

Marge Byrd – Interview Transcript
Individuals Present: Marge Byrd (M); Joshua Ream (J)
Interview Date: July 13 2010

1. Mentor (Esther Shay) & Clan Future (00:00-04:39)

(CONVERSATION REGARDING MARGE'S MENTOR ESTHER SHAY BEFORE RECORDING STARTED)

M: Esther Shay.

J: She lives in Ketchikan?

M: She did. She passed away though.

J: And your older brother also helped you?

M: Uh huh. And he passed away.

J: Who do you see as taking over as the leader of the Kiks.adi in future years?

J: Well there aren't that many here. I mean its my family. And I try to mentor like, Dawn, like I have children that I try to pass it on to and like I have a granddaughter who does the weaving and everything like that. Singing and dancing. I don't know how to. I just hope some of it gets passed on. Like the weaving and the singing and dancing. But the part like going down to Shakes Island last summer was the first time they had somebody go down there. I went down there for years and years and did it on my own for free and things like that but now the WCA set up the Shakes' Island Project. They have four of us that can go down and last summer was the first time that Carol Snoddy went down with me. And it made me feel really good because I wasn't there by myself and she was young enough but yet old enough to be able to take this in and maybe carry it on. And then just this last year Dawn started going down there and does the tours also.

(BRIEF INTERRUPTION AS MARGE TAKES A PHONE CALL)

M: I forgot where we were.

J: The clan house and doing the tours.

M: And then Dawn is getting more serious and more interested in working with the Shakes Island committee and doing tours. It is something that I feel that will continue you know. Because I see this happen and I told the younger ones I said "I've been a Tlingit elder. I've been the indian part of this community all my life." And Esther Shay was the one that kept her family going and dancing and doing their things. And another lady that lived in Ketchikan, she was the main one that kept her family going. And when she died it quit. And when Esther died her kids didn't go to Celebration. They don't do their things that kept going. And when I see Carol and Dawn in there and things like that I know its not going to disappear like that.

2. Indian Women (04:39-07:04)

J: I've noticed that there seems to be a lot of women that preserve their culture. Do men get as involved?

M: Indian women are very strong. I mean I see it in – my father was a leader and a chief but it was my mom that was behind him and kept him going. And I realized that more when she died. He just kind of, you know she wasn't there to keep him strong. That's what the native women did was the Alaska Native Sisterhood. They formed to help the men to keep going. Help them build an ANB hall. Help them do this and that. And they were always there behind them. So we support our men but in Wrangell it is very hard because we don't have any male leaders. It is all women so. When I first start. I'm sorry I get carried away here. When I first started Indian dancing and they sent me when I was 16 to Ketchikan to represent Wrangell in dancing and it's the women that keep things going. They're strong, they're very very strong people. That's when you see that even though there is a chief it is the women behind him that keep him going.

3. The Sun House (07:04-10:27)

J: The clan house that I visited with you, that was your father's clan?

M: Yes.

J: And the Sun House was the Kiks.adi?

M: Yes. That was our house.

J: Can you tell me a little bit about the Sun House?

M: I don't, except for being able to remember seeing it when I was growing up, they didn't do much there. It was just a great big white man building. It wasn't anything like Shakes' Island. And it just had at the peak it had a round window. They didn't do anything there. One of the men that were head of the Kiks.adi was the caretaker of it and then it went down. WE were hoping at one time when we were building the totem park that there would be some way that we could get funding to put a replica of the Sun House there but. Now we gotta concentrate on Shakes' Island.

J: It was behind the totem park?

M: No it was, you know the Kiks.adi pole that stands right in the middle it was right behind that.

J: Was there a Sun House before that one was built, an older one that was on the same site?

M: I don't really know, that's the only one I've seen in pictures and then I remember it being there when I grew up.

J: What is the relationship with the sun and the frog?

M: The sun we use as our emblem, as our crest because of the sun house. Because that is our tribal house. And then the frog we get from our cultural... Each crest that we choose was chosen from some great thing that animal or something did for us. Like the bear leading the people to the mountain during the flood. There's a story about a killer whale. When the man went overboard and went in. There's a

story about killer whale. And there's a story about the frog that his people went out in a canoe and it got foggy out there and the people in the canoe heard this noise and they spotted the frog on the water. And the frog swam and lead them to shore. So they took the frog as their crest. So all of our crests, all of our emblems have a meaning why we chose them.

4. Clan Histories (10:27-15:23)

J: is the frog clan here in Wrangell a very old clan?

M: Yea. In one of my papers that I found that my older brother wrote, in fact I just came across it a month ago or so, it told how we got the name Kiks. To where we came from originally. There is an island called Kiks and that's where we started from and then came. So when they left Kiks the leader – that's another thing the white people did – chief is not an indian word, they have leaders. And the leader of the Kiks said “when we leave here we will be known as Kiks.adis.” We come from Kiks.

