

# Oral History Methods In Native Studies: Saskatchewan Aboriginal World War Two Veterans<sup>1</sup>

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During my research on the post-war experiences of Saskatchewan Aboriginal Second World War veterans, I found the conventional historical approach to interpret events inadequate.<sup>2</sup> The primary problem is that the pool of documentation on Aboriginal veterans is small and lacks, for the most part, the veterans' perceptions and personal experiences. There were a few unexplored documents relating to veterans that were useful, but they still left a gaping hole in the history of Saskatchewan Aboriginal veterans.<sup>3</sup> This lack of documented accounts of Aboriginal veterans' views of their post-war experiences required supplementing the documents with oral interviews of the veterans themselves.

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1. A note on the use of the term Aboriginal. Some authors who have written about Indian veterans have confusingly used the terms Aboriginal, Native, and First Nations interchangeably in reference to Indians only. See Michael D. Stevenson "The Mobilisation of Native Canadians During the Second World War." *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 9 (1996): 205-226; and Robert Sheffield "'Of Pure European Descent and of the White Race': Recruitment Policy and Aboriginal Canadians, 1939-1945." *Canadian Military History* 5, 1 (1996): 8-15. In this paper, in keeping with the legal definition, Aboriginal is used in reference to both Indian and Metis people. The terms Native, which usually refers to both Indian and Metis, and First Nations, which refers only to Indians, are not used in this paper.
  2. Rob Innes, "The Social-Political Influence Of The Second World War Saskatchewan Aboriginal Veterans, 1945-1960" (M. A. Thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 2000).
  3. For example, Canada, Parliament, Special Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons Appointed to Examine and Consider the Indian Act, Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence, no. 19 Thursday, 8 May, no. 20 Friday, 9 May and no. 30, 5 June, 1947; Saskatchewan Archives Board. Douglas Papers, Files of the Premier, Indian Veterans' File, R33-1.

Since oral testimony was a crucial source for my study, I was forced to confront a range of methodological questions and debates. First, I had to discern the difference between oral history and oral tradition and determine how the veterans' interviews I was conducting fit or did not fit, within prevailing categories and definitions. Second, I had to weigh the historians' criticism of oral historical methodology against oral historians and other scholars responsive development of methods to verify and interpret oral data. Finally, I had to contend with established conventions about oral history research methodologies.

The use of interviews within the discipline of Native Studies not only challenges the conventional historical methodologies it also challenges the conventional oral historical methodology. The methods advocated by the discipline of Native Studies rejects the hierarchical researcher-researched relationship found in the conventional oral historical methodology. Native Studies stresses that the researcher has to be flexible to accommodate the interviewee's mode of communication.<sup>4</sup> This paper challenges conventional wisdoms on oral history interview methods from a Native Studies perspective. By way of a brief look at excerpts from three veterans' interviews it will demonstrate that conventional oral historical methodologies are problematic in an Aboriginal context.

### **Oral History Methodology And Native Studies**

There has emerged recently a debate about the conceptualization of the terms oral tradition and oral history which not only has repercussions for Native Studies, it also represents the divergence of Native Studies and other disciplines, especially History. Some scholars maintained a rigid distinction between oral tradition and oral history, while others have been receptive to the notion that the two are in a fluid relationship. According to many scholars who employ oral evidence, oral tradition and oral history are related but are not the same.<sup>5</sup> Jan Vansina distinguishes oral tradition as

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4. Angela Cavender-Wilson, "Grandmother to Granddaughter: Generations of Oral History in a Dakota Family," *Native and Academics: Researching and Writing about American Indians*, ed. D. A. Mihesuah, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, 1998); Winona Stevenson "Indigenous Voices, Indigenous Histories. Part I: The Othering of Indigenous History," *Saskatchewan History* no. 2 (1998): 24-27.
  5. David Henige, *Oral Historiography* (Essex, England: Longman Group, 1982); Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965); Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: U of Wisconsin

“oral messages based on previous oral messages, at least one generation old,”<sup>6</sup> and oral history as “reminiscences, hearsay, or eyewitness accounts about events and situations which are contemporary, that is, which occurred during the lifetime of the informants.”<sup>7</sup> While there is no universally accepted set of definitions, the one advanced by Vansina has been widely accepted, operational, and therefore authoritative.

Increasingly, the distinctions between oral history and oral tradition is being viewed within Native Studies as false and misleading. Vansina’s definition of oral tradition is important, as he was the first to academically conceptualize oral history; however, his definition tends to promote a static view of orally transmitted narratives. That is, his definition emphasizes that oral narratives are a “body of stories to be recorded and stored away ... passed on in the form of complete narratives.”<sup>8</sup> Julie Cruikshank acknowledges the difficulty scholars have in finding a suitable definition for oral tradition; however, she disagrees with any definition that relegates oral tradition to formal texts. Cruikshank states that oral tradition is “a living, vital part of life, and not simply information from a long time ago.” She concurs with Marshall Sahlins that “[k]nowledge of the past is not the dead and dying survivals of a past oral culture handed down through narrow conduits from generations to generations.” Rather, oral tradition “is related to the critical intelligence and active deployment of knowledge.”<sup>9</sup>

In her article on Dakota oral history, Angela Cavender-Wilson also finds that the dichotomous definitions of oral history/tradition are problematic.<sup>10</sup> Whereas David Henige makes a clear distinction between oral history, as a recollection or memory from the speakers’ experience, and oral tradition, as information handed down through the generations, Cavender-Wilson asserts that oral history is contained within oral tradition and, therefore, is not a separate entity.<sup>11</sup> For Cavender-Wilson, oral tradition

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Press, 1985).

6. Vansina *Oral Tradition as History* ... 3.

7. Vansina *Oral Tradition as History* ... 12.

8. Julie Cruikshank, “Claiming Legitimacy: Oral Tradition and Oral History,” Draft Discussion Paper prepared for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, (1993): 2.

