



Antoinette Cavanaugh

Great Basin Indian Archive

GBIA 055



Oral History Interview by

**Norm Cavanaugh
June 14, 2016
Owyhee, NV**



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AC: Hi. My name is Antoinette Cavanaugh. My maiden name was Antoinette Harney, and this is Duck Valley. Owyhee is the town where I was born and raised for majority of my childhood. The Owyhee Hospital is the place where I was born, and that's—we're sitting in front of the hospital here. I was born in 1960. Seems like a long time ago. But, have a lot of fond memories here. My mother, Adrianna Harney, was born here as well, and my grandfather's name is Bert Harney and Lucille Osborne Pryor. The Owyhee Hospital, I have no idea what year it was built, but this is where I was born. And my mom actually worked here as a nurse. I have several aunts and an uncle that worked in this hospital in my childhood. And I just remember that this was the go-to place for a lot of things, for people in the community. And a lot of people worked here from the community, and it was run by the Indian Health Service until the Tribe decided to compact services, healthcare services, for the members of the Tribe. As you can see, it's all boarded up now. It doesn't have any use; no one uses this building. I'm not sure if there are any planned services or uses for it in the future. But it is an icon of Duck Valley. It sits here on the hill overlooking the valley. The new hospital was built, I believe, in the 1970s. It opened in the 1970s, and it now provides—it is run by the Shoshone-Paiute Tribes, and it provides outpatient services for the members of the community, and EMT services for the community, and I believe they have a dentist. They provide dental services, medical services, and social—I guess it would be *psychological* services for the community. So, I was born here in 1960. I lived on the reservation here until I was about in third grade. It was after my third grade year that I moved away. My mother divorced, and my younger sister and I moved with my mother off of the reservation. We lived in Elko for a while,

and we moved to a lot of different places in Northeastern Nevada. She married a ranch hand, and as a result we moved to a lot of different ranches as time went on. I returned to Owyhee my freshman year in high school, in 1974. And I think that was the longest period of time that I stayed in one place. And we'll talk about that a little bit later. But Owyhee has always been my home. My children were raised here in their earlier years. And I lived here with my husband, Norman Cavanaugh, until 1997—or, 1993, I'm sorry, when we moved to Spring Creek. So, Owyhee has been, it's where my family is from. A lot of my family relations still live here. I have a lot of fond memories of running this valley. There are a lot of places to run on the dirt roads, and it has always been a pastime of mine to engage in physical fitness activities. So, we'll talk a little bit later about my education. I did graduate from Owyhee High School in 1978, and we'll talk about that later.

[Break in recording]

So, this is the famous Dog Street of Duck Valley. This is where a lot of older people lived, and it has been known as one of the poorest places on the reservation. But, now they have some new homes here. They've taken down a lot of the older homes. Some of the old *hepittsos* lived here, like Noonie, Kitty Wells—oh, man! They were some tough ladies to live around. They were very—they were always busy working. And us kids, my cousins lived across the way, and we always got together and played, and had fun. And look: we have a resident dog right here in the middle of the street. The dogs here in dog street rule the roost. So, the reason it was called Dog Street is because a long time ago, people would come to this water spigot. There was a public watering hole here—I don't know if it was a *public* watering hole, but it was the only community water source that

was not attached to a house or a residence. Check out this hail. This is typical May weather for Duck Valley. Never know if it's going to rain, snow, hail. But, people would come to fill up their milk containers, those metal milk containers, and they would drop off their puppies if they had extra puppies that they didn't want to keep. And other people that would come by to fill up their water containers would pick up puppies. So, that's why it was called Dog Street. So, this is Dog Street. Check 'em out. I don't know whose dogs these are, they're not mine, but that's Dog Street. They still are here. Anyway, this is the house I was raised in until shortly before we left the reservation. As I said, this road here wasn't paved. It was a dirt road. And over to my far left was where *Tuukaa'* lived. And he was a—he was in a wheelchair. But he was always doing things like leatherwork and rawhide work. He was always very industrious and creative. And next to him in *this* house, which is a little different than when I lived here, was Lucy and Leon Harney, who were my relations. And then, coming back to my house, if you look at the structure of it, it almost looks like a tent. And that's because it actually was a tent—not when I lived in it, but before I lived here, they had a tent top. The sides were made of lumber. Initially, there was a dirt floor, and then later on they put in some plank flooring, and then they covered it with tar paper. And this is actually a poignant part in my life, because I was nine years old, and there's a little corner over here that you can—I don't know if you can see it from the camera, but it was a cold winter's day and I was sent outside to play, and I was facing the sun. And I was letting it warm my body, and I was thinking, "I never, ever want to live this way." Where there was no electricity, we had no running water. We had a kerosene lantern, that's what we could see by. And then later on, after we lived here for a while, they did bring in the electricity, and then we had a lightbulb that hung from a