J: Is that near here?

M: Yea in the paper that I have my brother had a description of exactly where it was. And I don't remember reading it before but I came across it when I was digging up some papers. I remember hearing it but I didn't remember seeing it written. So that is good its written.

J: That would be a neat place to visit too, the island of Kiks. When did the clan split and why? It was too large?

M: Yea. At one time we had seven clans. Some places say we had eight but when my brother was teaching Dawn and I it was always seven clans that lived here on this island. They got so large they started to split. Like the Kiks.adis split and the ones that were left were called Kaach.adis. And then the Nanyaa ayiis split and the ones that split, I'm sorry I can't remember what that clan was that split form the nanyaa ayiis.

J: Nanyaa ayii are the brown bears?

M: Is the bear and the killer whale. There is also a clan up in Sitka that has the bear and the killer whale. But they aren't from Wrangell, they are the Kagwantaans. But they have the same crests.

J: And they have a frog clan there? Kiks.adi?

M: Yes. It depends on where you're from. Where they were originally. If you go up there you'll hear the stories that the Kiks.adis were originated in Sitka. You come down here and you find that they originated down here.

J: When would that split have occurred?

(JUMBLED CONVERSATION ON PRONOUNCIATION)

J: The story here is that both of those (Kiks.adi and Kach.adi) originated as Kiks.adi)

M: Yes.

J: And they probably left at about the same time do you think (Kiks.adi in Sitka and Kaach.adi)?

M: It must have been pretty close to the same time but I'm not sure about that.

J: Are you familiar with the frog clan in Yakutat?

M: There are frogs everywhere. I mean the Haidas have frogs.

J: Do you know much about the Haida here?

M: No.

J: They're fairly recent to the Wrangell area?

M: They've been here all my life but...

(Recording turned off momentarily for private conversation as per request of Marge Byrd)

5. Frog Relationships and Respect (15:23-18:18)

J: So the Kiks.adi honor the frog as their crest. Do you think that respect translates to the actual animals on the ground? When you see a frog outside do you feel a connection with that animal?

M: Yes. Very much so. There are many stories about if you treat a frog good, like for instance, one of the stories that was always told to us, you don't ever hurt a frog or bad luck will come to you and if you treat him good then you will have good fortune or you always respected them. My father was fishing way out. He was a gillnetter so he was fishing way out away from land and he found a little frog hanging onto his cork line. They didn't have outboard motors in those days. But he took that little frog and he rode to shore and put in on shore. He caught very many fish.

M: The other story they use to tell us when we were little kids, because you know kids tend to, if they find toads or something they want to catch them, and put them in something and keep them. Our parents always told us "you don't mistreat frogs." They said there's this story about these little boys and they came across some frogs and they had a can with a lid and they put it in there, put more than one in there, and then they threw it in the water. The boy that was catching the frogs putting them in there got sick and he started having fits and he started you know, getting worse. They didn't know what to do with him. They were asking the other boys "well what happened? Where did you go? What happened? Did you do something?" Finally one of the boys said "we put frogs in a can and threw it." So a couple of the older men went out in a boat and they found the can and then they let them go and then he was okay. So that's how they taught us at a young age that you don't hurt animals.

J: And that includes bringing them into captivity / leaving them where they are?

M: Yea, leaving them in their environment. We were taught things like that so that we would respect what we see.

6. Frog Encounters (18:18-21:23)

J: Have you seen wood frogs in the area? (PICTURE SHOWN)

M: You see something like this up near Telegraph.

J: (STORY OF WOOD FROG ABUSE IN GWICHIN ATHABASCAN)

J: So the Athabaskans won't hurt a frog based on a similar story.

M: The Hawaiians too. They're very very respectful to the frog.

J: Are there any stories about salamanders or newts that you know of? Were you ever taught anything about them?

M: No. Except just like that. You always treat them, ya know you don't hurt them. You know things like that. I never heard any story connected with them like I did the frog.

J: Did you see any newts or salamanders when you were small?

M: Yea they're up where my, up that hill there's stairs going up the hill. There used to be a pond up there where they use to ice skate up there before they filled it in to build houses. We use to go up there and they always have salamanders and kids would catch them.

J: Frogs too?

M: I don't remember seeing any. Of course I lived down in the end part of town so we didn't come up this way very much except in the winter to go ice skating up there. But I remember some kids bringing you know salamanders to school and things like that and that's where they would have caught them.

J: Do you consider it a form of disrespect that they filled it in on this hill?

