis courts and a little shop where we could buy goodies. It was a pretty self-sufficient place. The boys that worked in the trades worked on people’s cars, the ones who had them. They made leather belts and purses for the girls in learning how to do that. There was a dry cleaning shop on the campus; we took our clothes there. Very nice.

**Little Thunder** *Who were some of the teachers or administrators that you remember?*

**King** I remember L. E. Correll. He was the superintendent from 1926 to 1956, and that was what I call the heyday of Chilocco. He, along with others, made that a good place to be. He had a strong principle, and he made himself available to all the students. Every year at graduation, he encouraged those who were graduating to come back every year, the last weekend in May. “We’ll be here. Come back,” he said, “and tell us what you’ve been doing.” Those were role models for the rest of us who were trying to find a place. They would come back, and the next year a different group would come. Every year there were graduates who came, and it became the very strong Chilocco Alumni Association. Those of us who were there looked forward to being a part of that.

**Little Thunder** *So the school itself kind of had been having the reunions for the alumni. They had some kind of welcoming back, sort of.*

**King** Yes, it had been going on for years. It continued all the time I was a student there. Until the school closed there was a reunion at the end of every May for all the graduates who wanted to come back from all over the country, and they did. They came by the hundreds, and it was a…. That weekend was turned over to alumni activities, and it was very reassuring and inspiring in a way. You heard the stories about the guy that was flying for the airlines, and about the one who had this good job. There were lots of distinguished Chilocco graduates, became doctors and judges. One guy, he was a North Carolina Cherokee. He took baking at Chilocco, and he later became an executive with the Krispy Kreme donut thing. Those made those of us that were still in school know that we could do the same if we worked, as they suggested. It was a place where they had discipline, where there weren’t too many rules, however my uncle ran off. In the late ʼ20s, he persuaded my cousin to go with him, and he ran off, the two of them.

I asked him many years later why he left, and he said, “Well, they just had too many rules.” I don’t think he ever found a rule that he liked. But anyway, my cousin, he regretted leaving because there was such a waiting list for the school that you couldn’t get in if you did that. Anyway, these role models that came back each year, they would have a big banquet for them, and you would hear where they were living and what they were accomplishing. A lot of them went back to their tribes and became tribal leaders. That continued until the school closed. The first year after 1980 when the school closed, we had the reunion. We had to find a place to have it, so the association decided we would hold it in Tulsa. There were several alumni chapters all over the United States, and there was the northeast chapter over in Tahlequah in Cherokee country. They said, “We’ll do it.” They rented a big hotel over there in Tulsa that weekend for three or four days, and we had a wonderful time.

There were about five hundred Indians showed up from all over the place. Afterwards, the chapter president, who was good friend of ours, called Kahlon, and he said, “You’ll never believe what happened to me today. I went in to be sure all the bills were paid and everything was back in order, and the guy told me that the owner of the hotel,” or the manager, (I don’t know who) someone responsible, wanted to talk with him. Bill went up there, and the guy said, “I feel like I owe someone an apology, so I’m going to apologize to you. When we heard five hundred Indians were going to descend on us, we hired three extra security teams for four days, and they stood around and did nothing.” (Laughter) That was our first experience of the reunion after Chilocco. … The alumni association decided they would hold it in three different places, so Oklahoma City one year, Tulsa the next, Albuquerque, because we had so many people from the southwest.

**Little Thunder** *Right, rotate a little. I’m glad he wasted his money.*

**King** Well, he was kind enough to say so.

**Little Thunder** *Yes. (Laughs) What were some of your more memorable classes?*

**King** I had a very good math teacher. He was a Choctaw man named [William] Thorne. ... He was very effective. I didn’t know anything about algebra when I went there. Had a little bit at Carter. Very good English teacher, her name was Mabel Walker. What was most helpful to me I think, besides the academic classes, you chose a vocation when you went in there. You enrolled in something. They had, like, forty-five shops or something…I’m just going to read this for you. They had all these vocations that you could choose: “printing, baking, power plant operation, masonry, food prep, farming, dry cleaning, foundry” (which was metal casting), “plumbing, shoe repair and leather craft, auto mechanics, dairy operation, printing, carpentry, electricity, blacksmith and welding, cosmetology, and animal husbandry.” And home ec. (Laughter)

I chose home ec. But you could—they gave you a three-week period. If you decide you didn’t like the one you had chosen, you could try another one for three periods, and the third time, that’s what you were doing. Half a day you went to academic classes; half a day you went to your chosen vocation. In that home ec. class, we learned to make our own clothing. We had already learned some of that at Carter Seminary. When we were in the fourth grade at Carter, we had to make our own flannel pajamas, flat felled seams and all, in the fourth grade. We had a continuation of how to make clothing. I had five children. I made all the clothing: shirts for the boys, gowns for the girl. Made my own clothes. In that era, that was helpful because clothing cost a lot and it was not available like it is now.