9. Cruikshank “Claiming Legitimacy ...” 9.

10. Cavender-Wilson 29.

11. Henige 5.

*refers to the way in which information is passed on rather than the length of time something has been told. Personal experiences, pieces of information, events, incidents, etc., can become a part of the oral tradition at the moment it happens or the moment it is told, as long as the person adopting the memory is part of an oral tradition.*<sup>12</sup>

She also points out the oral tradition form "is based on the assumption that the ability to remember is an acquired skill - one that may be acutely developed or neglected."<sup>13</sup> As a Dakota person, Cavender-Wilson defines oral history and oral tradition within her own cultural understandings. This may explain why her definitions of oral history and tradition are neither compartmentalized nor conflicting since they allow for a distinction yet also allow for overlap. Cavender-Wilson points out further that there are cultures that incorporate aspects of oral tradition in oral historical narrative. This corresponds with Cruikshank's findings in her recorded life stories of three Yukon Elders:

*I was interested in hearing women talk about events chronicled in written documents and records and tried to steer our conversations in that direction. Although the older women responded patiently to my line of inquiry for a while, they quite firmly shifted the emphasis to "more important" accounts they wanted me to record - particularly events central to traditional narrative. Gradually, I came to see oral tradition not as "evidence" about the past but as a window on ways the past is culturally constituted and discussed.*<sup>14</sup>

In interviewing Aboriginal veterans it was beneficial to acknowledge that the distinction between oral history and oral tradition does become blurred for some informants. Similar to the participants in Cruikshank's study, many of the veterans I interviewed also emphasized events that fit the traditional narrative. The following account by Adam Cuthand demonstrates the attributes of a fluid narrative which incorporated content that would otherwise be seen as belonging to oral history and oral tradition.

*The other one [story] is the time the veterans talked about the time they were sunk in the mid-Atlantic. There were a lot of natives there. As the ship was sunk the whitemen were scared and frightened but the natives were not scared. The whitemen were praying, crying for their mothers. The natives were going up with some white people, finally, they got to*

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12. Cavender-Wilson 29.

13. Cavender-Wilson 29.

14. Julie Cruikshank, *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Native Elders* (Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska Press, 1990) 14.

*the top. While they were waiting up there, the natives heard a voiced singing and this same person (Great Spirit) told them, "Sing with me". This voice was singing the Grass Dance. So, the natives sang with him, the whitemen tried but couldn't. They sang the Grass Dance and learned it. This same person that inspired them told them "I am going to end this sinking ship. You are going to be rescued, as soon as the ship gets down here, the ship will sink, but sing again", and they sang. That man that was on that ship is still in Hobbema. They still sing that song.*<sup>15</sup>

Adam Cuthand did not separate historical ("factual") events from mystical one because both were important components of the story. Thus, Cruikshank's and Cavender-Wilson's conception of oral history is operational because the researcher allows for flexibility in attributing the veterans' narrative interviews to the cultural conceptions of oral tradition.

### Different Approaches To Oral History

Scholars who employ the oral historical method agree that the interview is the best method to truly understand the feelings, attitudes and perceptions of the informants. However, researchers differ in their approaches to oral history, and the benefits of their approaches. Some of these views are more conducive to Native Studies methods than others. Patricia Green-Powell, a researcher of Black women in the United States asserts that the "advantage of the interview as a research tool is that it is possible for the researcher to talk directly with his or her subjects and investigate their thinking first hand."<sup>16</sup> According to Nicole St. Onge, who has researched Metis communities in Manitoba, the benefits of interviews is that they "indicate how useful oral history can be as a tool for understanding the evolving social structure of a community."<sup>17</sup> And Diana Fancher adds that the interview process had a positive effect on her informants, elderly residents of a particular neighborhood in Toronto, because it "reinforced their place in society as that which belongs to 'elders'

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15. Saskatchewan Indians Veterans Association. *We Were There* (Saskatoon: Saskatchewan Federation of Saskatchewan Nations, 1989) 37.

16. Patricia Green-Powell, "Methodological Considerations in Field Research," *Oral Narrative Research with Black Women* ed. Kim Marie Vaz (Thousands Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997) 198.

17. Nicole St. Onge, "Saint-Laurent, Manitoba: Oral History of a Metis Community," *Canadian Oral History Association Journal*, 7 (1984): 2.

- keepers of wisdom based on past experience.”<sup>18</sup> Interviews are a prerequisite for almost all research in Native Studies because the interviews brings Native perspectives to the foreground.

While some oral historical methodologies are conducive to Native Studies, others are not. Fancher’s study, for example, raises the issue of the role of the researcher. She states, for example, that “present day social scientists can be the keepers of past experience of everyday life, something that cannot be as effectively reconstituted in any other way.”<sup>19</sup> First, “Do the “keepers of wisdom” need the social scientist to reinforce their place in society?” Second, “Can scholars ethically assume the role of “keepers of past experience?” Many in Native Studies would answer no to both questions because there is an implicit understanding that the academy can not legitimize nor replace the “keepers of wisdom.” The Native Studies researcher should always be mindful of the role they play in the research process. Researchers may come to understand many new ideas from the people they are interviewing. However, this does not mean they automatically become elevated to the same status in the Aboriginal community as the interviewees. The Native Studies researcher’s role is to record and analysis the peoples’ experiences and not to supplant the interviewees’ role in the community.

Approaches to oral history vary considerably. For example, in their discussion of the European approach to life histories, Daniel Bertaux and M. Kohli, made a conscious decision to not be confined to rigid methodological standards because “[g]iven the variation in basic theoretical orientations and substantive issues, the general feeling among researchers is that no standard procedures will be devised in the near future.”<sup>20</sup> Paul Thompson, agrees that there is no one way to interview;

*there are many different styles of interviewing, ranging from the friendly, informal, conversational approach to the more formal, controlled style of questioning, and good interviewers eventually*

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18. Diana Fancher, “Oral History: The Research Reality,” *Canadian Oral History Association Journal* 10 (1990): 8.

19. Fancher 8.

20. Daniel Bertaux and M. Kohli, “The Life Story Approach: A Continental View,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 10 (1984): 218.

