

DONALD J. BERTHRONG
 Interviewed by Ronald McCoy
 Edited by Ronald McCoy

Introduction

Donald J. Berthrong is the sort of pivotally inspiring figure one encounters from time to time in the profession of history. Sensitive to nuance, an indefatigable researcher and a writer of admirable precision, Dr. Berthrong's accomplishments include such noteworthy and definitive contributions to the history of the American West as *The Southern Cheyennes* (1963) and *The Cheyenne and Arapaho Ordeal: Reservation and Agency Life in the Indian Territory, 1875-1907* (1976).

Born in LaCrosse, Wisconsin, on October 2, 1922, Donald J. Berthrong earned his B.S. (1947), M.S. (1948), and Ph.D. (1952) at the University of Wisconsin. Between 1951-52 he was an instructor at the University of Kansas City (now University of Missouri, Kansas City). Upon receiving his doctorate he accepted a professorship at the University of Oklahoma where, between 1952-1970, he rose through professorial ranks and spent the last four years of that period as Chairman of the Department of History. In 1970, Dr. Berthrong became Head of the Department of History at Purdue University, a position he occupied until stepping down to resume fulltime teaching duties in 1985. Although slated to retire in 1991, Dr. Berthrong intends to actively pursue the goal of adding to his multi-volume history of Oklahoma's Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes.



*Donald Berthrong about age 12
 "that one got away."*

Dr. Berthrong's interest in the Southern Cheyennes, as well as the Southern Arapahos, dates to his days at the University of Oklahoma. After embarking on Indian-related research, though, he edited a trio of important pioneer reminiscences: *Joseph Reddeford Walker and the Arizona Adventure* (1956); *My Sixty Years on the Plains* (1960) and *A Confederate in the Colorado Gold Fields* (1970). Dr. Berthrong is, however, certainly best known for his work in Indian history, a field of interest enriched by the

influence of Walter Stanley Campbell, a member of that institution's English faculty, perhaps best known by his pseudonym Stanley Vestal. Campbell's intense interest in studying tribal history as documented not only by written sources but, additionally, as augmented by tribal oral traditions is reflected in Dr. Berthrong's work.

As Dr. Berthrong points out, historians typically approach oral traditions with caution; and with good reason. Yet as he explains in this interview, those sources can be of immense assistance in establishing a framework of understanding within the historian may conduct work of a more rewarding magnitude than might otherwise have been possible.

Dr. Berthrong's research has led not only to the publication of books and articles but to a more direct involvement in matters Indian through his preparation of documentary evidence for the Indian Claims Commission and appearances in federal courts on behalf of tribes. Clearly, he is one of those historians who not only writes about the past but enjoys a gift for rendering its anecdotal elements, broad sweeps, and wealth of detail into a form which has been long admired by his colleagues.

The reason for this is not hard to detect. After all, Dr. Berthrong set for himself the daunting task of sifting through extensive archival material, familiarizing himself with an equally extensive (and often contradictory) oral history, and coming to know well a culture far different from his own. All this, in order to make sense of the course and content of Cheyenne and Arapaho tribal histories. In doing so--and, not least of all, succeeding admirably along the way--Donald Berthrong has rendered a service for all who would understand something about America through the study of groups; surely a worthy goal in such a fundamentally pluralistic society.



Donald Berthrong age 17 - high school

The Interview

M: What got you into the academic world, made you want to go university and then on to a Ph.D.?

B: I started my undergraduate study at State Teachers College in LaCrosse and took a liberal arts curriculum, intending to be a physician. At that time the college was devoted to physical education and better known as "Muscle Tech." The historians I worked with at LaCrosse were great people, and I became interested in history.

In my second year World War II erupted. I volunteered soon after Pearl Harbor and served in the armed forces, which took five years out of my normal pattern of education. However, I had read



Donald Berthrong and Rhio (spouse), 1943

a good deal during the war though I wasn't sure whether I was going to be a historian or a political scientist. The army attempted to make an engineer out of me, which was a mistake. I simply wasn't compatible with engineering. I understood the theory, but I didn't have the patience. When I came back I quickly determined there was no question but that I was going on further in my education. So in 1946, I enrolled at the University of Wisconsin as a last semester junior.