M: I just think of it as just the different changes. But sometimes I wonder what in the world is going to happen up there because that was all water (laugh). What's going to happen to those houses? I don't know what they filled it in with.

7. Reptiles (21:23-22:26)

J: Have you ever heard any stories about turtles or snakes?

M: No because we don't have them here.

J: I asked the question because there have been people that have told me they've seen them along the Stikine and we have actual specimens from Telegraph Creek [do we?]. They think that the river might provide a good corridor for them to move through though there aren't many of them. I just thought you know we might be able to identify things that were there if people knew stories and things like that.

M: I wasn't really too interested or aware of turtles until I met this lady that is connected with our church and she is, her crest is turtle.

J: She's Tlingit?

M: No she is from the states. But I always try to find her turtles and she finds me frogs.

8. Kiks.adi Aat.oow & Caretakers (22:26-36.05)

J: How do you think it would affect the Kiks.adi if frogs ceased to exist or died off? If there was a problem with them?

M: I think they would wonder what? Why? Because it's like my brother said "You can never kill a frog." Because they go down to the ground and freeze in the winter and come back in the spring and thaw out and that's where they are. He said you "stomp on them but you can never kill them." My family was very strong frog Kiks.adi people. We were taught to highly respect that Kiks.adi pole. My mother was one of the highest Kiks.adi women in Wrangell

J: What was her name?

M: Louise Bradley. Her Tlingit name was (inaudible).

J: What does that mean?

M: She spoke I think five different languages of the Indians because our culture has different protocols and they teach them at a very young age. My uncle was a master carver and he was taught at a young age on carving. My oldest brother if it were in the day when he was starting to be taught to be a storyteller, a historian, they teach him from a young age. And I never understood that until I was already, well my children were grown and I had a naming ceremony down at the tribal house and I explained to my nephew who wanted his children named how they go about naming and everything. His children he married a nonnative so his wife had to be adopted by the opposite of what he was. He was a raven. His wife had to be adopted a bear or eagle. Esther Shay was a bear and so I asked her if she would be able or have it in her wanting to adopt my nephew's wife and children and she said she would so I got back to my nephew and told him everything he had to do to make this naming the way it's supposed to be. So he did and his brother's boy was, his mother was a Raven, he didn't need to be adopted. They gave him his Tlingit name. When we had those three children up there getting their names plus one of the mothers and we had the elders sitting on the side ramp – Esther Shay and Carol Brady and Marlita Wallace – were sitting on the side as elders as witnesses and I explained to the parents what had to be done and why. When they got gifts for the elders they got things for Esther because she adopted the family and then when that was over, Esther called me over and she pointed to one of my great nephews and she said "that's your Indian right there." I looked at her and she said "he's Indian." The other two were Indian too but she could see in him what probably our elders could see in the different children when they were growing up. What they were. Were they storytellers were they, like this. They would start training them. Start teaching them. And then sure enough he loves to dance, he loves his history. And he came and went to celebration. He came here with his dad. And I have a, I've been wanting to do this and I never had a time. Time gets away from you. But my husband had this frog hat, one piece of wood, a big frog carved hat, and the things I have I'm a caretaker. There's a difference between a caretaker and a owner. I am a caretaker of the Kiks.adi robe that is in the museum and of a raven

backbone staff that I put in the museum to be safe and another what they call a keeping time stick. I'm a caretaker of those things for my people. They were given to me to be caretaker when I turned 21. My father brought them to me and said "you are a caretaker" so I learned. He told me, my mother told me, they said "a caretaker only takes care of these things for their tribe. Doesn't belong to you. You can't sell it." And so I'm a caretaker of these things and when I went to one of the elders conferences in Juneau, no it was Sitka, I was sitting with the elders there and I was never when I was in high school and when I first got married I was never this talkative. I was very quiet and into myself. But I went to elders conference and I stood up and I said we need to change with the times. We can't live in the past the way we use to because the generations have changed. And we need to change. And I said one of the things, I said I have done and I think this is the way we should be looking towards because we already had experiences here, and Klukwan where their caretakers have sold what they were taking care of. In Klukwan they sold their valuables and they had a hard time getting them back. And so when I was at the conference I said I have because times have changed we can't do just agreement on verbal I said so the robe that I'm the caretaker of I put it in my will, who the next caretaker will be. The staff the same way. The things I have are in my will as to who the next caretakers are. And I have talked to each one of them and explained to them what a caretaker was. So I really believe that has to be done with our people because word of mouth isn't good anymore. Our words aren't as powerful and meaningful because what they did long ago came from here (points to heart). It doesn't come from there anymore. Our blood is getting so diluted that it's not coming straight from the heart the way it used to. Because they didn't grow up in it. So that was how that caretaker is.

J: The hat, is there a story behind that?