*develop a variation of the method which, for them, brings the best results, and suits their personality.*<sup>21</sup>

In contrast, Diane Turner stresses a more rigid approach. She prefers that informants be given standardized questions in order to provide a means to contrast and compare answers.<sup>22</sup> The interview schedule should be carefully phrased in order to encourage more than simple yes/no answers. Answers that are more descriptively narrative are preferred because, according to Turner, the “more descriptive the answer, the more data to interpret and analyze.”<sup>23</sup> In order to ensure meaningful data, Henige discourages allowing informants to dictate what type of data the interview will generate. The oral historian, he asserts, should control the flow of the interview because when the interviewee is allowed “to control the direction of the interview as well as kinds of data he provides by means of apparently aimless reminiscing, the historian concedes that rambling is a virtue.”<sup>24</sup>

However, to follow Turner and Henige’s suggestions would prove problematic within Native Studies research because some Aboriginal informants neither respond well to the standard question and answer interview, nor to the attempt of the interviewer to control the interview. An excerpt of an interview conducted by Murray Dobbin provides an example of how an interview can go wrong with an Aboriginal interviewee when the interviewer tries to control the process. In his 1977 interview with John B. Tootoosis, Dobbin frequently interrupts with leading questions and unsolicited commentary. The frustration in Tootoosis’s voice is noticeable. At one point, after Dobbin interrupted yet again, Tootoosis rebuked him, “Wait a second! I’m not finished!”<sup>25</sup> The challenge for interviewers is to listen and allow the informants to answer questions in a way that truly reflects their experience, even if it does not meet the agenda of the interviewers.

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21. Thompson Paul, *Voices of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978): 165.

22. Diane Turner, “Reconstructing the History of Musicians’ Protective Union Local 274 Through Oral Narrative Method,” *Oral Narrative Research With Black Women*, ed. Kim Marie Vaz (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997) 181.

23. Turner 181.

24. Henige 109.

25. Murray Dobbin, interview with John Tootoosis, Saskatchewan Archives Board, 1977.

In contrast to Turner and Henige, Joseph H. Cash and Herbert T. Hoover were clear that the interviewees should allow interviewees to say what was important to them. The challenge facing the interviewer, according to Cash and Hoover,

*was to avoid becoming too rigid, and thereby unnecessarily restricting the flow of information concerning subjects that might not be of primary interest to him but that could prove vital to someone else. Above all, he was not to "lead" the informant by injecting too much of himself into the finished product. Whether researchers succeeded must ultimately be decided by the researcher.*<sup>26</sup>

When interviewing Aboriginal people, researchers should keep in mind that many may not be accustomed to the barrage of questions typical of formal interview schedule. It becomes incumbent upon the interviewer to be patient and allow the interviewee the latitude to complete their answers; especially if the answers come in the form of a story. Most elders prefer to tell their stories without interruption. In interviewing three Yukon Elders, Cruikshank came to the realization that:

*None of the women appreciated being interrupted, and usually they interpreted any request for clarification as a sign of flagging attention. Once I started using a tape recorder, I discovered that most intrusions were unnecessary because my questions would be clarified when I transcribed the tape.*<sup>27</sup>

This awareness was instructive when conducting interviews with Aboriginal veterans, as many responded in a similar fashion. What is considered "aimless reminiscing" by some researchers is actually a rich source of data and accessing this source should be the aim of researchers in Native Studies as it is culturally appropriate.

Many Aboriginal respondents provide answers that are more like stories. These stories may contain answers to numerous questions. Interview methods which accommodate storytelling as answers, however, take longer than those which are designed more rigidly. Interviewers can either decide to accept the advice of Henige and assume control of the interview or they can be flexible and allow the informant to lead. Though the first suggestion may expedite the interview process, my own research demonstrates that it does not provide the best way to acquire the most information in the least

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26. Joseph H. Cash and Herbert T. Hoover, *To Be An Indian: An Oral History* (St. Paul, Minnesota Historical Board, 1971) xxi-xxii.

27. Cruikshank, *Life Lived Like ...* 19.



obtrusive way. Native Studies methodologies require that the informant be allowed to speak in the manner to which he/she is accustomed, such as a storytelling or conversational style. The less obtrusive the interview, the more the researcher gains information and respect from the informant.

With this in mind, the interview schedule employed for the research on Aboriginal veterans supplied a framework for the kind of information sought. The veterans' responses determined how strictly the interview schedule was followed. For example, for veterans who preferred to provide specific answers to specific questions, the interview schedule was strictly observed. But for those veterans who answered questions by telling a story, the interview schedule was followed less strictly. Many of the veterans, for example, responded to the first question "Why did you enlist?," with stories which came in storytelling form and lasted from twenty to forty-five minutes. These stories contain information to questions I had not formulated but which were, nonetheless, invaluable in understanding the veterans' experiences. This information would have been inaccessible if a more rigid approach had been adopted. The main concern was to ensure that veterans supplied the information in a manner most comfortable to them. At the same time, I had to be aware that the information the veterans offered corresponded with the information I sought. When veterans provided stories as answers I was obliged to follow closely what was being said and monitor how these responses corresponded to the interview schedule. At first this was difficult. There was a temptation to direct the interview or to interrupt veterans. The more interviews I did, the more familiar I became with the interview schedule, which allowed me to follow the interviewee and keep a mental checklist of what questions were being answered. This method of interviewing allowed veterans to choose the way to give information and highlighted the veterans' perception of significant events and details.

### **Example Of Veterans' Interviews**

What follows are excerpts from three interviews I conducted with Saskatchewan Aboriginal veterans. These excerpts not only provide a glimpse of the war experiences of Aboriginal veterans, they also are instructive in that they provide examples of different modes of communication researchers may encounter. In addition, these excerpts illustrate the need for the interviewer to be flexible in asking questions. Although some veterans I interviewed said less than others, they all provided valuable information for my research. If I had ignored the

information provided or had tried to wrestle control of the interview I would have not gained the same understanding of the veterans' experiences.

I went into the interview process with a list of forty-five questions I hoped would be answered. In all the twenty-five interviews I conducted, not once did I ask all forty-five questions. Many veterans did not provide direct answers to my questions but they did provide a series of stories. In some cases, I asked the first question and the veterans spoke at length providing not only depth but breadth of topic which gave me new questions to ask other veterans in subsequent interviews. Some veterans provided short answers and I was left unsure if they had finished answering or if they were thinking of more to say. Some veterans provided a combination of short and long answers. As a result of the different modes of communication, I had to adjust the way in which I conducted the interviews. It is clear that Henige's warning to prospective oral historians to control the interview process is not advantageous to researchers within Native Studies.