Wisconsin had a superior group of scholars, especially in United States history--headed by scholars like Merle Curti, Merrill Jensen, Howard K. Beale--a whole group, and I was stimulated to go on for a Ph.D. So there was no break. I looked upon my undergraduate history as preparation for my Ph.D. because those who taught undergraduate courses were also the principal mentors at Wisconsin.

Merle Curti accepted me as one of his students. I became involved in social

and intellectual history--in those days they were woven together--and completed my Ph.D. in January 1952. Although I was trained in social and intellectual history I had a strong introduction to Frederick Jackson Turner and Western history through Vernon Carstensen courses. I also took a seminar with R. Carlyle Buley, a Turnerite, who wrote a pioneer study of Indiana. This gave me some introduction to Western history and this is the pattern that I followed. In those days the Turnerians or Turnerites were holding sway.

M: How do you think Turner has weathered over the years?

B: Well, we all know the critiques of Turner. Yet when you realize he's talking only about symbols--you don't expect him to prove these symbols can be documented in an exact way--if you don't take his words too literally, he focused the history of the United States internally. I think he marks the shift away from the attention to Europe. If you look at the Frontier Thesis as symbol more than fact and don't become too expectant to find just the tightly reasoned essay, well I think there's still something that can be found in Turner.

M: So it's helpful if you're looking for something other than revealed truth.

B: That's right. By the time that I was on the scene we're talking about the next generation of Turner students. Vernon Carstensen and others recognized the flaws in Turner and we were exposed to these, so we didn't become doctrinaire Turnerites. Yet we could still be appreciative of Turner. If you read him I think you'll also find that he was a master of language.

M: A good writer.

B: Yes.

M: In 1952 you graduated from the

University of Wisconsin having produced a thesis--your master's in 1948 is "LaCrosse: A Case Study in Social History 1900-1910"--with a dissertation in hand, "Social Legislation in Wisconsin 1836-1900." You proceed to pick up an assistant professorship at the University of Oklahoma in 1952 where you will remain for 18 years, becoming a full professor before leaving in 1970. How does one move from writing about social legislation in Wisconsin and about early twentieth century LaCrosse into the area that has occupied you for so many years now?

B: One of the benefits of studying with Curti, Jensen, Carstensen, Fred Harvey Harrington and the others was that they taught research methodology. And one of the things they said is, wherever you go there will be historical records.

I had already developed a western interest in a way because my dissertation involved the movement of social legislation from New England to Wisconsin. I was looking at it from the movement of institutions and legislation westward, so in part it was within the Turner framework. Well, when a position became available at the University of Oklahoma it was in Western history. Merle Curti and Merrill Jensen convinced the history faculty at the University of Oklahoma that I was a Western historian. So it was understood I would teach Western history at the University of Oklahoma. Naturally, I had to read and read and read for years to build up the background in Western history. At Wisconsin I only took two courses and one seminar in what I would call Western history, two courses from Vernon Carstensen and a seminar from R. Carlyle Buley.

At the University of Oklahoma as a Western historian, I said to myself, "Well, if you're going to teach Western history you better start doing some research in Western history." To turn my dissertation, which I cut off at 1900, into a book would

have required extension at least through the administration of Robert M. LaFollette. Funds at that time were simply not available for that kind of research and travel; this was pre-National Endowment for the Humanities or anything like that. So I started looking at local records.

M: Excuse me, but you've said that you got precisely one article out of your dissertation.

B: Yes, on worker's compensation and the Granger Laws. I wrote that when I was at the University of Kansas City teaching fifteen hours of lecture by day and six hours of lecture by night.

M: Would you call that an overload?

B: Yes. Twenty-one hours. It was my first academic assignment, and I wrote one article that year. But that was fine. It was part of the deal. Back then even in major universities your normal academic assignment was twelve hours. It was a different world. That was my first appointment at the University of Kansas City, and then the opening came at the University of Oklahoma the next year. So I wrote one article on workmen's compensation and employer's liability and then I was in Western history by September of the next year, 1952.

I spent a lot of time working and reading. One of the things I noticed was, there was this gap about the western Plains Indians in Oklahoma. I'd read George Bird Grinnell and a few others but when I read Grinnell I wasn't particularly satisfied with what he did.

