

INTERVIEW WITH PENNY OLSON  
August 23, 1998

Interview with Penny Olson a former instructor of mine at Northern Michigan University. Today I am conducting an interview to hopefully reveal Upper Peninsula of Michigan folklore. Specifically relating to the native Americans of this land. To begin I guess I need to start with some simple straightforward questions. Similar formalities for this project Penny was in a position at Northern Michigan University.

PO: I am the adjunct instructor for Native American Studies program and english program. I teach anything from basic and English to creative writing and ????? contemporary literature and the Native American Experience class

MS: That's pretty extensive.

PO: I've also taught at other colleges and universities, full time instructor for two and half years which is the only Native American college in the state of Michigan and I taught everything, everything in English, everything and anything

MS: Was that your beginning into college instruction?

PO: No, I taught at Northern as TA, '91 and '92.

MS: Where did you receive your formal college level education?

PO: At Northern. Various classes taken some Ojibwas classes. Most of my classes were done here. English, speech and psychology.

MS: As a successful published writer, what are your accomplishments, current projects and future goals?

PO: I have had seventeen short stories published in Anthology and journalism, I have had numerous poems published and couple pieces of non-fiction essays published. I am currently working on a novel, short stories pretty much I am working on a novel and spend time with my family. Future goal being the second native American ? others have been nominated I would like to be one of them and then I should come back to Northern said you should have hired me you know Matt. I would like that long term goal Native American writers give awards to short fiction writers and novel awarded or at least be nominated.

MS: With ? writing I know you dealt with Native American culture in relation to folklore of the upper peninsula. How significant is the folklore to you in correlation with your admirable accomplishments and writings?

PO: Admirable. Well anyway you are too good to me. The novel that I'm working on my family was from the eastern UP have a lot of stories that I have been told from Bay Mills area find ways in my writings depending on the stories ? Anishanbe culture we taught certain ? creation stories because ? is asleep or frozen ? play more tricks on people. Lot of People call it ? See my grandfather was a traditional story teller and he would he might tell us a story because he knew that he had the person's attention. the reason why is the same reason he was paid because he was offered to be paid to be on a videotape and he would not do it. Another reason is that traditional stories oral stories a very good story teller would lock in stories it will change they could make one and that was another reason my grandfather would not do that because he was afraid that the audience would read the wrong story. I have seen some of those stories he has told in writing. We are talking about a wide culture. There are about 30-40 Ojibwas tribe. Those stories are exactly the same and certain people I would know but my grandfather refused doing that and since I respect him and his memories I don't write down his stories unless I don't feel it. I it is not a traditional story there was one he would tell us about Bay Mills and what happened it is not a creation story other wise I will just mention his stories a native will know what it is talking about and if a non-native would read he does not know look at two options I am not that difficult to find and if I'm published in a collection there is always something about where I'm from in the collection to where they could find it very easily or they could do some research if they really want to find about it. But I just can't I have a hard time printing and give the jest 6 the story but not the whole story

MS: And certainly that signifies your relation in successfully writing within the Native American genre.

PO: I hope it does. Some people just say they were superstitions and not to worry about them but they were superstitions for a reason and out of respect for my grandfather I won't write ? just can't one of them that I knew that I wasn't suppose to write, I mean I'll go out back now and ask if it's ok if I use this there was one story that I'm using in the novel about like I said the battle that went on in the Ojibwa and I guess put it in your left hand and if you drop it then ok you are suppose you can go ahead and if the tobacco sticks to your hand then may be you shouldn't the offer is not being accepted. There is a few things you should be careful whether I should tell story or not my hands were clean apparently it was ok to write it down. Lot of stories I tell lot of autobiographical I change names or I change the events to protect the guilty people in my family including myself and family members come back and say that I did not do that he did that or she did that and so ....

MS: Then you say sure I know that's why...

PO: That is why it is fiction,



MS: Yeah and that is why it is like that because you don't want your readers to know the exact stories.

PO: It is autobiographical fiction and that something close to everything ???? something I know . It happens that way because this was easiest for me to tell. and the traditional stories are part of my heritage, they were ways to show how people would behave but they were very individual and you might hear a story it might not affect your life right now but 15 years or 20 years down the road when something happens that affect your life. In time it will affect you in different way because stories are different they change and the meaning of stories changes. I was told a story when I was seven years old my grandfather, I took one thing away from it, when my son was born my grandfather said it was one of my favorite stories he told to me when my son was born with disability I did not understand why he was telling me that story until one day I was doing something. I was in a hurry my son wasn't going fast enough and I picked him up and carried him and a butterfly landed on my son. and I remembered the story so because my grandfather had been gone for he passed over 4 years before. I put my son back down and made a mark but that's those are things that you realize while your told a story. Like I said there might be something there that day when you hear it but then again you might not remember a story you might forget about it and not even hear it again for 10 or 15 years and all of a sudden you hear it again. An oh my god this is something else I was supposed to get from that and learn the lesson that way.

