

Interview with Mary John  
Dragon Den, Flora Flick Hall at Minnesota State University Moorhead  
April 28, 2004 - 6:00 pm

Interviewers:  
Kayla Soper (primary interviewer)  
Jackie Hockett  
James Sander

KS: Okay, so I am just going to verify how you spell your name.

MJ:: J-O-H-N

KS: Okay, and Mary is?

MJ:: M-A-R-Y

KS: Okay, how would you describe the transition from the Spirit Lake Nation to the Fargo Moorhead community?

MJ: I think it was, it wasn't a real positive transition, but it was also a learning transition. Because when we came here, I was six years old and my mother had married a white man. We had [previously] lived in that house that I—that's in my video. It was just a two-room house way back in the hills. I mean it was like a half a mile to the mailbox, our closest neighbors were like three miles away. We didn't have any electricity, any plumbing, any running water...there was nothing like that. It was just really primitive. And sometimes we, the transportation we had was...my grandfather had like a 1940's car and that worked sometimes, otherwise we have to push it, to get it started. Well, sometimes we had a team of horses, sometimes we just walked. But we didn't have, I didn't experience a lot of the modern conveniences that I did when I moved here.

So, when we moved here we were living right next to people in a neighborhood and we had, we walked in the house, and I'll always remember that we walk in to my step dad's house and there was, everything was just so new to us we had, there was a bathroom, a telephone, and a television...everything that we had never experienced so and it was like, we thought that was a rich person. But it was just everybody lived like that here. Everyone had that. So that was the learning thing. The food was different 'cause we didn't have refrigerators or electricity. And I remember the first time one of my first experiences having cottage cheeses, and how different that was. That was all a learning—and then we, we started school at St. Mary's school. And that was a Catholic, parochial school. And that's where we ran in to a lot of racism. And that was like ongoing and I remember our neighbors didn't—they probably had never meet any Ind... American Indians or Native American people before. So that was really a learning experience, too, because there was always boundaries...you couldn't go here, you couldn't go here and it wasn't like back home. Back home we had just hills and unlimited space to just play and just explore, and here I remember the neighbor, the neighborhood was just like right next to each other and I remember one time there was a,

a little play—like a play ground set in somebody’s yard, and so I went there to play there, and I remember I wasn’t allowed to do that because that was somebody else’s yard. That was—people didn’t just go in another person’s yard and...just start playing so there was a lot of learning things, a lot of negative things.

But we didn’t experience racism back home because we all, it was all, it was on a reservation and everybody was Indian and even the way people thought and felt about each other was different. We came from our grandparents who were really close really close to us and our neighbors were really close too, even though they lived a ways. They would come in team of horses or come and visit us and there was always an event. Whereas [here] you’re living right next to people and you don’t even know them. So, and then the school, they kind of grouped us in with the orphanage people. Because the orphanage kids were Native American from the St. John’s orphanage, which was a block away from St. Mary’s and they thought we were orphans too. But we were with them and we had to fight our battles with them, because a lot of kids didn’t know Indian kids, and we had to fight them all the time because they, there wasn’t that much communication or anything. And it was like that all through—it’s been like that all through the years

KS: Can you describe your experiences as a minority in a private non-secular school?

MJ: Well, in grade school we had other native students there that I was friends with but by the time I got to high school it was like we all parted company and I was the only Native American in my high school at Shanley, and it was the same way there and I mean there was that subtle racism—there’s that kind of looking down on a person of color. It was, I remember, in grade school one of the things I remember learning that sticks in my mind is the history books—that we were all heathens and cutthroats. And I felt really bad about that because other kids would call us that too, because that’s what they learned that’s what we were, in there minds. I remember I asked my mom that: “Why do they call us this, why do they call us savages?” But that that always bothered me, and it kind of made me feel less-than, you know? There was always—it is just like if you sit yourself in a room full of natives you would probably feel that...the way I felt. So there was some good experiences. There was—it wasn’t all bad. I had friends in high school and it was hard at home, too. Everything was so different. I’d say it was like a learning experience, good and bad.

KS: What was your motivation for creating Daughters of the Earth?