The History Chairman, Alfred Sears, at the University of Oklahoma was very kind to me. He arranged all my teaching to be held on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. So I was teaching twelve or fifteen hours, I forget, four or five classes. Then on Tuesdays and Thursdays I got in my car with a graduate student I had and we went to the Oklahoma Historical

Society. A very fine lady by the name of Rella Rooney was the sole archivist in the Division of Archives and Manuscripts. I started just looking generally in the files because the Oklahoma Historical Society by federal law was the repository of all Indian agency records in Oklahoma up until 1933.

M: Were you just throwing out a big net?

B: I was just looking. First I started going through the Kiowa and Comanche and the Cheyenne and Arapaho records, then the Wichita and affiliated tribes--everybody on the west side of Oklahoma. I was going to write a history of the westside Indians. Well, it didn't take me long to determine that that was impossible. So I did more reading and at the University of Oklahoma (Special Collections?) one of their richest collections consists of the Cheyenne-Arapaho Agency records. About one hundred and fifty 500-page letter books, pressed letter books, are there. That then formed the topic of my research. And that's how I embarked on the history of the Cheyenne and Arapaho of Oklahoma.

M: Why Indians?

B: I think it was largely because at that time I really didn't know anything about native Americans. For me, Native Americans were a few Winnebagos living north of LaCrosse on the federal land. The women wove baskets and came down to town to sell their baskets. But that was all I had ever observed in my life.

It was the richness of the manuscripts available at the Oklahoma Historical Society that attracted me. I'd been trained to drive research as far down into what my professors called original sources. We were drilled with the idea that every printed document in one way or another is a self-serving document. When I read the reports of the Indian officials they simply didn't square with the manuscript records that were available at the

Oklahoma Historical Society.

Gradually, over the years, I became more and more involved in tribal history relating the history of the tribe to policy and trying to show how people lived, how they existed, under federal policy. I became more concerned with the impact of federal policy upon people than with the origins and the establishment of policy.

M: Do you think in a sense you were doing social history, or something very like it?

B: In a sense it is. It's social history because you're dealing with a society of a particular people.

M: You mentioned just a moment ago with George Bird Grinnell's work that you hadn't been all that impressed. In the forward *The Southern Cheyennes*, you say "Grinnell, impressed by the composite knowledge of the Cheyenne and friends used these records sparingly [talking about historical records] and preferred Indian tradition to white sources. This led him to present warped and biased versions of some incidents and clashes between the Cheyennes and frontiersman and troops. Obviously judicious use of both Cheyenne tradition and historical record will produce greater objectivity." I take it those words still ring true to you today?

B: Yes. The oral traditions can inform you about many things that the manuscript records by agents, missionaries, and anthropologists do not. And yet you have to know enough of the records to be able to put the oral history into context. You find many things in the oral history that are correct. Most of it is correct but it's not full; it doesn't always give you the full context of what transpired. After all, the memory of people changes from generation to generation as their interests change.

So the oral tradition is not necessarily the fixed tradition and you have to be

aware of that. The only way that you can be aware of that is to be able to look at it over time for other supporting evidence. You put the oral tradition with the documentary and manuscript sources and this, I think, will make clear, finally, how the two can be blended together to give you a statement that is closer to what really transpired though not necessarily reality itself.

M: If you take this mix you're talking about and call it a stew and you add bit of ethnography don't you then have what some people call ethnohistory?

B: Close to it.

M: What is ethnohistory to you?

B: It's the study of the culture of a people--how they lived, how they interacted, not only amongst themselves but with other people. I think this is the essence of writing about Indian relations with other Indian groups, relations with the white invaders, the relations with the federal government; the change in patterns of Indian society, how they married, how they made a living, how they educated. This I think you can get best by knowing not only the people but the people they must interact with. I don't think of myself as an ethnohistorian but as a historian. At the University of Wisconsin we were trained to say, "We are historians. It is our profession." If you are an historian you don't need another hyphen to describe yourself.

M: Is ethnohistory, simply put, good history? History done well?