M: The hat my husband, this man knew I was a frog, he was a carver, Wayne Price up in Haines. He knew I was a very strong Kiks.adi. He sent my husband a picture of this hat. He says "I have this hat I just finished it. Would you like to buy it?" He bought it for a lot of money and I've been wanting to take it to celebration and I wore it myself only twice. It is very heavy. Anyway, this celebration I told my sister she has three sons, I only have one, I said "I want to take the frog hat to celebration. I've been wanting to." I said "one of your boys can wear it because they're Kiks.adis." We got up there and it fit her grandson to a T and he's the one Ester Shay was the Indian. He wore it so perfectly that, so proudly. It was so awesome. It was like it was made for him. It was beautiful. I hope somebody got good pictures of him in it. It was awesome. But my husband got it. He wasn't an Indian but he respected me and my culture and my people and he let me raise my children in their culture. I told him ya know I can't wear this unless its handed to me in public. So we had a native women's conference in Wrangell. We had dancing going on down at the island and he brought it down. He was a very quiet man. And I didn't think he would do it but he came. He didn't tell me he was going to do it. But he came and he brought the hat and came up on stage. He said I got this for my wife. So she will have something to hand down to our children. So that's why he bought it. Because the rest of the things I can't give, I can't sell, can't give, he bought that one so it would go to his children. So that was pretty awesome.

J: So you are keeping it until you pass and then you'll give it to your children.

M: Yes, but everyone who is a frog can wear it but it's very heavy. Heavy in more ways than one. You know it's just like. I told my priest, she said one of my younger priests, she said sometimes this white collar gets really tight. Sometimes it's really hard to wear. I said I don't know if you believe it or not or what you think of it I said but when I put my button robe on I said sometimes that is very heavy. And sometimes it's hard to wear but you have to be strong to be able to wear it. She said "hmmm, okay."

9. Research Suggestions (36:05-39:43)

J: Do you have guidance or suggestions for me? Things you'd like to see me do or pursue? Questions that you'd like to see a student look at whether it's with your culture or just Wrangell?

M: I think you, myself; I think you got a good start on meeting people. And you've made a good impression. And in explaining to everybody what it is about and why you're doing it and things like that. It is a lot of help to us as well as you because so many times white people come into our life, into our culture, and we don't understand what they're doing and they don't ever ask us. We have been told so many times that we get kind of leery when someone asks but they never ask us before. You know it was like the forest service, you get kind of leery when they start asking. I think what you were saying earlier about maybe doing something on Wrangell and having it put on computer or whatever so that it could be passed on or read about or preserved or whatever is a good thing.

J: Who else would you suggest that I talk to? Are there key people that you think that hold a lot of really important information that can kind of guide and steer me?

M: Probably on different things in Wrangell but I don't know anybody right off hand on the cultural part except for maybe Dawn she reads a lot and has gone to different workshops and learned more. Because a lot of us, we are still learning. You never get through learning.

J: Well I thank-you so much for your time, I really appreciate it. It's an honor so thank-you.

M: Thank-you.

10. The Stikine River (39:43-42:56)

M: I bought a charter and paid for them (friend and family) to take a trip up the river. It was so awesome.

J: What does it mean to the people of Wrangell, the river?

M: That was our life ya know. They went up there in the summer and lived there all summer. They got their food and everything for the winter and brought it back down and there was a lot of trading going on there.

J: Do you think that today there is still a connection with the river? I know a lot of people still enjoy it but...

M: Yea not the same. Not the same kind I don't think.

J: What about for the Tlingit stories? Does that instill in you a sense of pride or respect?

M: Yea the stories that I remember hearing were from my older brother. You don't hear those no more.

J: Do you feel any sort of spiritual connection to the river?

M: When I went up there, I went up there on this charter, this young man he was really cared about the river and respect it and everything. I went up on this charter and I said could you stop here? So he stopped and I said "Would it bother you if I got out?" You know on the charter boat you can open up the doors. I said "Would it bother you if I got out and sang a song to my ancestors that use to live here?" he let me do that and I saw him the next week and he said that was the highlight of my whole charter. But it was something for myself. I can't say everybody feels what I feel. It was pretty awesome.

J: I almost had the opportunity to go last week with Clara Haley to the potlatch in Telegraph.

M: Oh she just got back.

J: Did she have fun? Did you talk to her? It was a last minute kind of deal and the boat was full unfortunately but I hope that it went well. Have you talked to her since she got back?

M: I just put my head into her shop and said "hi, how was your trip?" She said "ohhh, she was all excited still." I said oh boy you had a ball.

J: I hope she took some pictures, I'll have to look at them.

M: I hope so too.

J: Thank-you.

M: you're welcome.