**Little Thunder** *Were you aware of National Guard activities at the school?*

**King** Yes. My husband, who I didn’t know at the time, he was a member of that Chilocco C Company. We heard history of the World War II group that we had two Medal of Honor winners, from Chilocco C Company. My husband in later years told me, he was the sergeant, or anyway, he was in charge of some of it when they were getting ready to go to Korea. They were down in Lake Charles, I think, or somewhere down in Louisiana. I’m not certain of that. They had been gathering them up down at this camp. He said that the Chilocco boys were out playing basketball or something out in front of what they call the place where they, military camp, the house, anyway, whatever they were in. He said next door in the next bunk house there was a man, one of the officers, out there talking to a young white boy who was crying. He consoled him, I guess, and he went back [inside]. This man came over to Kahlon, and he said, “How is it that your enlisted members are out here laughing and talking and playing ball? I have so many youngsters who don’t know one another who have never been away from home.”

Kahlon said, “Well, these guys have lived together twenty-four hours a day for years. They already bonded.” It was a strong group. One of the Medal of Honor winners said he didn’t tell this [to the press] when they interviewed him [and] asked him why he did it, [but he did say] he said to the Chilocco group, “I did it because they were killing my brothers, and I was angry,” because they did become like your sisters and brothers. We lived together twenty-four hours a day most of the year. There were lots of accolades for that Chilocco C Company. It was the 45th division, and they were the only company in the Army, as I understand, that was allowed by an act of Congress to have that little Charlie doll on their guidon because there were…. I said one time they were all Indians, and my husband said, “No, that’s not right. We had two boys that were sons of Chilocco employees that lived on the campus.” There were about sixty employees that lived on the campus during the era we were there. They did well; established a name for themselves.

**Little Thunder** *How did you meet your husband?*

**King** I don’t know for sure exactly when I first saw him because there were twelve, thirteen hundred students that were there and they were just everywhere, but I remember vividly the first time I *saw* him. I had been out with some of my Carter Seminary friends. We’d only been there about a month, and the harvest moon was out. We decided we would sneak out. “Night hawking” they called it. We would go out and swing and go to the tennis courts, so we went out there. It wasn’t very long until that Cherokee night watchman…. He had a reputation. There was thirty-five acres of school stuff there, and he could find you. He caught everybody but me. Finally, I was the last one, and I was in the shrubs next to Home Three.

He said, “Time to come out. What are you doing out here?” I said, “Oh, the moon was just so pretty, and we wanted to get up to the swings and the tennis courts.” We got grounded, of course, but it went all over the campus. The next day at breakfast when the boys were running down the center sidewalk to go to the chow hall, I heard someone [yell], “Hey, Moonlight!” I looked, and I saw this guy running through the [flower oval]. I can still remember the shirt he had on, and it was Kahlon, or John David they call him. Anyway he got my attention. (Laughter) That was the day, and I was a freshman, fourteen years old. Well, I was fifteen by then, but my birthday was in late September.

**Little Thunder** *That’s a wonderful story.*

**King** They still talk about Moonlight in our family.

**Little Thunder** *So then did you get to spend more time at a dance, or did you go to some of the dances with John David?*

**King** Yes!

**Little Thunder** *They had the Saturday night….*

**King** Yes, one Saturday was the movie, and one Saturday was the dancing. I loved the dancing. We went to the movies together. He didn’t like dancing as much as I did, but he would take me. I would usually dance with Clyde Brown, or I had some dancing partners that loved to Jitterbug. Every Saturday night they would play this song: (singing) “Goodnight sweetheart, well, it’s time to go.” He and I would dance that every other Saturday night.

**Little Thunder** *And lots of supervision.*

**King** Oh, yes, they were strict. Girls were restricted to the north end of the campus primarily. All the boys’ dorms were down in the south. You know, it worked. They let us socialize after school out on the oval, and they kept us busy with school activities, sports, movies, and skating on Sunday afternoons. They would take us into Ark City on a bus. I guess it was once a month (I don’t remember really) if we wanted to go. You didn’t have to.