B: Yes. The definitions change every decade. They change with every article. Historians, I think, can be sometimes misled by saying to themselves, "Wouldn't it be nice if I sat down and poured history into this model." Some of the innovative ethnohistory written by historians simply follows models about dependency or

patterns of belief in Indian society. You pour your information in and then you very carefully discard those things that do not fit. But--and this is fundamental--a historian has to confront what doesn't fit, as well as what does fit. I think sometimes that's the distinction between history and the practitioner of ethnohistory.

M: Did you first meet Walter Stanley Campbell when you were at the University of Oklahoma?

B: Yes.

M: You wrote a fascinating article on Campbell in *Arizona and the West* a few years ago. You described him as having lived in Severy, Kansas, and here was a line that struck me because I live near the Flint Hills: "One of those Flint Hills towns that never grew up." The article is clearly written by someone who knew him, that's you, who admired him, yet doesn't put him up on a pedestal. You've described him as a friend, rather than as somebody who exerted tremendous impact on your research direction.

B: That's right.

M: In the Foreward to *The Cheyenne-Arapaho Ordeal* you write, "Boyce Timmons and the late Walter S. Campbell introduced me to their Cheyenne and Arapaho friends, thereby furnishing me with insights and knowledge unobtainable in written records." Could you elaborate on that a little bit?

B: One of the first experiences I had with meeting a Cheyenne person was in 1956 with Walter Campbell. We went out to Weatherford, Oklahoma, where he grew up. We were walking down this street. Now, Weatherford isn't that big and we could see a man two or three blocks away. Walter saw him and this man--Paul Rhodes--saw him and they stopped, just looked and then walked towards each other and shook hands. "Walter, how are

you?" "Paul, how are you? Let's go have a cup of coffee."

It developed into a daylong dialogue between Walter and Paul with Don Berthong sitting there listening. One of the things discussed toward evening was Paul Rhodes' experience in the Native American Church and his beliefs about peyote. It was very unusual for a Cheyenne person to do this. I didn't know peyote from a tumbleweed in those days. Rhodes also told of his vision and I became very interested in vision as part of Cheyenne and Arapaho society. That personal kind of information and its sensitivity stayed with me. As I read more and more about peyote and the Native American church, I don't think I would have understood as much about it without being able to recall that evening of conversation. Just conversation, no tape recorder or notebook. I never use a notebook or a tape recorder when I go out and talk to my Cheyenne and Arapaho friends; I just remember. They don't like tape recorders.

So casually, without prying, you develop this understanding and empathy as to what the other person is about. And you discover very quickly that they're human. You find they have foibles, problems, loves, family, respect for their ceremonies, a sense of pride of being a Cheyenne or an Arapaho in addition to being a person within the structure of the United States. This is what comes through as you know people. That is what Walter Campbell opened for me: the beginning of those insights.

As for Boyce Timmons, he was the longtime assistant registrar at the University of Oklahoma. He himself was part Cherokee. I worked with Boyce trying to get the Cheyenne people to register to vote. He and Walter Campbell helped me gain a sense of being able to fit what the documentary words and the manuscript words mean to the Indian people. Bringing

these together you come closer, I think, to an understanding of what tribal history should be.

M: That's obviously exerted a profound impact upon on your writing and research I assume.

B: Very much so. I found, too, that as you proceed more and more deeply into your research and become aware of the nature of manuscript sources you have to pursue them any place they're available. So if you're concerned with Cheyennes and Arapahoes as I am you go to Yale and to the Newberry, you go to the Colorado Historical Society, and the Kansas Historical Society. Often people mistake as the complete records the archives found in Washington, D.C. But the National Archives' focus is on the official correspondence between the Indian office and the agent. So where's the other stuff? Where are the intra-agency communications? Where are the notes the Indian people write to the agent? You don't find that in Washington. You find that either at the Oklahoma Historical Society, in part, or you find it in the regional archives down in Ft. Worth. You must continuously press down, down, down until you get to the place where you can't get farther down. I call it hardrock research. That's where you find what Indian people, the literate Indian people, are writing to their agent. Beautiful letters. Maybe the grammar isn't perfect, maybe their spelling isn't perfect, but there's no mistaking their concerns--how they want to live. When you add those manuscripts to the oral traditions and I think you're coming closer to being able to write good tribal history.