MS: I guess the aspect of story telling plays a big part in ? of the graveyard that I have just now realized when Megan is in the garage and her grandfather tells her this story of how her mother

PO: oh fell and broke her leg

MS: yea, A simple story with later you realize the significance.

PO: A lot of times as a story teller they won't tell you why they are telling you the story. They figure you have those answers inside you and they will never tell you what you are supposed to take from the story. Because what they take from the story, what everybody takes from the story is going to be a little bit different. And Megan in the story when she remembers the story about her mom fishing she realizes at that point in her life why she is remembering that story is to show that he dad was an individual too. And that her dad because she doesn't remember her dad as clear as her mom because her dad had been gone. I played with some tricks with the story telling and in the novel that I am working on there is a chapter on the grandfather tells a story and like I said its autobiographical. The grandfather told a story to all of his grandkids and afterwards all the other kids leave and one kid gets up and starts walking to him and telling her grandfather that her little cousin was teasing her and said that stories aren't worthwhile anymore and that they have no bearing on today's life and stuff like that and she said that's not true is it



and then her grandfather steps close to hear the story that she told about something that had happened in the family. And he looked down at her and he says now stories are told for reasons different reasons. If Richard was to tell the same story as you just did would it be exactly the same? And that's all he says to her and then she comes to the realization because they were telling the story for different reasons and as well as hearing the story and getting different things out of the story. But the goal behind telling the story might be different too. And that's what story telling is. And that's why a story teller cant tell you what ot take? Eventhough I am an english teacher, I have trouble people telling me what Shakerspeare ??? we going to place of popular ??? I will not teach my stories, I will teach 20th century native american lit. Because you should be able to take teh meaning yourself, I cannot tell you waht to take because if you are sitting a story and you had to ask what that story meant you won't get an answer you will be told to look inside you to get an answer to see what it meant. I can show whaat the story means but it will be my view. I would rather have you tell waht it meant. It might be not what I got out of it but it might be something that I missed, it might be smoehting that I vieewed?? lot of people want to purchase my answer but this is my life....

MS: the ? of understanding any specific story and how it relates to you personally seems very impartant and I guess that is the significance of naitve American story telling to find out more about yourself..

PO: that more you know about yourself you cana share with the community becuae community is important in the culture no ons person we had coutnries we had warriors and we had cheifs it was not that at all what we used to do in the ??? father of teh white house we can speaak for human beings it is like that exercise that ido with my 090 class. I write somehting on the board and then everybody writes down their own meaning tell me somtthine about a dog even identical twins would nto like the same dog and very close to my oldest brother what he wrote about killing and I wrote about killing and teh were very different????? and he havei ng a little bloe chair call her up but those are quite differnt stories. my husband talks about his his bird dog which was a setter cold not hunt rabbits, my brother tallks about first time taking up hunting so ....

MS: In relatin to what you are speaking now holding a community and buiding us as individuals as students to have some more understanding and ? learning education and that is primarily a basis of native american cultutre aand I lost my train of thought..

PO: going to use it is going to diferent. I have ? in my class contemporary American lit and what they are going to get of it will be different ways of life. You already need ? you all watched movie clear cut somebody went by one thing , somebody went by another thing eventhough it was for the exact same topic. we try to make everybody, each one gonna know something different and the nyou have to get truth out of what you saw.

MA: So in relation to culture do you think the native American culture is based on the understanding of stories told...

PO: Somewhat it gives us a base to go from. some of the things we should have, when I am Bay Mills differences in many people? me. You have some people you get that but you have to once you get that it is not much of a judgement call at least cause there is like I said in the University.

MA: It seems a greater emphasis on unity.

PO: I know some of the things bothered me when I went? we had a Ph.D reason why I have not gone for further education. they do not even

MS: the Ph.D for instance is an icon the society for someone who more or less dominant position and it appears that dominance is not significance feature based on equality.

PO: like I said

MS: Person who got the fish

PO: and I am not saying we have never been said we never measuring people by how much

MS: some of these stories or questions leaving the UP the significance of the native American perception