**Little Thunder** *You only went home during the summers? Is that right? Did you have family come see you there?*

**King** At Christmas and in the summers, yes. By then, my parents lived in Oklahoma City. They still didn’t have a car, but they were able to take care of…you know, feed us and clothe us. I started working when I was fifteen at the Biltmore Hotel in Oklahoma City as an elevator operator. My aunt [who] went to Chilocco was already employed there, and another friend. I went and got an interview and got to run those elevators up and down all summer, so I was able to buy all of my own clothes. That was helpful to Mom and Dad.

**Little Thunder** *What’s one of the toughest moments you experienced at the school?*

**King** I don’t know if you want this on here, but when I was a freshman, because I was working as an elevator operator and making my own money I was able to buy some clothing. A lot of the kids couldn’t do that, you know. I lived in a place where I could get a job. There was a Kiowa dorm attendant who decided, I think primarily because of the way I looked, that I had too much money and I didn’t belong there. … She filed some kind of a complaint about there were not enough slots, and here I was taking one. I don’t really know her basis for that, anyway. They sent me home. I was traumatized. I had to go to school with my sister at this public school, and I felt like a fish out of water. Anyway, it wasn’t very long until a social worker came to the little apartment where we lived. Nysa and I were there by ourselves.

Mom and Dad were both working. We had roll-out beds in this little bitty apartment. He came in and talked with me and looked around, and he said, “Would you like to go back to Chilocco?” I said, “Yes.” He said, “Well, that’s not a problem.” Actually my aunt was employed there by that time, her name was Lucille Bearskin. She went to Mr. Correll. I believe it was Mr. Correll. Anyway, he got Mr. [Ernest] Mueller working on it. He’s the one that got the social worker to come, and I got to go back. That was a very brief time, but it was really hard for me because I did not know any world but that. That’s the only thing. It really didn’t have anything to do with Chilocco. I don’t know what her motive was, but [the lady] was fired [or transferred elsewhere] after that.

**Little Thunder** *Glad it had a happy ending for you. So after Chilocco—well, your husband graduates before you, right, because he’s a year….*

**King** No, he didn’t. He was in the class ahead of me, but he was in the Chilocco C Company that was activated during the Korean war. He was gone a year. When he came back he was in my class, and he couldn’t get away. (Laughs)

**Little Thunder** *Did you write him while he was in Korea?*

**King** Yes, along with several other guys that were in that class, you know. They would write letters to different girls and, I assume, boys there wanting to know what was going on. There was one [Choctaw] guy named Aaron Crittenden that used to write to me regularly and send me pictures of some of the things they were doing. Of course, my husband and his brother were in that company, and they would write, too.

**Little Thunder** *Your friends also wrote. I understand that a lot of times students would write just to show support of the students.*

**King** Yeah! They had lots of letters from home.

**Little Thunder** *So after you graduate Chilocco, what happens?*

**King** Well, I went to Hill’s Business University.

**Little Thunder** *In Oklahoma City.*

**King** Yes. I was the valedictorian of the class. I always felt kind of bad. Brian LeClair, a Ponca boy, he was in the Company C. He was one class ahead of me. He said, “I would’ve been the valedictorian of my class if I hadn’t come back and been in your class.” He was the salutatorian. They always gave the valedictorian a scholarship to OU, and the [salutatorian] got one to OSU. Brian wanted so badly to go to [OU]. I got the scholarship, and I didn’t even want to go there. I wanted to go to OSU, so neither of us went to where…. I felt bad for Brian because he really wanted to go to OU. He stayed in the military, I think, or went back to the military, and he was killed in a jeep accident in Germany.

I ended up going to Hill’s Business University to be an admin secretary and got a job. I finished a little bit early and ended up grading papers. One of the things that happened there that was a real shock to me was when we first went there, they said, “We’re going to teach you to be the best administrative secretaries.” Well, they also taught the court reporters. You had to choose. “You’ll be irreplaceable, you’ll just be so good.” Then when we got to the, when we finished, they said, “Now that you are so good at your job that you’re irreplaceable, when you leave you can train your replacement so well that you won’t be missed.” I thought…. (Laughter) Anyway, it motivated us at the time.

**Little Thunder** *Was John David already working, or….*

**King** He went to work at Chilocco in the dairy. I was down [at Hills] there, and when I finished I moved back. We lived on the campus for four years underneath the water tower in an apartment. Had two children when we lived there. Then he decided he wanted to go back to school, so we moved to Stillwater for eight years.