M: You mentioned that your Cheyenne and Arapaho friends don't really appreciate tape recorders. Why is that?

B: I think it's suspicion of technology. Anyway, it's better, I think, to be less

systematic, just let the information drift out. What you're interested in may not be the center for their concern. Sometimes what you're concerned with may not even be important to them, as you find out as you go along. You find that like any people some of the things that you listen to will be completely anecdotal and really distorted. Sometimes they'll test you. I was sitting in a home one evening with a number of men, Cheyenne men, and they started telling stories and pulling my leg. I sat there and one of my older friends finally leaned over and said "Be a little careful, Guys, Don knows a little bit more about it than we do." The atmosphere changed immediately. But I had to be authenticated by a Cheyenne. I think you have to realize that Indian people are intuitively or instinctively extremely kind, extremely polite people. Sometimes they'll tell you what they think you want to hear and do it in a perfectly proper way. They're not lying to you, not at all. They're saying to themselves, "what does he really want to know?" So their information will corroborate whatever you're leading question highlights as being in need of corroboration. That's the danger.

M: Is it a matter of just good tribal manners?

B: Yes. If they know what you're looking for they'll help you without saying you're wrong. They're too polite, too well mannered to do that. You have to understand that. If you're going to do extensive research-- I collect oral history, for example--then you'll have to also realize how this can change over time and how the person is really trying to be your friend. That's a real tough problem. The best researchers will spend years and years and years talking to groups, talking to tribal people, so that they will get the full range of opinion. Like the old historical maxim says, "You must have two

eyewitnesses to the same event to corroborate its validity." But so many researchers go out and work only with those who reinforce their particular thesis, ignoring the various groups and factions even within in a tribe or on a reservation. So what comes out often is a very closely-woven portrait that leaves out precisely what we historians try to find out. It takes years and years to build up your rapport with people. You can't do it in two, three, four, five summers. It takes much longer.

M: How much of the history you work with is generated from the oral tradition?

B: I really couldn't answer that. Basically it provides me with insight into what transpired from the Indian perspective which might not be the perspective of the white person. One of the finest examples I encountered was the tradition among the Cheyenne and Arapaho cession agreement in 1890 which were attended by coercion, fraud, bribery, and intimidation. Well, you can read the transcripts of the council and you can see the coercion but you can't see the bribery and you keep pressing for this. The Cheyenne and Arapaho, though, are adamant, absolutely adamant, on this point. It is for them, a matter of fact. So I keep looking and looking and looking. Finally, just by accident, in the National Archives, in a drawer that wasn't even cataloged, I found an unopened bundle of manuscripts that told me who did the bribing, who took the bribes and how much. So that the oral tradition in this instance was exact, explicit, and correct. So the bribery was a matter of fact by oral tradition and also by documentary evidence. This is what historians should work toward. You'd be surprised how many times you can reconcile written and oral traditions if you keep pressing for more and more information. It's there and sometimes you'll find it. You'll always run into a stonewall but you just come down the other side of it. We all know that.

And in many instances you can find the corroboration of the oral tradition.

M: It strikes me that in your writing there is a good deal of attention given to highlighting people and events which serve a symbolic value. I also find an eye for irony. For example, in *A Confederate in the Colorado Gold Fields*, you edited, you note how have the lure of a goldfield brought in people who disrupted the whole way of life of the Indian peoples around it. Yet, you write: "In the autumn of 1857, Fall Leaf, a well known Delaware Indian who had occupied Colonel E.B. Summer's expedition, displayed to John Easter of Lawrence, Kansas, several gold nuggets." You don't overemphasize the point or belabor it, but it seems that for somebody who's looking for some irony in history there is some here.

B: I think you're right, there is irony there. But I don't try to make this any kind of a major theme. I think any intelligent reader can see the irony without belaboring it. There are many ironies as such. The land itself, the resources that the Indians knew they had and the exploitation of these. The irony of the dominant culture, the power of the white society to take these things away. It's only recently that the Indian people through self determination have come around to the point of starting to manage their resources themselves. The irony, for example, in the progressive era with the rings of land speculators going to prison for what they did but the Indians who won the case, never being able to recover their land because the ultimate land buyers were classified as innocent parties beyond the law.