#### **Veteran One: Gordon Ahenakew**

**R.I.:** All right we'll start one more time. OK. Why did you enlist in the war?

**Ahenakew:** I guess I'm one of these loyalist cause from a way back far as I can remember we had a Queen. That time it was a Queen. Later it became King George, that is who we fought under. We were taught at a young age to stand at attention whatever you were doing, quit when they bring down the flag in the evenings, and I heard my grandfathers over here at the lake, further down there is a point over there. Do you see it? That is where my dad built a house for us to go to school. So the Queen and King was everything to us. They're were talking these old fellows. They were sitting there smoking their pipe. "Heya heyas," they said "too bad, we heard about the Kaiser in 1918." They said, "Hitler, now this time, Hitler is going to rule the world. Wonder what will happen to us? What will happen to our Treaty? What will happen to everything?" So they said he had to be defeated and being loyalists, or whatever you what to call it, I thought all right I'll join up. This was about, I was about 16, 15. I had that in my mind that I wouldn't allow Hitler to rule the world. So when I was 17 I joined up. That was my picture you saw it. I was 17 then. Full of vim and vigor. So when I was 17, I told my dad, "Dad I want to join the army." He didn't say anything for a while. He sat there. We were sitting at the table. So he

said "Well son, its up to you, you are going to have to decide and everything." But he said "if they will accept you and they will accept" he said, "you are young and smart" he said "you will be accepted" he said "but try and learn something while you're in the army. So it will be useful when you come back" he said. That's all he said. So one of those mornings, I got up early and I walked to Canwood. That's about 8 or 9 miles. Catch the bus and the way I went. Cost me a dollar, I think that time. From Canwood to Prince Albert. Dollar, dollar and half. Then, from there, I went to join up in just a little office. The man said "call back about 6-7 o'clock," he said, I think, "so I can give you a ticket for the train for Regina." So I came back. It was midnight, I think. I left Prince Albert to Regina in the morning. Then I went, April, that was April. So I join up, went to my examination. So I write my written test too. I Passed uh. So I was sworn in allegiance uh. That they would be the bosses from now on, not me. Well I was never a boss anyway that time. So they sent me, they gave me \$30 for my enlistment leave. That was about 2 weeks, 14 days. I came home. And I walked into the house. My mother didn't know uh. When I walked in with my uniform, she cried. I said "that's all right mom, never mind. If I'm going to die within the next 2 or 3 years," I said, "I die either here or when my time comes," I says. "I'll go no matter what." So I went back to Regina. They sent us to 122 which was were the student residence is now there was an army camp [R.I.: In Regina?] no in P.A. So we trained there for a - geez four weeks? Until when D-Day broke out then. I have a hard time to remember. I took my basic training there. And we went to Calgary. Where that trouble is now where that woman was shot, there by the RMCP. We were there uh. So that summer there was, on D-Day, and you may not believe this, but eight thousands were kill uh. When they crossed. That's a sacrifice you know, that the people I don't think know. They don't know so they don't appreciate that uh. The freedom that we live today was paid for by blood and guts. That's what I saw. I saw that. So we went to, from Halifax, no Calgary sent to Turuo, Nova Scotia, holding unit there. Finally there gave orders that we had to pack up all our clothes and be ready to move at a moments notice, they said. So we were. So they yelled out to us when we came in went to the Halifax. We waited there about a day and a half to load the soldiers coming in and bunked up you know. They had to everything in alphabetical order uh. So we left there early in the morning. Some boys were crying, older guys too. When we started

moving, you could see Canada about a mile, 2 miles. We were safe then. But after 3 miles it's the zone where we could be torpedoed uh. So we left. But boy he could go fast, that Isle de France they called that ship. Boy did we go. We would be going towards the sun, he turned, the sun would be behind your back. So we reached the speed of 30 knots. I think that's faster than miles uh. About 35 miles an hour and boy that's how fast you went, you know. Boy that was real fast for me that time. Cause there no stops signs. It took us three days, I think. Three days to get to Liverpool. We went by Ireland "There's Ireland," there they told us. To Liverpool. And that night the tide wouldn't come up. So we had to stay out. And the planes are coming in, you know, German miser schimdt, I don't know spitfires, I don't know what they were. Bombing uh. You can see the search lights they looking uh for the planes. We were sitting ducks there boy. If they came after us we'd ah . . . But we were ready uh. We had boats tied to the sides. Quite big boats too. Anyway uh I got off the ship just before day break. They took us in those little boxcars, small over there. And we got to Aldershot. It's not far from London. Boy that was a big camp. Everybody was there. Whitley, Aldershot, a lot of them in Scotland too. Then they, of course you know that morning they gave us - we couldn't go to bed - they had to show them, in inspection. So we were there about 2 weeks, 3 weeks. I don't remember. I may not be able to tell you the truth. But as I remember it. So they took us to Dover, south close to Southampton that south. They took us over, they told us to be ready. 100% alert is what they called it. So they took us there and we stayed there about 4 or 5 days. That English Channel a rough place uh. Waves you know, and uh. . . So finally they told us to get ready to go. We went. Took trucks, conveys took us to uh Dover. And when we got there we jumped off and went to those boats loaded up 20-25 to a boat. And I looked and I could see boats all the way, long ways you know. I looked at each sides, and oh boy this is serious now eh. So uh, it was running and uh we were sitting there and some of these guys you know were .swearing "C'mon boy, fuck boy." There is a corporal or a Lance corporal in each boat a sergeant or sergeant major in each boat you know. Finally, "OK you guys brace yourselves." Boy that guy took off you know. All two tons on there you know. Not a big boat. And a way we went. But you see the, like there's Paris uh. That's where we were but Holland and Belgium wasn't taken yet. It was just after the break through of the national line, the zegfreed line ya [R.I.: the what?]