**Little Thunder** *The first time you went back, what was it like to come back as an employee, or wife of an employee? I guess you were raising your kids….*

**King** Well, I’d only been gone about two years, and it just seemed like coming home. I knew all the people there. It was sure different not being a student, being an employee, but it was still a very good place to be for the students. It was a very supportive place at that time. I wanted to tell you stories of some of my friends and [other] students, if that’s possible, because I think that tells a story of Chilocco. Because of the very active alumni association, those of us who were there knew well many of the older students who had been there before we came, and there were a lot of them who went away to make successful lives for themselves. I think about my cousin. His dad was a drinker and a gambler. He gambled away their house. They split the kids up, lived with this relative and that relative, and they finally got them into Chilocco. He took carpentry and masonry, and when he graduated he went on to build two restaurant hotels along the Mississippi River and employed a lot of Chilocco graduates. If it hadn’t been for Chilocco, his life would have been quite different.

I think of Trent Tilley who put out the Chilocco paper for a long time. He told me that his dad was a drinker and difficult to live with. By the time he was very young, he was out on his own. He said, “I lived with this family and that family and this relative and that relative.” He said, “When they told me I could go to Chilocco, I had been with an Osage family long enough that I was speaking Osage instead of Creek. I distinctly remember after being at Chilocco four or five days, I thought to myself, ‘I’m going to like it here. At least I know where I’ll be tomorrow.’” He became a success. He took printing; he became a successful printer. That was what he did all of his life. He spent some time in the military. When my husband was five, he had no parents. His mother had died, and his dad during the Depression was able to get a job with Santa Fe [Railroad] but only in California. He went away, and my husband and his five siblings were placed with an uncle who became their guardian.

He was one of seventeen people in a three-room house with no utilities. His sister Ellen [(King) Willis] went to Chilocco, too. She became president of the [Willis] Granite Monument works. They put up that big marker there on the OSU campus. They do all of those portraits in the Wrestling Hall of Fame. Were it not for Chilocco, that probably wouldn’t have happened. The guy that took the baking, you know, did the baking and became a Krispy Kreme executive, he came from North Carolina because the school near that reservation there, or that Indian community, only went to the eighth grade. That’s why he came. … When my husband was working at the dairy, we were living on campus. We took in a couple of New York boys. They sent about eight or ten kids down here from New York when that boarding school closed up there. I can’t think of the name of it. Most of them, they placed them there, but they had some that they had no placement for, so they sent them to Chilocco.

These [three New York] boys worked for my husband at the dairy, and he would bring them home with him to our apartment. We would feed them, and check them out of the dorm on weekends and holidays, and take them uptown sometimes. I will never forget the first Christmas week. My husband didn’t make much money. We had two kids. He said, “Buy them a gift, and we’ll have them over here for Christmas dinner.” I went and got the cheapest things I could buy, a hairbrush and some gloves, and I don’t remember the other thing. They came for Christmas dinner. We had a good time, but one of them was very quiet all evening. The personality boy got up and thanked us and [went] back to the dorm. Merlin, who was very shy, said thank you. He talked a while, and he went back to the dorm. There sits the one who hadn’t said anything all evening. He was short, pudgy, at that time about fourteen years old. He got up, and he was standing in the doorway, shifting from one foot to the other. He said, “I want to thank you for this gift, this Christmas gift. It’s the first one I ever got.” He just became part of our family after that, [two] of them did. We were parents at Merlin’s wedding. They had no place to be or go were it not for Chilocco.

Jimerson was a Seneca-Cayuga out of Erie, Pennsylvania, and he went back up there and became the foreman at a toy factory and then worked at the university there. One night in home training at Chilocco, he stood up, and he said, “When I came here I was rough as a [corn]cob, and Chilocco smoothed the edges.” Of course, his nickname became Corncob, (Laughter) but that’s what they did for hundreds of Indians. They smoothed the edges so we could get out there and function in a society we didn’t know too much about. There were lots of those stories. Then [Carrasco McGilbra’s] story, he went to Euchee Boarding School with my husband, and they transferred to Chilocco. His dad was a career military man and always gone. His mother had died, and Chilocco was his home. He told us after the school closed, “I would like to be buried at Chilocco. They won’t let me, so I’m going to be buried at Newkirk which is as close as I can get.” That’s the kind of feelings and loyalty that were generated by the school that was there, at least for the thirty years that L. E. Correll was superintendent.