M: You mentioned that any intelligent reader should be able to spot the irony, which brings up the question who you're writing for?

B: Hopefully I write for my peers and I write for the lay reader who has an

interest in Indian or Western history. I think you write your volume or your article in such a way that it can be understood. You do not necessarily involve yourself in elaborate expressions of theory. You write as logically and succinctly as you can. This then opens up your information for both your peers and also the intelligent lay public who have a nonprofessional interest in history. I think if you write in this way you reach the broadest audience you can find.

M: You reached a very broad audience indeed with *The Southern Cheyenne*, which is now a classic. You followed that with *The Cheyenne and Arapaho Ordeal: Reservation and Agency Life in the Indian Territory, 1875-1907*, taking up essentially where *The Southern Cheyenne* ends. You've called the reservation period "the bitter years," and you note in *The Cheyenne and Arapaho Ordeal* that "too few studies in Indian history deal intensively with the reservation period." That book was published in 1976. Does this condition still pertain?

B: Many more works in the reservation era are starting to appear.

M: Why do you suppose so many people stay away from it?

B: I think both your peers and your informed lay public still are almost trapped by the romance and mythology of peoples so different from the dominant society, of an essentially free people, the warrior society--kind of like the myth of the cowboy. In some ways it's almost an escape back into the past. Then you have the free peoples subdued and brought to the open prison of the reservation and the glamor, the warfare, the dramatic incidents of courage are no longer there. But placing the people on the reservation isn't the end of the story. We have to take the same group of people and show how they maintained their tribalism and beliefs, survived despite the enormous pressures

placed upon them for acculturation and assimilation. Some presses are not too responsive to the history after the end of the Indian wars. The reader appeal diminishes and they're not interested.

M: Not as sexy.

B: Yes. So I think I'm going to take this group of people as my life's study seriously and however it comes out, however the volumes fall, I'll try to take them as far into history and as far back as I can trace them and bring them down as far to the present as the records permit me.

M: You're talking about your in-progress work on the third volume of a trilogy.

B: Well, hopefully I will be able to finish one that will go from 1907 to 1937. After that, hopefully I can do another one from 1937 down to 1971.

M: There's a remark you made in *The Cheyenne and Arapaho Ordeal* I would like to sound you out on relative to the depth of the despair triggered by the reservation experience: "A people of less courage and character than the Cheyenne would have crumbled under the onslaught of the white man." There you have very few words but they struck me as an especially powerful statement and I am wondering if you could expand on that a bit.

B: What I was trying to contrast the Cheyenne's experience with what happened with the assimilation and acculturation that took place rapidly with the European within a generation or two. The Europeans became part of the salad bowl or the melting pot or whatever you want to call it--the process of Americanization. But we still have minorities--the black minority, the Asian minority, the Spanish minority. And yet in the case of the Indian people, the world view, of the spiritual values, the relationship amongst themselves, the respect for their leaders and their elders, the continuity of family--all of

these things--although impacted upon by the reservation and the government policy--never completely disintegrated because of the pride and belief they possessed had a validity of its own. They made the transition to European economic institutions, land and property, the way to make a living, but they did not abandon all of the cultural understanding that they possessed and which had been handed down to them from generation to generation. That traditionalism is weaker today than when I was writing in those terms for the early reservation period. In those days the Cheyenne still had the leadership in the form of their chiefs. They still had (and have) their Keeper of the Sacred Arrows. They still held their Sun Dances, although sometimes they wouldn't call it a Sun Dance because of the government's regulations designed to suppress Indian religion. They still understood their teachings and the meaning of family, the meaning of sharing--all these things were not totally eroded away although there may have been some erosion on the edges. The central core of their culture had been somewhat modified but still remained essentially Cheyenne or Arapaho.

M: One of the vicissitudes which Indians in general cope with is the white men's law. Your involvement in the Indian relationship to and with the law has gone well beyond sitting in this office and just studying about it. You are the author of a comprehensive brief presented to the Indian Claims Commission, you've testified on behalf of the Cheyenne tribe. Could you explain how a historian gets involved with the law and what your role is in that capacity?