wire, and in each compartment of this house there was a kitchen area, an eating area, and then in the back was where the bedroom was. And then, eventually, with my mom working, we had a TV, and that was really something. It was unreal. And that was right before we moved away. But I want to take you over this way a bit. Right here was where Kitty Wells lived—or, that's what we called her. I'm not sure what her real name was. But, she—it was in front of her house, in front of her gate, that was the community water spigot. And that's where we would get our drinking water. We had no plumbing in the house. And then, next to her, next to Kitty Wells's house, this little tar paper shack here. You'll see the other tar paper shack there. And that was probably the biggest house on Dog Street at the time, on this side of the street. And that was where **Lighty Peakanum** lived. And Ralph Cavanaugh. And **Merla** Cavanaugh. And Norm Cavanaugh lived there as well, who actually is now my husband! But I didn't know who he was. It was before, you know, I played with boys. Got to know him later on, and eventually married him. But my cousins lived across the street where all these trees are. And that was where my Aunt Clara Jones lived, and Uncle Leslie. And they had a lot of kids. And I can't remember everybody else. There was Noonie, who lived down at the very end of the street. She was always nice, and would make baked goods for us. Always invite us in for pies and stuff. And my first cousin Nuffie, or Jeannette Jones, and I used to play with mud pies and do all kinds of fun things out here on Dog Street. So, a lot of good memories of playing with my cousins, and my younger brothers, my two younger brothers—of course, they were infants, young children and my older brother. So, while we were living in poverty—I mean, you don't know that when you're a child until you start to realize that things are tough, and sometimes you don't have all the things that you could probably use. We had

a library that we used to use that was over on the main street that the Tribe had, and I remember that Beverly Crum ran the library, and I used to go. And she would say, “Yeah, take some books!” And I’d bring those home and read them by the light of the kerosene lamp. So, that’s my life here on Dog Street. There was one place I lived when I was an infant, and that was out at **Carl** Dick’s place out the valley. There was a cabin behind their main house, and we lived there for a short time before we moved here to Dog Street. And I was probably about, I’d say about three and a half. That’s my earliest recollection of living here. And I lived here until I was about—well, like I said, right before we left and lived in **Labor Camp** for a short period of time.

[Break in recording]

This is Owyhee High School, located on the Duck Valley Indian Reservation in Owyhee, Nevada. It is a public school. I attended school here in 1974 and graduated in 1978. I’d have to say that it was here at the school where I grew the most as an individual. In fact, I remember standing in this very spot my senior year taking pictures with my classmates, and also the student government organization. I ran track, was involved in the Future Business Leaders of America. The Future Homemakers of America, or also known as FCCLA today. Those organizations helped develop me as an individual, and allowed me many opportunities to engage in public speaking, organizing activities and events, and most of all, allowed me to develop as a runner. If I could give anyone any advice about school, and high school, or even junior high, I would say: get involved in your school. *Make* it yours; it *is* your school. So, take advantage of the opportunities that are available to you. And also, take advantage of your classes to learn all that you can learn. And challenge your teachers to teach you the most that they can. Because it’s free. It was here

that I was able to make some decisions about what I wanted to be when I grew up. And I had ideas that I wanted to become a legal secretary, so I took all of these business classes, traveled all over the nation to different state and national conferences, and participated at the national level. I became the State Officer for Nevada for Future Business Leaders of America, and had a lot of opportunities afforded me because I was active and involved. Keep in mind that it was during this time that I was also raising and taking care of my two younger brothers and sister. I also worked at a little business across the street. So, I had a full schedule. I also attended school in the building that is located across the street. I attended fourth grade there right before we left Duck Valley. Between my third grade year and my fourth grade year, I went to summer school. And through summer school, if we attended there, we had to go to school every day. And if we did attend school every day, we got to go on a summer trip. And it was usually about five days long. I remember one of the trips we took, we got to go to Yellowstone. Got to go fishing. Another trip, we went to Canada—Victoria, Canada. It was amazing. Especially for someone who had rarely ventured off of the reservation. So, I worked at the Arrowhead—used to be called the Arrowhead Across the Way, that old building. I worked there as a—I mean, everything: as a cashier, I flipped hamburgers, and made fries, and worked for Gwen Thacker, who was the owner at the time, Gwen and Bill Thacker, made ice cream—homemade ice cream—in that little shop. And it helped me pay the bills to raise our little family.