national line, the zegfeed line. Boy that was a stupid thing. The National line, those guys, the French, had designed that. And their guns pointed that way. They couldn't turn those. While the Germans maneuver up, down which ever way. So the Germans got up to them they just went past them. Couldn't do anything. They couldn't turn their guns, just rifles uh, motors, bazookas. So when we hit the, you know, that guy told us to brace ourselves, hang on. When he hit the beach, there were planes up. Cause they must have been watching us from Holland or Belgium you know, they had those great big things you know. So you know uh, those planes came down you know. They dropped their bombs and water would fly up you know. And boy that ice that salt water is cold water eh. When it hits you it seems to go right through you clothes. I don't know why that is. I never did figured that out. So he got not far, 20 miles. What is that 23 miles. He said "brace yourselves" and he just hit the beach as far as he could go and then you jump out. That thing opens like this. You've seen it uh? It opens like that and "go on get out get going." Jump in the water whoa boy. There is no such thing as a dock uh. So we ran up the hill and we lay down "Get Down" Cause they scared of machine gun fire. And there was none. So we lay there for a while till I guess, I don't know, I'm just guessing, but they knew there wasn't any firing. So they moved about a mile maybe, I don't know. And then we stayed there the night while we waited for trucks to haul us over to Germany now. We landed in France. France was here, like that and Belgium is here, and Germany is there too. So we went through France, about 4-5 miles I'd say and then we went into Germany. So boy our fire, these morning meetings they called them. They're a deadly thing. Is about, I don't know, 10-12 barrels and they shoot they all come out eh. And when they come "WOOOOWOOOO" that's what they sound a demoralizing thing uh. And boy, you got in your hole uh and dig in right away. And you just pray. And you pray that it doesn't fall in your hole uh. They go off like that uh. He's just laying there. So we went into Germany. There was a big forest. That's were we fought. But it's not bad in the forest uh. Its out in the open that's dangerous even from bombs uh or whatever, artillery, or their motors. And they had good equipment those Germans. Smart people those guys boy, damn right. I always say that they're smart, good fighters. Well I guess it took the world to beat them uh. Just one country. They said the best soldiers were Australians, the best fighters. I don't believe that. I think Germans were. But we can't gave

'em that since he were the enemy, we can not gave it to him. But there were all different kinds of soldiers there. So in this forest we fought bang, bang, bang, you know. So uh that uh see the artillery came down it would hit a tree or a branch it could explode. See that's how come you not in so much danger in the bush. Just a rifle or sniper or machine gun uh. Boy you know, I remember, I don't know if I told you, in there same where I was with a guy I told you from Hudson Bay, O'Rielly his name was. I think he was a Irishman. They were bombing us and there was rifle fire from about here to that machinery over there, I guess. And uh there was me and this young fellow, I know him, I knew him, he died. He was yelling, not far maybe to the fence there, "help me help me" he was kinda crying "help me ahhh, help me." I turned to O'Rielly, "hell I'm going to get that guy." "Don't," he said, "you get killed too." I said "I don't give a shit." I really didn't. I think I remember correctly. So I jump out and I ran over and I grab him here and pulled him to our hole and put him in there. So he said "pray for me." But I'm a product of the residential school. It came in handy. I could. I prayed for him there. And boy he was, even the blood was coming out uh already, through his clothes. He was shoot here through the spine. It didn't hit the spine I don't think. So uh I prayed and O'Rielly was on the other side like this. So he was going fast, he was getting weak. I, we knew that. So he said sing a hymn so I sang Abide with Me ....you've heard that at the November 11th. I sang that. When I was through I looked down, I was really watching him because I knew what would happen if he died eh. There would be a telegram sent over here to notify the parents. That's want I didn't like. So when I looked down his mouth was opened. His eyes were wide open. He was dead. And that guy, you know, had tears in his eyes, so did I you know because a month later the war was over. You know just a kid, you know. These damn bastards that make war, oh shit, boy there crazy. That's because we can't talk to each other reasonably. "My head is made up that way then that's the only way." Which is not true. "My ideas are different from other people that's why I never listen." I try to be a good listener. I will not interrupt when two people are talking. I will not interrupt. You know why? That's because the thing they're talking about, even though I hear them, they're not really important to me but it may be important to them. My grandfather said "don't never interfere son and never walk right in the middle of them. Go around one of them, don't walk in front of them." Patience uh. So when that

guy, the Red Cross came, soldiers Red Cross white helmets, ribbon here and on their backs "Red Cross." they came for that guy. So after they took his tags, took the shovel and buried him in the ground. And I think and I remember my Dad and my mom. I didn't want to be killed uh, cause of the telegram. I think I became a man then that very first two or three hours I was in a little bit you know. I became a man, then I knew that somehow we need each other you know. No matter what race that is. You shouldn't even talk about race. No matter who you are should always, always be kind. Funny how that is. So uh we kept going. The thing that bother me too is uh, the killing I did. I was a machine gunner. Bren gun they called it. I handle that. I was always in front of the line even in the ditch never on the road. You stayed on the ditch and walked uh. But you had to be careful, always looking. Looking too cause you were always in danger of land mines. I was good at that. So I would lead the pack. And we came to that Germany. We got to the Rhine River finally. And I saw two of my cousins there one was Richard Robinson, I don't know if you have ever heard of him that's my own cousin his mother was Ahenakew, he lives in Saskatoon. His brother too I saw there. They were in a tank. So uh, we were clearing the Rhine River so our boys were going to cross uh. I knew I wasn't going to cross. So we cleared them up nice they had those Geiger counters, all over, so support uh. So they wouldn't notice the support. Quite a ways, quite a ways we cleared that out and course we flushed out the Germans at the same time. I remember the time the Jews made that railroad look like this here outside, and that it would move you know. They made that by hand. The train was down there so you couldn't see it. Smart those buggers, you know. Jews did that. Boy there must have been a lot of wheel barrels and spades uh. Dig down and build a railroad. Sometimes they be in there. So we were going down and they shot at us, machine guns, and so I went down steps about that high, but the ground here opened up on us and I crawled in there like this. And they must have saw us you know, cause we were hitting the ground you know and the dust would fall down my neck uh. You had to be cold. Don't jump up because you are dead if you do. Some guys did you know. They'd lose all reason, I don't know. I know a fellow from Indian Head that kinda went crazy. They had to hit him and knock him down, and put him back on the ditch on the road. Cause he went crazy. That's why when you go to war you might be there for 2 weeks then they take you back; back and forth. Some guys - you're