**Little Thunder** *Thank you for sharing those. I know that you worked at a title and trust company for a little bit, and then you ended up at OSU. You were working at one point as a head research secretary, I guess, and your husband was going to school there. So when you went back that second time to Chilocco then, a number of years have passed, more years. What positions did you both take there, and what were some of the changes?*

**King** We went back; he was persuaded by Dee Gregory to come to work in the dorm as a dorm matron. That was 1963 when he came back. I did not go to work there at that time. I went to work here in Newkirk because we had four children at that time and they were in school here. They could come home for lunch if I worked in town, and I could, too. I worked here at the title and trust company for eight years, I think. When they were older and better to care for themselves, I got the registrar’s job at Chilocco because it was better pay and more benefits. That was in 1973, and (you’re right) it was very different. When I was a freshman there in the freshman dorm—well, first of all there were probably 350, maybe 400 Navajo students brought in from the southwest. Ninety-five percent didn’t speak any English.

They had a special program there, a five-year program for them, and they were allowed to learn as fast as they could and go at their speed to get through that five-year program where they were taught the essentials to get into the regular high school program. The guy who came, bringing that painting for Kahlon for his seventy-fifth birthday, he was at Chilocco nine years. He was a product of that “five-year, prep at your own speed, get into the high school, graduate from high school.” There were then a lot of those. I can only tell you about the girls’ dorm. They had two house officers for each floor. The Navajo girls were put up on the third floor because they spoke Navajo mostly. We had some interpreters. They had a much steeper learning curve than the rest of us, those who were bilingual. One of the stories that I’ve told that I still remember vividly, they didn’t have much water out there. What they had, they used to eat or drink or for necessities.

Here they came, and they didn’t know how to use water to clean. They didn’t know about showers, washing machines, any of that stuff. The matron there, who was a graduate of Carter Seminary and a graduate of Chilocco, she was the house mother for the freshman girls. Once a week we would line them up and tell them—we would make them take off one of their underskirts, the nearest one, and we would show them how to do the laundry and how to do the showers, the house officers and the matron. They didn’t like that much. We did this for about three weeks, and then we stopped. Well, they started using the showers and the laundry room, and another three weeks went by. They called themselves the people, and they called the rest of us the Indians. Well, we liked to have had a little war in there between the Indians and the people because once they discovered if they would get in the showers and just stand there, groups of them, talking in Navajo and standing in that water, they decided they liked it. (Laughter)

Same thing with the washers and dryers. We couldn’t get in there, and there was only limited time on the weekends and in the evening. You still had homework, and you just had a few hours there to get all of that done. Finally they had to post—the house officers had to take turns working in the shower and the laundry rooms to urge them to get out because there were Indians banging on the shower doors and yelling at them because they wouldn’t get out. I learned a lot of bad words in a lot of different languages down there. (Laughter) That was the kind of adjustment that a lot of them had. You know, in that group one of those guys became a state representative in Arizona and then was a state senator. His brother became the head of the Navajo college on the reservation out there. I admired that bunch because they had a tough road to hoe, but they did it. We had some outstanding graduates from out there. I got off the subject, I guess. I can’t remember what you asked me!

**Little Thunder** *No, it’s neat to hear a little more about the program. I think one of the things that’s happening throughout the ʼ70s up until the time that Chilocco closed is enrollment falling a little bit. Then as I understood from talking with Jim Baker, there are more students who are coming to Chilocco because there just aren’t other options for them in public school. I was just wondering your thoughts on how the student demographics were changing.*

**King** Well, it went from that, the twelve hundred students with the Navajos who adjusted. The discipline was good. Lots of opportunities they took advantage. We had a strong alumni association who inspired people. We had a Museum and Guides Club on campus that showed visitors around. We had many, many visitors who thought the campus looked like an eastern college. When we came back….

**Little Thunder** *These are non-Indians coming in to look at the campus?*

**King** Oh, yes, a lot of them. You could only be in the Museum and Guides Club if you had a certain grade point average because you had to go out of class to show these people around. I remember one day there was a black [car]. They called me to take these people around, and we had a museum there at that time. It was a man and woman and a young boy. He must have been thirteen or something; I don’t really know. They were from New York. We were allowed two hours, so I took them through all of the shops where the guys were working. We went through the home ec department. I did the tour that we were supposed to do as Museum and Guides people. We got back to the car, and the guy was opening the door. The woman and the young boy were standing with me back at the back, and she said, “But where are the Indians?” I don’t know what she expected, maybe tipis? Someone said, “What did you say?” For the life of me, I have no idea…. I was so stunned. She had been surrounded by Indians for hours.