MJ: Well, I didn’t create that. My sister did, and my sister, she lives in Wisconsin right now. And we talked about that recently, when she came down to visit, and she said it started with her and another friend, they were trying to bead some little round thing and she said, “Well, I wonder if other women would like to learn how to bead this.” Well, then, that was how it started, from that little ornament or little pin and so I remember we had, she got a group of women together and I was part of the, I was one of the women—my two sisters and another friend, Gladys. I don’t know if she’s been interviewed, too. And that was the start of Daughters of the Earth. And then we started to meeting to learn how to bead. But I didn’t...my interest was not...I was just too

clumsy with the needle and beads and stuff and then so I started doing a newsletter for our group and then we started making outfits and shawls. And then we became a support group, and then it seemed like it started, just spreading. And then people asked us to do collaborate with powwows, and so we did that with the Heritage Center, Bonanzaville, Yunker Farm, just around the community, and then we started a dance troop, of Native dancers. And that we went to all of these, like, say, senior citizens groups—we did a demonstration for them. But there was always the negative of that, too, because in our culture when you invite someone, you invite somebody, you feed them, or you're hospitable to them. Well, you know. These groups didn't know that. They didn't... Sometimes there'd be sometimes six, sometimes ten dancers, and they'd give us like \$50 for all of us. And some of them were families, that their mother and father and kids and they all danced...that was nothing. And we ended up having to pay our own dancers. And one day they would have like a picnic or something, we—they wouldn't even offer us a cup of coffee or something to drink. It was just the little things like that, it was just kind of subtle, and I think people just kind of...got tired of that, too. That didn't...it was good for a couple of years anyway.

KS: What would you say was its [Daughters of the Earth's] biggest success?

MJ: Well, I think we when we had powwows at the different at those different places I mentioned, we always tried to educate the public on our native, our native culture. Somebody would do a dance demonstration; somebody would go up and talk about the songs. The different dances and things like that, that we felt were making a difference, to kind of get rid of the racism, the stereotyping. Things like that...so, I think that was our biggest success. All the things we did were successful, and the powwows—to measure a good powwow, people want to come back the next year. “I'll be back the next year,” you know. We always felt happy that we made people feel good, and it was a social celebration.

KS: What has been an obstacle in your life?

MK: Well, I think, like I said, the racism made me feel less-than, and I really never felt, like when I graduated from high school, I didn't go on to college or any thing like that because I just felt like that wasn't for me. That's for other people, but that's not for me. And I, and I went to work right out of high school. I think right the next week I started working for the government as a clerk-typist, and then after that I went to Wahpeton Jr. College. (laughs) And then after that I got married. I started back to work at another government job. So, it was always clerk-typist jobs. So, I think the obstacle was really myself and not feeling good enough, because I think if I had more positives in my life I probably would have went to college right then and I probably would have did things differently. It took me a long time to learn different things even about our own history. The Midwest, too.

KS: What is the most influential thing you have accomplished in your life?

MJ: Well, I think it was learning about my Indian culture and learning that there was so much there that I never knew about. Like, when I was raised strict Catholic, when through all through Catholic grade school and high school. And I really was in...my parents and my grandparents...went back to the 1800s, about the forced—their Christianity being forced on Indian people. And it went way back then, I remember my grandparents always talked kind of secretively about the Indian ways. I didn't realize until I was grown up that there was laws against our ceremonies and our, our belief system, and so I was...it wasn't until twenty years ago, maybe even less than that...yeah, twent years, that I start learning about my own culture. When I went to school here [MSUM] I started learning about the ceremonies and the different, like the sweat lodge, and that had such an impact on me. It was nothing like Catholicism. Because to me, like, I compared it to, like, if I was really feeling bad or really sad or really down and going to a church and praying to cold statues that how I looked at it. I never felt that connection with our creator. Until I went back to my belief systems. It was there that I really felt that connection that strength—it was just awesome for me. And it really, it changed my life. So, I think I was able to complete college and go on to do the, the video that I did make, and also my own relationships with people, and... So that was a big influence was learning about my own history and culture.

KS: How would you describe the Midwest as a Native American?

MJ: As a Native American? I think we've come a long way. I know even in the school, they don't teach the history that we were heathens...cut throats. That has changed, and I think in the city there is still, they're that ongoing racism. I don't think that will ever be totally eliminated, but I think the at people are more aware of it, and I think... I was reading an article the other day about Leech Lake and the stuff that's going on there with the young people and some that, some of that I did grow up with here. Here in this city, you know, when I go back, when I go back to the reservation I go back the that little two room house. Its like I always have to connect with that sometimes, somehow. And I always go back to the house all is just about fallen down now, but its just there that I found I had my memories and my grandparents there, you know, a lot of good things that that were part of my formative years.

KS: What role did you play during the creation of the Indian Center?

MJ: You know that I looked at it—I didn't create the Indian Center. My friend Gladys was one of the ones that created the Indian Center. I was the, just like sixteen or seventeen that time when I started going to the meetings when they were trying, setting it up or trying to create it trying to get... It started as a club, and I know that was probably about '68 '69, and then after I got married, my husband was on the board, and then he volunteered me for the board, too. So I got on that board and I served on that 'til 1974. But as far as creating it, I wasn't a big part of that. I didn't create it. I know that they were trying to help people in the...our community, because Indian people didn't have a place to come to or a place to identify with other people or anything. And I think that's what they were , I think that was their positive motivation in getting support for Native people.