scared and you get nervous you know, your reasoning power won't stay with very long. Especially when dead bodies you know. OK. that Rhine River they were shooting at us eh, he yelled and we went down and went up the other side of the hill there and there was a bush there and there were houses there and that was Germany. And uh so we went, ran. Two or three guys got knock down uh. But you cant' stop you know. "Help me." You don't listen or the sergeant major if you stop to help them could shot you and get away with it cause this is, war is just killing each other eh. So we got to a house there and uh a girl came out. As I said, I was leading the pack. Our officer just got there about day or two days earlier, he's from Whitewood too, I think. Bell, Lieutenant Bell. Where was he from, I forget now. That girl came out. "Chocolates comrades." She said something like that. He looked into his pouch and that girl pulled out a revolver and shot up right in the ... And that guy from Nova Scotia swore, "son of a Bitch, I'll kill you." So she ran up the stairs and he went after her and there was another stairs, back door. He caught her there. He hit her with his rifle butt over here. Knock her down, as she fell down the cement steps. And he cut her open here. It was cold. You could see the steam coming up, you could see it. And she wasn't dead either. But you see those things, your in it for a while, 3-4 months you know, you get to be heartless too uh. Cause if you came by a German lying there been dead for 2-3 days, some of the boys used to kick him. "There's a good German" they said. You know cause you can't kill us. Crazy buggers. So that's what I meant to tell you about that. So we went back. No no. I, we come to a house we're coming in the back there. There was a stairs down and a door when I got there, there was a German there sleeping with his rifle uh, must have been very tired you know. And all those shelling, he was still sleeping. We get used to that anyways. So I went down slowly put my rifle, my machine gun, on his chest here. I said shh and I brought him and I did this. And that guy from Nova Scotia said "Throuyour grenade in there" he said. So I pull it "1,2," threw it through the window. And there were a bunch of Germans sleeping in it, and boy it went. Boy there were yelling, crying and uh so we captured them. So uh we went back from where that MacDonald, his name was MacDonald from Nova Scotia. Rough cookie that guy, big fella too. We went back to clean, clean Germany. That's uh right on the river there uh, Rhine River. That's not far from the forest I was telling you about, Auchweld Forest. From there went towards, what you call,



Amsterdam. But We turned east when we got to Amsterdam. We fought along there quite a bit. We captured Veronican they called it a city. Must be a big place now. I remember we were having fun. Stupid buggers. We captured it uh from the German it was in Holland but they had taken over the liquor board. We captured that. You know big cases like that it was in wood, seems you know, strange you know packed, break those open. Start drinking. We were at a street like that. We were here and Germans were running across street over there and I fired at them. You know I was half cut. By the time I saw them, they were half way. You aim they're gone already. about 3,4,5 of the them in a bunch ....<sup>28</sup>

**Veteran Two: Gabriel Dorian**

**R.I.:** ... I guess first of all I'll just start off with asking some background information - getting some background information. Why did you enlist in the war?

[pause - 5 seconds]

**Dorian:** Why. I think the boys (inaudible) so I joined up too. I didn't want to be left behind.

**R.I.:** When was that? What year was that?

**Dorian:** Oh, '42

**R.I.:** And how old were you?

**Dorian:** Seventy-nine.

**R.I.:** How old were you when you joined?

[ pause 3 seconds]

**Dorian:** Twenty-two, I think.

[pause - 2 seconds]

**R.I.:** Twenty-two.

**Dorian:** Yeah.

**R.I.:** Where did you have to go to enlist?

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28. Gordon Ahenakew, personal interview, Sandy Lake reserve, 5 April, 1998.

**Dorian:** Saskatoon.

[pause - 3 seconds]

**R.I.:** And how did you get down there?

**Dorian:** Well, they sent me a ticket, eh?

[pause - 3 seconds]

**R.I.:** Train ticket?

**Dorian:** Ticket.

[pause - 3 seconds]

**R.I.:** Yeah. So how were you making a living before you joined?

**Dorian:** I was trapping, fishing that's all.

[pause - two seconds]

**R.I.:** How old were you when you started trapping?

**Dorian:** Well, I think I was about fifteen.

**R.I.:** Fifteen?

**Dorian:** Fifteen or sixteen. It quite a long ago,

[pause - 2 seconds]

**R.I.:** What outfit were you in?

**Dorian:** Engineers.

[pause - 5 seconds]

**R.I.:** Engineers?

**Dorian:** Sappers.

[pause - 4 seconds]

**R.I.:** And did you go overseas?

**Dorian:** Yeah.

[pause - 4 seconds]

**R.I.:** When did you leave?

**Dorian:** Oh, you got me there. When I started out from Chiliwack, eh, I went right through Canada.

**R.I.:** Do you remember the ship going over to England? (inaudible).

[pause - 10 seconds]

**Dorian:** (no reply).

**R.I.:** How long were you overseas?

[pause - 3 seconds]

**Dorian:** Two years at least, two years.

[pause - 3 seconds]

**R.I.:** When you came back was there work for you when you came back?  
Jobs?

[pause - 2 seconds]

**Dorian:** I went to Ontario to make my living.

**R.I.:** Oh, you went to Ontario?

[pause - 3 seconds]

**Dorian:** Yeah.

[pause - 4 seconds]

**R.I.:** How long were you in Ontario?

**Dorian:** Oh, quite a while.

[pause - 4 seconds]

**R.I.:** Quite a while?

**Dorian:** Yeah. Lot of camps, eh, big camps over there.

**R.I.:** Logging camps or...?

**Dorian:** Logging camps, yeah. There were no logs here in them days. You had to go out someplace else to make a living. Yeah.<sup>29</sup>

### **Veteran Three: Anonymous veteran**

**R.I.:** OK. The first question I guess I'd like to ask you is what was life like in the community here before you joined up?

**V3:** Well, I was just a kid. You might as well say I was only eighteen years old you know and things were very bad here you know. There was no work for nobody as a matter of fact. This was in 1940. That's when my dad joined the army in 1940. But living was rough around here in the '30s and '40s.

**R.I.:** How did people... What was the main way of making a living?

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29. Gabriel Dorian, personal interview, Cumberland House, 25 august, 1998.