[Break in recording]

My great-grandfather's name was Race Harney. My grandfather's father, who lived in **Brook** Valley at the time that the reservation here was being established. And he used to

run messages from Ruby Valley to Lee, where other Shoshone people lived, by way of the mountains. And then, later on, he used to run the mail from Elko all the way here to Duck Valley, and on into Riddle, Idaho. I grew up with all of those stories. And I guess that's why I always had a passion for running. And so, I started running when I was about in sixth grade. And I used to have these awful, awful asthma attacks, and I think it was brought on by the running. My grandfather used to tell me, "Well, keep running! Don't quit! You can do whatever you want if you keep on running. You'll be able to do it, achieve any goal." We didn't have organized sports in 1974. We had what was called the Girls' Athletic Association. And the girls couldn't even earn letters until that first year in 1974. I just turned 56, and I ran a marathon, my fastest marathon in my older years. Almost qualified for the Boston, so I guess my new goal for this year is to try to qualify for the Boston Marathon. So, running has helped me to be strong mentally, spiritually, and physically. So, if you have the capacity to do it: run.

[Break in recording]

After graduating from college in 1983, I taught at Owyhee Combined Schools from 1983 until 1993, a period of almost ten years. And in the spring of 1993, I had a challenge to live up to, and that was to look for a job off of the reservation. I applied to Spring Creek High School. At that time, it was called Spring Creek Junior/Senior High School. And it was a school that was going to be conformed as a growing high school. So it started at seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth, and then with each consecutive year, an additional grade had been added to comprise a junior/senior high school. This was my first experience, aside from my teaching internship, to teach at a high school of this magnitude. Spring Creek was a brand new school. We planned it, we designed it, and we developed our

teacher teams to be the first school that featured technology and computers in every classroom, where attendance was going to be taken by computers, and it was on a token ring network, so that information could be shared throughout the school. This school boasted—at the time that was a full junior/senior high, it boasted over seven hundred students, and we were running double sessions. I learned so much at this school about curriculum development, developing schedules, and I owe a great amount of gratitude and honor to Joe DeBraga, who saw to it that I should be hired as a vice-principal here; to the administration at Elko County School District central office, who gave me the opportunity to move from Owyhee into this position here. I was the principal of vice, was in charge of all of the discipline, I was in charge of helping to develop curriculum, and I also did things along the lines of school improvement and accreditation. This job was intense. And I was no longer in my comfort zone; it was the first job I had that was off of the reservation. And I had to learn new families, I had to learn new contacts, and I'm forever grateful for having had the opportunity to work in this environment.

[Break in recording]

We knew that there was a middle school that was going to be on the horizon, where the middle school would break away from the high school and become its own school. I also knew that if I wanted to work in that middle school, and work with students that I really enjoyed working with—because middle school kids are kind of their own little character. They're not quite adults yet, they haven't transitioned into that adolescent phase, they're still little kids; they're kind of in mid-stream. So, I knew there were people that had the skills and the training to do that job probably better than I did. So, I decided after working at Spring Creek High School for about two and a half years that it was time to go

back to school and work on my PhD. And to work in the middle school setting. So, I went back to school at University of Nevada, Reno, where I had gotten my master's degree. And it was here at Spring Creek Middle School that I had the first opportunity to really spend time learning about the infrastructure of schools; learning how to read blueprints; designing, again, curriculum and schedules. But there was one piece that for me was an amazing opportunity. You see, middle schools and junior high schools are structured differently. And all of Elko County School District junior highs were junior highs. They were miniature high schools. And middle schools are designed to give kids more opportunities to explore things that they're interested in. So, while working on my PhD, I was given an opportunity to work as an intern at Swope Middle School. Swope was one of those middle schools in Reno that featured a true concept of middle school programs, where teachers were podded, teachers worked together to align their curriculum so kids were learning concepts across curriculums. It was an opportunity for me to really make a difference in how kids learned and *what* they learned. So, here at Spring Creek Middle School, I needed to make sure—if I wanted to be the principal of Spring Creek Middle School, I needed to go get more education. The master's level wasn't enough. And sure enough, the school board of trustees decided they were going to try and make this a middle school. And I got hired for the job. It was at this school where I think my children, after moving to Spring Creek from Owyhee, had a lot of opportunities. Trust me: when we first moved off of the reservation, our oldest daughter was *not* happy. We were taking her out of her comfort zone, she was moving away from all of her friends. She had to go to Spring Creek High School, and she was going to have to make new friends. But given that they had a challenge, it was also an opportunity for

them to grow. And I am really very thankful that I've had opportunities here to learn, and structure schools that were just a little bit different than what had already been in place in the school district. Rarely does an educational professional have an opportunity to start schools from the ground up, and build them, and establish a culture of excellence, and establish a *tradition* of excellence. And I believe that's what has happened here.