KS: Could you tell us a little bit more about what happened there or the program in itself?

MJ: Oh, well...I think just like Daughters of the Earth. It started as a club. I remember we had a softball team and we had picnics and things to just draw Indian people together. Just to know who's in this community, who lives here...that was a positive. And I think like the ones that really worked on that were Gladys. She had a big influence, not only in the Indian community, but the whole community, as a whole. And she's really worked hard to...to work for the Indian people, and I think a lot of the things that there is an Indian center here now they have a Good Medicine Board there doing things. I'm not really (interruption) Well I know that meeting other native people in the community was good for me, . I learned a lot from them and also made friends and we kind of had a group of people that we knew and were friends with and that we kind of hung around with. It was good to be around Indian people and that's what I liked about having the Indian Centers that could connect with native people.

KS: How would the production of *All My Relatives* changed...how would it have changed if lived on the Spirit Lake Nation?

MJ: I think it would have been, it would have had a deeper impact on me. I—right now I want to learn my own language, but I lost that coming here. My sister knew how to talk the language when she came here and she was only like three, she doesn't know, we don't...talk fluently. I can still understand it, she can understand it, and then we say words, we'll say, "Yeah..." We can understand. So it's that I think, I would have learned, I knew my language more, I probably would have been able to speak it fluently, I think I would have been more on the pulse of the whole reservation because I know like when I went back, having a person come as Mary John, that doesn't even sound Indian. Because people didn't know I was who I was. And when I went back and when I mentioned who I was related to they knew me. They knew me pretty good, they knew who I was, they knew who my grandparents, my mom. I know like when I did the actual interviewing of the elders all of them I was related to and it seems so appropriate to name it *All My Relatives*, because that's like a prayer in itself, like, in Christianity they say "Amen" at the end of a prayer. Whereas *All My Relatives* is a prayer and it's, it's acknowledging the connection between everything that was created by our Creator. Like he created the trees and the animals and whatever. So we're all related to that because we have the same Creator. So that was one reason I named it that. Then, ah, because it was about my relatives from the past and, hopefully, I was hoping it would help the future generations, too. And it was getting to know my relatives and I just think it would have had a deeper impact 'cause even now when I watch it I think, "God, I should of did this differently." Because I was only going back to film, I wasn't living there—I was just going back and forth. So, I didn't really grasp the whole, the whole concept of *All My Relatives*.

KS: Can you describe your experiences and changes in the ethnicity and diversity in the Fargo-Moorhead Area since you moved here?

MJ: Yeah, well since I—the history books have changed, there's more awareness of Native People, like in the stereotyping and we're...[section omitted]...talking with the Native, the Latin women in this area. Because we have, some of the same problems with our children and living in this community, ah, so. We're—there's a connection there. And it's, I think it's changed. It's not a hundred percent, but I think more people are aware of Native people and their history and the things that they can offer the community. And, yeah, I think it's changed for the better.

KS: Okay, what do you consider to be your home?

MJ: My home?

KS: Your home.

MJ: Where? Or what?

KS: Where and...how would you describe it?

MJ: Where? Well, I still call, where I was born and grew up, I mean, I didn't grow up there, I moved when I was six. I still that consider that home, when I talk about home to my sister. I'll say, "I'm gonna go back home," and she knows, she knows, too, what I mean. You know living here it's, it wasn't one place, you're moving all over Fargo-Moorhead. Moving around here, different houses, it's not really like you have one spot to call home. I think in my heart that's where my home is, even though I haven't lived there in years. But I go back and I want to go back to visit my relatives and connect with them and go back home to our little house and walk around and remember things and, so...

KS: Also, just one more question, can you describe what it was like going to school here as an American Studies major?

MJ: At where?

KS: Here, when you went to school at MSU

MJ: Oh, MSU. I really learned a lot. I mean, I'm so glad I came here. At first I was going to be a social worker. And then I decided, uh, I don't know. And so I had that opportunity to just take different classes and learn. I...my minor's American Indian or Native American Studies and I learned a lot from Dr. Cole. I just have such a respect for him. He's such a neat person. He was also my...advisor on a lot of my projects, when I was at. Then I was on the board here, on I was on the Native Students Board. And he was an advisor there, and then he was an advisor on the Wild Rice Video that I did before my video. And then also on my video. So I really liked it here, I learned a lot here and I'm glad I worked and went to school here and learned a lot here. It was a great experience for me.

JS: You mentioned you friend Gladys, I believe.