V3: Oh, we used to fish, you'd trap. We mostly lived on rabbits and deer. We used to shoot deer, ducks, you know. We'd grow a big garden and we'd put up fruits and fish you name it, chickens anything just to survive through the winter.

R.I.: Right.

V3: We used to crush chokecherries, dry saskatoons - yeah.

R.I.: So you had to work really hard to survive?

V3: Oh, yeah. We used to do a lot of hunting a lot of fishing. And we used to get odd jobs, eh, with in stores you know going to clean the back up a little bit you know. My mother was a seamstress in Fort Qu'Appelle here. She also used to work at the golf course there and going to work there when they had a tournament - we'd get sandwiches and everything after the tournament you know. And it was really rough in the thirties there in Fort Qu'Appelle here. In 1936 we moved south of the valley across Lebret.

R.I.: To Lebret?

V3: Yeah. We went on the south side here I remember we moved there and my grandfather - his name was "Old Dodgie" - that was his name Dodgie Blondel. He moved us. I remember he went over the bank and we lost a lot of pictures we didn't have much furniture you know - we had nothing, eh. A few blankets, and an old spring bed a couple of them. My grandfather was building a log house up there with a sod roof. That's where we all lived you know for the winter until they built another log house. That's how they all lived up there. There was about - my grandfather Dodgie Blondel - he had a scrip there he had about eighty acres up there and we all lived there.

R.I.: On the eighty acres?

V3: On the eighty acres, yeah. But (inaudible) all stone and gravel and it wasn't much good for growing anything. We did have gardens, though.

R.I.: But not much farming?

V3: No, there was no farming - couldn't farm. But in 1936 we moved up there and then we went to school there. In 1940 my dad joined the army. 'Cause there was no work you know we - my dad, myself, and my twin brother - we all worked there for relief. That's what they used

to call relief, you know. And I think we got twelve dollars a month or something like that.

**R.I.:** What kind of work did you do?

**V3:** Well, we built road, eh, and we had to put so much time on the roads in order to get relief - that's how it was. And most of the people around here were what we called road allowance settlers, eh, they lived all over, you know. Along the CPR just on the south side of Katepwa you know all along there. Well they... That's why they called us road allowance settlers, you know. 'Cause well we had no place to go, eh, and you never had a damn chance with the white man, you know, he wasn't going to give us any land. As a matter of fact he took all the land from us, you know our scrips and everything. Because the old people they didn't know... You know they had no education, eh. Then after (inaudible) it was too late when we did get education, you know.

**R.I.:** Right.

**V3:** Well, anyway, in 1940 my dad joined the army and then my mother used to get I think seventy, seventy-four dollars a month. That was a lot of money in them days you know. We could continue our schooling. Basically, I was deprived of my education, you know. I just taught myself through (inaudible) experience, you know, everything. Then in 19... My dad went overseas in 1940, then we were of age in 1943 and my twin brother and I we went...he joined the army before me then I went after in 1943.

**R.I.:** How old was your dad when he joined up?

**V3:** I think he was about forty.

**R.I.:** He went overseas as well?

**V3:** Yeah.

**R.I.:** He must have been pretty healthy to be able to go overseas at age forty?

**V3:** He was born in 1902 - so you just figure it out. Well, there's a lot of people that... well that was war they took them at fifty years old. My Uncle Bill that was dad's brother he was in the First World War he went overseas. Yeah. A lot of people here George Pelletier, Scotty Pelletier, there was a hell of a slew of Metis people that joined the army here. Then I went over in '44, my twin brother went in the spring of '44. In 1944.

**R.I.:** So there was a lot of people from the community that you enlisted with or...?

**V3:** Oh, yeah, a lot of young guys here. Some got in some didn't, you know out of the whole thing. Yeah, when I got overseas I had to get ah like my cousin there Lawrence Fisher he was stationed in Aldershot with us with me and he had to go see his dad in Borden, England and that's where my dad was. He looked after the laundry there with the quacks I told him (ha ha) or the ATS. So I went to see my dad 'cause we were going across the next night, eh, across the into action across the pond. So he got permission, Lawrence got permission and I went to say good-bye to my dad. Then the next day we went across Lawrence got his leg blown off. He was in action in about two minutes of hitting the beach. Yeah. But I was (inaudible). I got a few hits but nothing to talk about, you know.

**R.I.:** What are some of the things you remember about Europe and Europeans - the people there and the place?

**V3:** I found the Europeans - well, what I should say when I got there I thought I was ah it was the end of the world. Because I was never out of Le Bret, eh? You know, to go to Regina was, ah . . . they thought you were a millionaire. "Oh that guy's rich, he went to Regina," you know. Basically, that's how we used to think down there, you know, in the early forties. Yeah, well when I got to Aldershot or ah what the hell's the name of that, ah, Liverpool - I landed in Liverpool and you couldn't see nothing for fog, you know. We had all our packs and guns and then we got. . . I seen these double-deckers and got on them and I was hanging on like this you know. I was scared the damn thing was going to roll over (ha ha). Then we got to Aldershot from there they gave us each what they call a pallyass. A bag, you know. We went to this place and we filled it up with straw. That was our mattress you know. Then up there were little wee bunks, I think they were built in the 1700s you know. Little wooden ones, short ones, they must have been short over there. I'm short myself but not that short. Then it rain all the time. Then there was a lot of hard training for us. Then I went on leave. Went to Scotland for a while. Then I come back to Canada. I arrived here in August 17th, 1945 I was on my way to the far east you know, Japan. But just when I was coming off the train they dropped the atomic bomb. That was over. I didn't have to go over. But when I got out of the Canadian Army I had what they called a P5.

R.I.: What's that?

V3: Physically unfit. That's what they call your (inaudible) like you know. So I went to DVA and hell I couldn't get nothing out of them you know. P5 is you're physically unfit you know. I was drawn right out you know. Tired. I used to go to DVA they wouldn't give me nothing. So I remember, I went. We used to get what they call out of work benefits. Twenty five dollars every two weeks. That's what we got after fighting the war - twenty five dollars every two weeks. And that's true, as sure as I'm sitting here. One time I didn't get nothing. So I had to go back to Regina to DVA and go and pound the hell out of them it. Didn't do any good though..