Moreover, little did I know that all of the things that I learned about school construction, building schedules, working with curriculum, design from the ground up, working with teacher teams, and working with technology as a foundation for delivery of student instruction; little did I know that all of that was going to lead to bigger and better things.

All my children, except—*all* my children: Joe, Casey, Dustin, and Tanner went to school at the Spring Creek schools. They took those opportunities to be involved in schools and do a lot of different things. Of course, I don't know that they had a choice to *not* do anything. [Laughter] But they were all very active in soccer, they played basketball, they played volleyball, and they were involved in all of the different high school activities and junior high school activities that were available. Many, many opportunities are out there.

And like I said earlier, if you have an opportunity to be involved, take those opportunities to at least learn something and develop your skills. We're going to take a walk up over the hill to Elko. Spring Creek is over the Elko Summit. From Elko, it's about fifteen to twenty miles from Elko. When we moved off of the reservation in 1993, we really knew nothing about purchasing property; we didn't know anything about building equity in a home; we didn't know how all of that worked. Because on the reservation, it doesn't work that way. And so, for my husband Norm Cavanaugh and I, we had a lot of learning to do to make that transition from the reservation to living *off* of the reservation, and

learning all about those things. So, moving our children away from the reservation had its challenges, and it has also had the rewards.

[Break in recording]

At the beginning of 2001, a job opportunity came open for me to apply for a job at central office. And it was going to be a pretty rigorous job that required someone with a lot of skills that are important to ensuring that children have appropriate education. So I'm going to go back a little bit: when I went to college for my PhD studies, I was hired as a research grad assistant. And a lot of times, higher education will offer grad assistantships to those individuals that they want to have work in their department. And the gentleman that, the professor that I was hired to work with, was a special services law professor. So, I had the opportunity to research special education law cases at the judicial college. Now, understand: I had no desire to study law. I had no desire to spend a lot of time learning about law. But I needed the money to pay the bills while I was at school. So, I worked for Dr. Dan Klein, who was an expert in special education law. And I spent *hours*—and this is before WestEd was open on computers for all students. So I actually had to go in the old way to find these cases that had come up, do the research on those cases, read the case law, and write case briefs for my professor. When the job opened at Elko County for the special education director, I had no idea how much all of that information and research was going to come in handy. It has served me well. All of the research I did, all of the classes I took, everything—all of the conversations we had about case law regarding special education—came into play. I was hired as a Special Services Director for Elko County School District in 2001, and performed that responsibility for two years. One year of that overlapped while I was doing the job of the superintendent. So, I did the

special education federal programs director for one year by myself. That included Indian education; Title III, which is English as a Second Language; it included Title I, At-Risk Schools; and that's just about the time that No Child Left Behind legislation came to fruition in the early—the turn of the century. So, a lot of change was happening in the school district, and I was expected to be the go-to person on quality schools, and facilitating change of instruction to ensure that children received appropriate instructional services. During that time, we did some construction again on developing an educational resource for children who are highly impacted with handicapping conditions over at Elko High School. That was the first time I had ever done that. And I learned a lot from that project, as well. So, this was the central office. There's the window to my office. And that office was the superintendent's office, and I became the superintendent. I was hired as the Superintendent of Schools in 2002. So, I was the Special Services Director in 2001 through 2003, and then we did some rearrangement the first year that I was the superintendent, and I split those special service responsibilities away from me in 2003. We hired a special services director who was specifically responsible for special education. And then we put all of the other federal programs into either elementary education and secondary education, where the directors in those schools could do the job. I worked as the superintendent of Elko County School District for almost eight years. I think I was shy one month of hitting the eight-year mark. I retired from the school district in January of 2010. We were the first school district in the state of Nevada to have Smartboards in every classroom. Where students could do online instruction as well, we provided distance education to students from Elko High School and Spring Creek High School, out to Carlin, Owyhee, Wendover, and Jackpot. I think we were one of the first