MJ: Umm, hmm.

JS: What would be, what is her full name?

MJ: Gladys Ray.

JS: Okay, and how long have you known her?

MJ: Oh, well I've known her, maybe since I was fourteen.

JS: Okay.

MJ: Yeah, and I knew her children, and then as I think it was even after I started college that I've gotten closer to her. And she's been a really a good support person. She's... she's taught me a lot. And I really have a lot of respect, love for her.

KS: Do you have anything else you want to add that you would like us to include in our project about yourself?

MJ: I think one of my biggest, I just—one of my biggest loves in my life is my son. He's a, if you're talking about personal accomplishments, he's my one and only child, and he was born with a lot of a lot of problems. But he's...he's given me a lot of joy and happiness. He's probably your age now, he's nineteen. He's, he lives in a group home and I talk to him everyday, and I see him two or three times a week and... He is, like, one of the big, big influences I've had in my life, too, because I don't think I would have been back to school or anything if it wasn't for my son. I was like thirty-two when I had Kevin and I was way past school age and all that, I just didn't think that was going to be for me. And I...wanted something, I didn't want to be sitting at a clerk-typist job for the next twenty years, . And, he was one of the reasons, too, that helped, he helped me change my life, too. And he's just, really means a lot to me.

[section omitted]

KS: Well I think that's all I have for questions for you. And I'd just really like to thank you sharing a lot of your personal history with us today and letting us experience—

MJ: Yeah.

Long Pause [Technical Difficulty]

MJ: From my grandmother who was Catholic and she named me after a saint. And Teresa was another saint that she named me after. So my name is like Mary Teresa. But growing up I wasn't called that at all. My, since I was the oldest girl, in the family, the oldest female in the family, my, you know, we were named according to the first, second, third. So the first, ah the name of the first girl is "Winoona." Like it's spelled Wiona but

it's "Winoona," and so my name is "Noonie," you know, they call me that for short. And then growing up and learning my ceremonies and my own culture, I took the name of my grandmother. And, I don't know if [you] learned about in Indian history, but we were given like all these names to shorten them because people couldn't pronounce our names and they couldn't say them right. So they gave us these short names, and so mine, my real, spiritual Indian name, I should say is Mackbeahotomanoniewiona. Ah, so, you couldn't say all that name. Yeah, I know how to spell it out. And my son, his name is Weachakbelota. Or Weachakbeloba, which means, "Red Star." And my name is kind of describes, like "Mackbea" is like the clouds, the heavens, all the above, and then "Hoto," is like, kind of a roar; "Monie" is walking, and then "Winona" is always woman. so if you can, I thought of, it's hard to, to interpret that, but there's a spiritual significance to that name and, in our culture we believe that when we go in the spirit world, I'm not going to be known as Mary, I'm going to be known as Mackbeahotomnoiewiona, because that's my spiritual name, so my name Mary John, is just [laughs] how do you say, it's not an Indian name. Anyway. So...

KS: Could you spell out your name, so that we have it when we type it?

MJ: Okay, I'd have, I need a pencil

JS Either you can write it out or else you can do like I'm James; J-A-M-E-S

MJ: Okay, like Mary John and then...

KS: Like your spiritual name.

MJ: Okay, well I have, like, kind of three names, Winona is W-I-N-O-N-A, and that means the first female child born in the family. And that's my name but it's, my family calls me Nonie, for short. And then my spiritual, my Indian name is...I took that from my grandmother's name, which was Mackbeahotomoniewiona, and it's spelt; I'd have to get a pencil. And my son his name is "Red Star" which is Weachakbelota. And my Indian name could be spelled M-A-H-well you know in Native there's all those different sounds, like guttural, and those different kinds of sounds so, well how I spell it out is probably not the way it's going to be pronounced. But I'll just spell where I think it can be. Okay it'd be like M-A, and then you'd have like that "mach", B-I and then I put P-E-Y-A. Hoton is like H-O-T-O-N. 'Cause you gotten get that "n" in there, and then Monie would be M-A-N-I and then Weaya is just spelled W-I-N. It looks like it's "win", but it's like you have to get that, that guttural sound in there. So it's a long name. It was my grandmother's name before she was changed to just plain Agnes, when she was a young girl. So you know the names were changed so that they could enroll people in the... because a lot of the agents didn't know how to say the names or even spell the names. So they gave us, like, shortened names. My name is after Saint Mary and Saint Teresa, so. And then John is my married name. So...so that's how my name is.

KS: Okay, Thank you! Anything else you would like to add?



MJ: I can't think of anything right now. I'll probably think of a lot of things later, but... No, I guess not.

KS: Okay. Well, thank you.