**Little Thunder** *Now, that was when you were a student?*

**King** Yes, afterwards going back. That’s what you asked me that caused me to reflect on the.…

**Little Thunder** *Well, sort of, as the registrar, too, I was thinking you were really in a position…*

**King** Yes.

**Little Thunder** *…to be seeing some changes and….*

**King** Oh, it was a drastic change for me. I was really surprised, but the biggest drop was the enrollment because by then a lot of the tribes who had been sending their students from Arizona and Alaska and up in the northwest were better able financially to educate them at home. Of course, that’s what they wanted to do, so we didn’t have as many coming. It was an era—times had just changed everywhere. … When I went to boarding school, you had to be a proven quarter Indian, you had to be an orphan or a half-orphan, or placement by a social worker, or what they called a hardship placement. I was a hardship placement. I don’t know about all my friends that came. Mostly after I went back there, they were hardship placements, kids that were not functioning well in the places where they were, who were in some trouble considered relatively minor at the time, where they could have a better opportunity.

It was not the same. It was very, very different, and I was saddened when I went back. There were some wonderful students there, but there were just fewer and fewer and fewer. Of course, the cost per student was just out of sight. Chilocco closed because it had served its purpose, I think, for the times, because all the Indians, they encouraged them, the graduates, to make homes in the communities where they were. That’s where they wanted their children. They were able to do that. It was a success in that regard, so it became more of a place for children whose Indian parents wanted them there because they were having trouble with them, or financially they just weren’t able to support them. Something like that. The enrollment just dwindled away. There was less than two hundred students there when it closed.

**Little Thunder** *Do you remember the school board that—I think Jim Baker came on as superintendent in ’73 and put together a school board. I was wondering if you remembered the school board.*

**King** Yes, I served on it for a time, and then….

**Little Thunder** *What were some of the issues the board was asked to think about or advise on?*

**King** The five tribes—I’m not going there. Mostly it was political stuff that went on, that very little of which concerned the students. I was on it for a time, but there was no objection because I was a student, had been a….

**Little Thunder** *Former student.*

**King** Yes, former student.

**Little Thunder** *Was it Chilocco trying to navigate through the five tribes that held the land and trust at that point?*

**King** Yes, and that was difficult. They weren’t prepared. Let’s see; that’s not maybe the right word. Their knowledge of educational needs, they were expert maybe in other fields. It was difficult to serve on that board for me, but Jim did a good job with it, pretty good job, best he could. I know that the people that were on it strived to do what they could. That was just not their field of expertise.

**Little Thunder** *Well, and then there was the tragic death of the student that was killed. What kind of an impact did that have on the school morale?*

**King** Well, it got a lot of attention from the media and from Washington. I think that was one of the big factors that caused their attention to the school. We had children there who had problems, and this boy who was killed was a Ponca boy. Now, I can only speak about this from my perspective; I don’t know everything there. My husband [had] worked in the dorms. This boy had been adopted when he was very young and raised by parents who loved him and gave him a good life, but he wanted to find out about his roots. He wanted to go to Chilocco because a lot of his original family had done so, and he never quite fit. It was not his world. He looked the part but he…. He was hassled, and it got out of hand. It was really sad. When I called my husband, he was in training in Utah at the time at the federal police academy. I called to tell him what had happened. He asked me—he mentioned the names and, “Are they involved?” They were. [Kahlon was head of security for Chilocco by then.]

**Little Thunder** *Do you remember when people started talking about the fact that the rumors were going around that Chilocco was going to close, the Department of Interior was going to close Chilocco?*

**King** Yes, it was a sad time up there, and yet a lot of us knew that it was inevitable because of the drop in enrollment and the problems they were having with some of the students that were there. Some of the employees began to look other places for employment, so the writing was on the wall. It just was kind of a sad time for those of us who remembered the heyday of Chilocco, and how much it had accomplished, and how many thousands of Indians that had the edges smoothed by Chilocco and distributed around this country to influence their tribes in the areas where they were. One of my classmates led the Pima tribe for a time when he went back home. It was a downward spiral caused by a number of factors: drop in enrollment, change in the times, the ability of more of the tribes to educate their own children, and the fact that lots of Chilocco graduates were now able to keep their children at home and provide for them.