schools to offer that for high school credit. And the purpose of that was, we wanted to make sure that kids in the outlying rural areas had equal opportunity. This school district is the fifth-largest school district in the contiguous United States. It spans 17,172 square miles. There are seven different communities supported or served by the Elko County School District, and there are a number of rural, one-room schoolhouses, where kids who live on ranches and in very rural areas receive instruction. I think it is one of the most diverse school districts in the nation, spanning almost the whole northeastern quarter of Nevada. It has been my pleasure to be the first Native American in the history of Nevada to be a superintendent. And I wear that banner proudly, and I realize that in that role, it's my responsibility to make sure that I set a good example, and pay honor to many educators who really spend a lot of quality time with kids, and make sure that kids have an opportunity to learn. The superintendent job is not an easy one. There are many, many issues that come up, and it's really important that in order to be true to the children that you serve, that you consider how things are going to affect students, how those programs are going to promote students to higher levels of success. And success isn't always how well they're going to perform on a test. Has everything to do with whether or not you're giving opportunities for those students to develop their character, their knowledge base, their experiential base, and learning how to take care of each other as well. There were so many challenges in this job, and some of them were personal because I had to grow, and that was frightening; some of it was learning how to work diplomatically with unions, work diplomatically with people in the public; making sure that the public understood that we were stewards for taxpayer dollars—*good* stewards for taxpayer dollars—and that we were making gains in developing schools that met the needs of kids. During the years

that I served as a superintendent of schools, we built Adobe Middle School, we completed the construction of Spring Creek Elementary School. Adobe Middle School is a twenty-one million dollar project. And that, all of the knowledge I gained from working out at Spring Creek, and working with the construction crews, and our building and sites people, all of that served me well in laying out the Adobe Middle School, planning that out. And also, redesigning the Flag View Intermediate School which was going to be serving fifth and sixth grade students. We also had an earthquake that caused some problems for us in Wells, and we had to look at scheduling and how we were going to get those students through the year so that they could finish out the school year, and allow us to go in and repair the damage that was done to a historic school. The earthquake there did a lot of damage to the infrastructure of buildings throughout the town of Wells. And we were fortunate enough to be able to get the work done quickly, so that our kids could be back in school and resume their education. So, a superintendent position has everything to do with *everything*. It's all-encompassing. I mean, from school lunches, to bus drivers, to the weather—getting kids to and from school safely, making sure that buildings are constructed safely, that repairs are done. You have to either know it all—which is impossible—or you have to surround yourself with people who have the capacity to make good judgment, and have sound knowledge upon which you move forward in making good decisions. So, it's been my honor to serve as a superintendent of Elko County School District.

[Break in recording]

So, when someone retires, that doesn't necessarily mean that you stop working. After a year of retirement, where I got to do my beading, my running, my sewing, I was offered a

job to do some work for grantwriting, and then my dream job came along. And it came by way of a phonecall from Barrick of North America. In 2013, Tim Buchanan called me, and he asked me if I would be interested in working as a consultant for Barrick to mentor, encourage, and help Native American students—Western Shoshone students in particular—prepare for and pursue post-high school education. That was my dream job. In fact, when I was a junior in high school, I remember thinking—when there was a loss of one of my classmates due to a car accident—I began to think, “We really do need to make a difference and go forward with our education, so that we can be competitive, and live better lives.” And that kind of fed into my earlier years of thinking I needed to change my life. So all of a sudden, here’s my dream job to help Native American students. And for the last three years, it’s been my privilege to visit schools in Owyhee, Duckwater, Elko, Ely, Wells, Yomba, Battle Mountain, and Elko, just to help the kids look at their GPAs, understand how grades work, develop strategies on how to improve their performance academically, how to get involved in activities in schools, take them to colleges and visit Boise State, University of Utah, Great Basin College. It’s been a phenomenal opportunity. And we are now starting to see a higher number of students go to college and graduate. One of the individuals I have the opportunity to work with, Bryan Mason, said to me—when I first interviewed with them and told them that I might be interested in doing this work, he said, “This is a job that you’ve been training for for the past thirty years.” And you know what? He was right. I love what I do; I don’t even see it as a job. It’s a very rewarding opportunity to see our Native American students move forward with their lives, and have the capacity to engage in a life that they’re interested in by completing their studies at the college level. It’s been phenomenal. So, if

I have one word to tell you, or one phrase to tell you, I would say this: when you have the opportunity to learn something new, you can either approach it by being fearful of it and feeding that fear, or you can move forward and see it as an adventure. I challenge you to take new opportunities and move forward with them, and challenge yourself, and take the opportunity to feed the adventure, rather than the fear.

[End of recording]