B: I've been involved four or five times as a consultant and expert witness both for the Justice Department and for the Indian people. I've been involved in several trials in federal court. Here I think you have to

understand that the role of the historian is to locate the documents, find the so-called "facts," show what they mean, and attempt to relate this to documentary evidence. The advantage I've had is that I know the records related to the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes of Oklahoma--not to the Wind River Arapaho of Wyoming, or the Northern Cheyenne in Montana--but to the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes of Oklahoma. I've probably seen more of the relevant documents than anybody else, and therefore I can go as an expert witness, as a consultant, furnish the documentation and discuss that documentation as a matter of historical record without attempting to fit it into any anthropological or legal context. The latter, that's the lawyer's job. And you must be very careful to remain a historian. You are not an economist, you do not know land valuation, you are not an anthropologist dealing with cultures, you're not an attorney, skilled in the application of these facts to the law. Your job as a historian is to present the factual information, build the historical record upon which the court can act. That's the distinction.

M: It's a classically historian type job.

B: It is classic. I was involved in one trial in the United States District Court in western Oklahoma involving game and fish violations. The judge only wanted to listen to the historian and talk to the historian about the facts and wouldn't entertain the opinion of other social scientists. It was quite rewarding.

M: In an article you wrote for *Quaker Life* in 1972 you described Indians as "the most deprived of all minority groups in the United States" and ticked off such problems as inadequate skills, domination by whites, a cycle of poverty and dependence. You also noted the need for many Indian policies rather than a single Indian policy. As a historian looking at the government's shifting policies over the

years, is there a fundamental problem they seem to share in common?

B: Yes, in that you have a policy meant to fit all of the human beings who we know as Native Americans, regardless of tribe, regardless of education, regardless of economic status, and yet one policy is supposed to fit all. No policy could do that. One policy would not fit John Ross of the Cherokees and also fit Little Raven of the Arapahos. It's impossible. You can't have one policy because within each unit, within each tribe, you have a complete spectrum of talent, status, and economic well being. What fits one doesn't fit the other. And yet we lock everybody into one policy. To me that's the failure of the Dawes Act--it was to be applied across the board in one way regardless of economic or educational circumstances. To me, that's the basis of the real failure, the reason why these policies caused the suffering that they did.

M: You said that you were at the first Western History Association meeting. What was that like?

B: That was in Santa Fe, New Mexico, if I remember right. It was just a group of people interested in Western history getting together for the first time--very informal. There were a few papers but most of it was conversation and we as a group decided to institutionalize it and set up a charter. It was an interesting meeting, completely in the Western tradition. Much comradeship, much social drinking, a two day holiday. Finally people who were interested in Western history were getting together. Then, gradually, the informality began to fade a little bit and the WHA became more institutionalized; periodicals came out, a historical quarterly appeared. The younger people had their meetings and the older people had theirs and they didn't necessarily mix very much.

M: When we were chatting before starting this interview you mentioned being at a meeting with Walter Prescott Webb and some other people, remarking on the informality, the almost anecdotal quality of conversation. How has the field of Indian history changed over the years? What's different about it from, say, when you went around Oklahoma with Walter S. Campbell in the 1950s?

B: Well, if you look at the older classics, George Bird Grinnell, Angie Debo in a way, Walter Prescott Webb in the Great Plains, you're struck that many of these people were almost participants in what was transpiring. They experienced this in the course of their lives--the cowboy, the range, these kind of things were still part of their lives. They came away with experiences that the next generation simply did not have. Their anecdotes and humor were attuned to those times and experiences. I think if you listen to Joe Frantz, Walter Prescott Webb's successor as chairman of the History department at the University of Texas, listen to one of his after dinner speeches you'll find he's among the very few who can really bridge two or three generations of historians.