**Little Thunder** *I wondered if there was also—you know, Bellmon was just a senator at that point, but he was very much a fiscal conservative. That was his whole agenda, so he was not exactly supportive of keeping the school open, either, as I understand it.*

**King** No, he was not, but I could see his point, too. I didn’t agree with him. I wanted it to be there. My husband, Bellmon was not his favorite person. I dealt with the figures and the numbers of the students, and the cost was just terrific. It made sense to me economically what they were doing. It was a heartache nevertheless.

**Little Thunder** *But your husband had a different take on it?*

**King** Oh, he did. Well, his heart belonged—he helped so many young boys. They came to our house over the years. Still do, some of them. We kind of raised those two Seneca boys. We were their family. Every year at Thanksgiving we got a great big plant from the boy in Pennsylvania. We were Merlin’s parents at his wedding; he lived up in Wichita. He knew how it was going to affect these boys he cared about. It was worse for him. I sat over there where I dealt with the paperwork and could see how it looked on paper.

**Little Thunder** *I forgot to ask you about coming back to Chilocco as employees that second time in’73. In terms of the ratio of the Indians to non-Indian employees and faculty, had that ratio changed by the time you came back? You have a Native superintendent at that point coming in.*

**King** Yes, we did, but even when I was a student there, there were lots of Indian employees on the campus. Most of the teachers were—well, it was a mixture then. I sure don’t know the percentage at that point in time. It seemed unimportant. When the school closed, there was many more Indians. We were called Indians then. There were many more Indians there than there were whites. The Indians outnumbered the white employees by quite a lot.

**Little Thunder** *So in your opinion, what could have maybe been done to stop the closing?*

**King** I don’t know the answer to that because that was discussed on the campus so often and no one really had an answer. They hoped to get some students from some of the reservations to come back, the ones that were struggling. They had services there for them that were provided. I’m not sure there could have been anything. If something could have been done to continue the excellence of this school, it would have had to been done some years before. I don’t know that there was anything they could have done differently.

**Little Thunder** *What did the alumni association try to do?*

**King** Every year, when they gathered and had their meeting, which were in Oklahoma City or Tulsa or Albuquerque, there was talk about the concern for the condition of the school, but if you talked with the different tribal members who were there from many different tribes, their students had a good school now where they were. So they had no solutions. It was just a general—they had all benefitted from the school to the point where they now were independent enough to not need the school for their children or their grandchildren. They had no answer, either, for us. Lots of discussion. What was a big disappointment for the alumni association was the fact that when it did close, the school was intact. It was allowed to deteriorate, to fall down. That just grieves my soul to this day. It was unnecessary because the people who had charge of it could have done something different. They tried, I guess. I just hated to see it deteriorate like that.

**Little Thunder** *So you’ve been pretty active, as I understand, with the alumni association. What are some of the things….*

**King** Yes, that was more a case of proximity. … When we returned here in 1964, the children and I, all of the employees that were on the campus and all of the local alumni were expected to help with the annual Chilocco reunion. On the campus there for, let’s see, that was another twenty years that we were there, my husband and I, we helped set up things and plan things and welcome the students coming back. I got to know lots of students from eras before I went to school there because they returned. I lived here at Newkirk; I still helped up there, you know, went to the meetings and helped with the alumni things. We’ve been active in it simply because we were here and able to do so. In fact, lately, even in just the last few years, we would go up there, the few of us that are left in this area, and clean up the campus area there, around the student union, rake and weed and mow, all that stuff trying to get ready for the alumni association people to come in.

We’re all getting up—I’m eighty-four years old! (Laughter) We were all getting where we hated to get up on ladders and wash the windows in the student union. Then last year, they didn’t allow us on there, but they had a contingent of Marines there. It was almost a relief to me when we went on the campus. Man! It was spic and span! They had weed-eated, all the windows were clean, and we didn’t have to do it! (Laughter) Actually, the Chilocco alumni, I’ve had death notices of four in the last two months. Five! We’re getting to be an endangered species. There’s very few actual graduates left because it’s been, (well, it closed in’80) gosh, long time. Anyway, a lot of the people active in the alumni association are still those who come from far, but they bring their families where they didn’t used to.

I took my daughter and two grandchildren to Oklahoma City one year when we had it there. We were going down the hall. Alison looked down that long hallway and said, “There’s Uncle Bedixie down there!” We all looked at her because he was supposed to come the next day. We said, “Are you sure that was Bedixie?” She was about ten, and her brother was thirteen. She said, “Well, it looked like him. He had on a blue shirt, and he had gray hair….” Before she could finish, her brother said, “Alison! They all have gray hair!” (Laughter) That was a real shock to me, but I thought, “Man, he is so right!” This Chilocco clan that gathers is getting up in years. (Laughter) Very few of us left.