R.I.: What are they saying? Why aren't they giving you anything?

V3: Well, that's the way they were.

R.I.: What did they say to you?

V3: You know, you just don't qualify. But then I got a Social Worker I forget his name and I told him what to say and everything. He wrote it down and I rehearsed it and I went in there. I remember I got back pay \$485.00. Then I built another house.

R.I.: Oh, is that right?

V3: I built a lodge then. Built out of ties you know, more modern, and a wood floor, and a wood roof, a brand new stove, and I raised two kids there. Then I had to get on with my life so I moved into town and you used to get odd jobs you couldn't get a damn job you know, we were not qualified for nothing. How to soldier that's all.

R.I.: Right?

V3: Then we worked on farms, we worked down at the beaches, you know, for a dollar an hour, ninety cents. And the Indian hospital here we worked like slaves for ninety cents an hours.

R.I.: What did you have to do there?

V3: They built that new hospital - that old hospital it's sixty years old - no it wouldn't be just it was built sixty years but there's a new part they built on it an extension. And that's where I worked. We didn't work too long maybe three or four months but it was work you know. We had to make a living. And then I was trying to get a pension then and I couldn't. But anyway ....

**R.I.:** Why is that?

**V3:** They just wouldn't that's the way they were. The Native people they wouldn't give them nothing. Like I went to try and get a farm I wanted to try to start a chicken ranch, yeah. "No you don't qualify." They wouldn't give me nothing. Just the same with the Status Indians they wouldn't give them nothing. Like I think they had what they call an agent you know and they would get this out of work benefits gratuities. They keep it there the guys wouldn't get nothing. Like they put in for that you know quarter section of land there I think there were a lot of ah forty-eight hundred dollars back then that was a lot of money you know after the war. You could buy a lot of land with that. But what they did they give them their own land back for that forty-eight hundred dollars. That's exactly how it worked, you know. But this goes on until one day in 1951 - we still didn't have a good job you know so this is in October 1951 - Armand Pelletier and myself went to Regina going to look for a job. That was when the Korean conflict was on, eh. God, I said we just can't get a job, I said, we go somewhere "oh get out of here you're not qualified for nothing," you know. Couldn't get a job. No, we were willing to work but they wouldn't give us a damn job. I said "there's only one solution." "What's that?" "Join the army." "Oh, we'll never get in you've got a P5 and I've got a P3" - you know we were hurt. "Well, let's go and try anyway." As soon as we say that we're veterans you know Second World War next day we were in sworn in.

**R.I.:** Oh, is that right?

**V3:** They gave us a seven day pass and I think it was twenty-five bucks or something. We come home never told our wives right away you know - we lived in Lebreton. I dropped my pass and the wife started crying. You didn't." "Well," I said, "I've got to make a living." Yeah, then I started training I went as a paratrooper. Yeah, started training as a paratrooper. Then I was going to go over to Korea and I made a jump and that's how I got steel in my knees here. I got what they call a streamer. Then I pull my reserve, eh, hit my damn nose, on the side here. Then I landed and I you know just instinct just how I come down you know but I hit a rock and you know with my elbow, me knee, my ribs. I was hurt... I was in the hospital quite a while but I went back jumping again.

**R.I.:** Is that right, eh?



V3: Oh, sure. But then we went through medical ready for Korea. No, you can't, you can't your legs are no good, he said. And there's the Prince there that guy ah....

R.I.: Right, Tommy Prince?

V3: Tommy Prince, yeah, he was in Second Battalion PCLI. I was in Second Battalion PCLI.

R.I.: Oh, you were in the same one with him?

V3: Yeah. He was a wild bugger.

R.I.: Was he?

V3: Oh, yeah.

R.I.: What did you think of him?

V3: Oh, he was ah... he had too much, ah he had too much, ah you know, Second World War really hit him, you know and then he was in this Korean war. Then he wanted to go back. He went back with the Third Battalion, you know. What they should have done when he come back from Korea was drop him and give him a damn good home, and left him alone. It should never been, let him go as far as he did, you know. It's unbelievable. But he was a great soldier. Brave man. He had no fear. You know, there's not very many people like that.<sup>30</sup>

The mode of communication of these three veterans dictated the style of the interview. The more the veteran spoke the less questions I asked. The assumption I worked with was, that whatever the veterans had to say was important, even if it did not directly relate to my research interests. Veterans such as Gordon Ahenakew and the Anonymous veteran who spoke a great deal required me to ask less questions. This did not necessarily make these interviews easier. It became incumbent upon me to ascertain whether they answered all the questions I wanted answered. If not, I had determine if the answer to a specific question warranted either interrupting a story that may have been providing equally pertinent information or changing the direction of the interview. In an interview with a veteran, such as Gabriel Dorion, who did not talk as much as other veterans, it became important that I listened to what exactly he had to say as there was a tendency on my part to think about how I could get him to say more. Dorion, for example, does

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30. An anonymous veteran, personal interview, Fort Qu'Appelle, 17 December, 1998.

say that after the war he went to Ontario to work as there was no work in his home community. A recurring theme in the interviews with Aboriginal veterans I conducted was that many left their communities after they returned from the war in search for employment or adventure. The information Dorion provided conforms to what other veterans had to say about their immediate post-war experiences. By modifying the questioning style to match the veterans' communication style I was able to gain new insights to the post-war experiences of Saskatchewan Aboriginal veterans.

## **Conclusion**

The use of oral historical methodologies greatly enhances the possibility that Aboriginal perspectives will be brought to the fore. Oral history also allows actors who had active roles in historical events to participate actively in the creation of history. Combined with traditional historical methodologies a broader understanding can be gained of historical events hitherto relegated to obscurity. Oral historians' persuasive arguments for the legitimacy of the oral historical methodology within the academy strengthens not only Aboriginal history but also disciplines, such as Native Studies, which employ oral history. However, the oral historical methodology is not always conducive to research conducted in Native Studies. The Native Studies researcher must be attuned to the mode of communication of the interviewees. By allowing the interviewee to dictate the style of the interview, the researcher will increase the possibility of gaining new insights into Aboriginal people and their experiences, which should be one of the objectives of Native Studies.