If you look at their publications you'll find that the next generation probably delves more into different kinds of historical records, using them more comprehensively and yet more cautiously than the older generation. In some ways the older generation was more poetic. The sense of style that they had has just escaped us. I think we are so overwhelmed with the facts that we forget that how facts have to be related. You look at Debo and Webb, that generation, and you'll find them wrapped up with people. I think they can teach us all something because history must deal with the human dimension, human actions and human ideas. Sometimes we become so institutional, even those of us in human

history, we can write a whole article or a book and you might go a hundred pages without finding the name of an Indian. To me that's not the way it should be done. Look at Webb's essays where the core sometimes springs out of a human experience. If we look at so many human experiences and try weaving them into some kind of homogeneous whole we lose something. So I think it's a matter of how the next generation perceives their research, realizing that they and we cannot duplicate in any way what the older scholars did; it would be a weak imitation at best. So the change is within the historical profession, and which has changed enormously even in the course of my writing. I think you'll see, if I ever get around to writing the next Cheyenne volume, that I pay much more attention to social history, cultural history and their relationship to people than I do to the economics and political end of Indian-white relations. Why? Because that's how people live. You don't live purely by institutions.

M: Then you've become more interested in the purely human aspect of history over the years?

B: Yes. You can't remain uninfluenced by your profession and part of my interest has been piqued by the insights offered by the newer history. If you're aware of how your profession is beginning to change--I don't care whether you're an engineer or a physician--you must adapt. Otherwise you no longer practice your profession as it is currently done. I think if you read you pick up these nuances and that helps lead into your research interests. You say to yourself, "Yes, it's there, I can do this. I can explain this by networks of people. I can explain this by knowing who these people are. I can do more in terms of understanding them as people than just filling out the skeleton that policies form." Economic history is the same thing. You

can see ways of using economic history to explain the deprivation that the Indian people endured without relying upon dependency theory or anything like it. The records will make this available to you without an involved investigation of the theory. So, you change.



Donald Berthrong and Rhio, 1990

M: Seven years ago you published a quote of Walter Stanley Campbell's from an unpublished article: "I'm a plainsman, with all the normal plainsman's love of wide horizons, huge spaces and sweeping vistas. Their mark is on me." Can you get deep into Plains Indian history whether you are from Wisconsin or New Jersey without, in a sense, becoming a plainsman of the sort Walter Stanley Campbell is talking about?

B: Well, it depends upon the time that you are investigating. I don't think that a person could be enveloped in the smog of Los Angeles or surrounded by the decay that we call Phoenix and feel the atmosphere of the Old West. They wouldn't have the same sense of place as

Walter Campbell, of growing up in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, in Weatherford, Oklahoma, a little town with open plains around it. This boy could go out and ride on the plains. He wasn't engulfed by technology and industrialization. He was in an environment that was free, open, and virtually uncontaminated except by nature itself. If you're going to understand part of the approach of the Cheyenne and Arapaho you have to understand in their way how Mother Earth and nature of the plains environment colored their outlook. In that sense I think you have to be there.

I'm not arguing that you have to be a Cheyenne or an Arapaho to write Cheyenne or Arapaho side of history. I'm not going to go to that extreme. I think you have to have some sense of this, just as when you want to write about something that happened at a particular place. You probably ought to go there and take a look at it. You probably ought to ride in your car across the plains--out where there are few fences. Then you can then see, in a way, what these people saw, where they lived, and how they could be free. I think in that sense Walter was probably right. But it's absurd to think that if you're going to write about the history of Oklahoma you have to be born in Oklahoma.

M: There is that view, that in order to be involved in Indian history you have to be an Indian historian--you have to be a member of a tribe to teach or write about American Indian history. That's obviously not a point with which you would agree.

B: I wouldn't agree with that completely, if you understand at the same time that one can never completely identify with another culture. Your cultural roots get in the way. The best you can do is try to watch these people you're talking about. That's the best you can do. I cannot go to a Sun Dance and have the same sense of

participation as a Cheyenne or Arapaho person who has been immersed in their system of belief.



Historian as grandfather. The children are Michael and Kerry Killeen, Berthrong's daughter's children.

M: You don't see the same Sun Dance.

B: You don't see it. It's not there for you. But what you can do is observe. You can watch and in your own mind record what you think it means. And that's as close as you can come. I'm not a linguist and I do not understand the Cheyenne or Arapaho language. Those who do can draw nuances from conversations that I cannot draw. So there are empty places in my investigations and I'm aware of them. You take those sources you can handle and base your history on what you can do knowing that no one has yet written the perfect history.