**Little Thunder** *When you’re not working or after you finish working, what is your favorite part of the reunion?*

**King** Oh, gosh, that would be difficult to answer. It’s not an activity. It’s getting together with all your old friends, people you haven’t seen for years who have to introduce themselves to you and you to them, and to hear about their lives. Again, it’s a picture or mini portrait of the value Chilocco was for so many Indians from across this country. That’s what I like, is visiting with my old friends. Last year when I went to the powwow—I was ill on Saturday and couldn’t attend. I went to the powwow and stayed much longer than I meant to because there were lots of old friends there. There were only two from my class, 1952. There used to be twenty or thirty of us every year, and every year it would be different bunch. There were ninety-one people in my class, and, wow, we’re fewer and fewer

**Little Thunder** *And you chose to stay at Newkirk even though….*

**King** Well, when we moved back, I was working with this research group at OSU, and two of the petroleum men were working with Conoco in Ponca City on research projects. They said they could guarantee me a good job at Conoco, and so I kind of wanted to live in Ponca City. My husband had already come up the fall before. He had an apartment in Ark City. He said, “Well, I’d like to live in Ark City.” We went up there to look at Ark City, and we just found we couldn’t afford it because at that time you had to buy all the textbooks for your children. We had four. This was the compromise, Newkirk, (Laughter) because he refused to live in Ponca City, and I understand not having my kids subjected to that. We lived here in this little town of Newkirk. When I used to go through here on a bus going back to Oklahoma City where I lived for the holidays, I would think, “Who would live in a little town like this?” (Laughter) I’ve been here for, gosh, a long, long time.

**Little Thunder** *Well, you have a beautiful home here. Is there anything else we should talk about that we haven’t mentioned, anything you think you would like to add?*

**King** I can’t think of anything. I’d made those speeches—did you find that DVD? I think I’ve got some more if you really want one. When my husband was nominated for the Hall of Fame award, he became ill and had a very short time, less than a month after he was diagnosed. He was not going to make it, and he said, “You can accept it for me.” I said, “Well, what shall I say?” He said, “Tell them I learned a lot there, and I found you there, and it was a good place to be.” I said, “Okay, what else?” Then he talked a little bit more about how much he had learned from all of the different tribes about the different cultures. He said, “I learned from so many Indian tribes I didn’t even know existed at the time. Chilocco taught me everything I needed to know to make a living in a world out there.” He said he was grateful for that. Anyway, I did the best I could to accept that award. It was tough, but all of my children were here, and that was helpful.

**Little Thunder** *Thank you for sharing that. I think that’s a good note to remember Chilocco with. Thank you.*

**King** Let me ask my daughter. “Laura, is there anything you think I’ve left out that I should have said?”

**Laura Stuemky** No, aside from the fact that a lot of the children of my age group who had parents that went there and/or worked there really still feel a pretty strong connection to that because that was our social life as we were growing up. I remember it was predominantly Indian employees and their families, and that’s who we had social gatherings with…. A lot of them are very active in the alumni association now. I have not been because I’ve lived out of state, but it’s had an impact down through generations, very much so, I think. Even my children have heard lots about it and can see the impact it’s had on their grandparents.

**King** That does remind me that at the powwow the year before my husband died, the head man dancer said, “I want to recognize someone who is here.” He talked about my husband in particular and Clara Bushyhead in the girls’ dorms who helped us all. I can’t remember exactly what he said, but he said they kept us on the path. I know that he had so many accolades from so many of the young people who went there. One of the things that I noticed at that powwow was how many of the dancers and the singers, when they got their awards or whatever, they would mention their parents or their grandparents who had gone to school at Chilocco.

When I [was to] accept [Kahlon’s Hall of Fame award], I asked the children of those two Senecas that we took in, I asked them to come because Merlin and Jimmerson both told us that they would have had a hard life if it hadn’t been for Chilocco. Their children had become successful. Again, it was generational benefits. Their daughter was a social worker for a tribe on the West Coast in Washington, and one of them was a foreman for some big packing shipping place, Albertson’s or something. Then the other girl was a nurse. I just know that their dads would have felt that would have never been possible if it weren’t for Chilocco. So I forgot about the generational benefit.

**Little Thunder** *Well, thank you very much Claudine.*

**King** Yes, down memory lane.

*-------* ***End of interview*** *-------*