

Smithsonian Folklife Festival Interview
Marvin Pooyouma
Equipment operator/ textile weaver
Kaibab & Coconino National Forests

July 2004
Interviewer – Cathie Schmidlin

Cathie Schmidlin (CS): Okay. Go ahead and give me your name and what you do with the Forest Service.

Marvin Pooyouma (MP): My name is Marvin Pooyouma, and I work for the Coconino-Kaibab National Forests on the road crew that the Forest Service has. I'm the equipment operator on the crew.

CS: Okay. Marvin, could you also give me a little bit of your background?

MP: I'm a member of the Hopi tribe, Hopi-Navajo tribe. I was raised down in Tucson and I always wanted to participate in the Hopi ceremonies on the reservation. In my time going to and from Tucson to the Hopi reservation I always went through Flagstaff and always wished that I could get a job at Flagstaff. And things worked out and I did eventually find a job with the Forest Service here in Flagstaff. I started out as a hot shot member on the Coconino hot shots.

CS: Which is a fire crew, right?

MP: That was the first hot shot twenty-man fire crew that they started up that year, in '72, and it was half Anglo and half Hopi, and we made up a team of hot shots, and we were pretty good. We did a lot of fire fighting in the years that we [initiated] that crew. And from then on I went to the engine crew and I was a member of the model 70 engine crew, and I worked for them for about five years, and then I became a [dodge] operator for the fire fighters and I operated the [dodge?] fires; and from then on I became an equipment operator on the road crew, and that's where I'm presently employed.

CS: Okay Marvin. Can you tell me a little bit about the skills or traditions that you learned as a member of the Hopi tribe that you brought in with you when you began your Forest Service career back twenty years ago, and currently?

MP: Before I joined the Forest Service I didn't know anything about the Hopi traditions or anything like that, until I became a member of the Hot Shot crew that I started my traditional weaving hobbies; because in the winter time—when we got laid off in the winter time—my grandfather was out there, and I just happened to hit him one day, and I asked him if I could learn how to weave. And he just kind of stood back and said, you

want to what? I said, I want to learn how to weave. And so I asked him that and that was the end of it until about two weeks later he showed up again, and he asked me again, were you really serious about learning how to weave? And I said yes, and in the meantime he had gotten all the yarns ready. He had spun the yarn [tider?] for my weaving projects. And he asked me again when he showed up two weeks later, he said, well, do you really want to learn how to weave. I said, yeah. Have you done anything in preparation for this? I said no, I haven't. And in the meantime he had gotten all this stuff prepared. And he brought everything with him that day. Do you want to learn? I said, yes I do. And because I didn't have a job in the winter time, I had that free time, I was able to pick up the weaving that he was to show me how. I picked up the weaving, and from then on I kind of had my grandfather help me, and he kind of showed me what to do, and what colors and traditional garments that were used in the Cochina dances and things like that, which I didn't know before I started with the Forest Service. And it was a blessing in disguise working for the Forest Service, because like I said I got laid off in the winter time. That put more time for the ceremonial things that were involved in the Cochina dances. Because that's when most of the Cochina dances were, in the winter time we had all our Cochina dances, so I was able to participate in all the ceremonies out there without having to think about a job. So I spent a lot of time learning that first winter. That first winter I learned a lot [emphasis] on the Hopi reservation about my culture and ceremonial things that go on in [Akiba?] and my clans that I didn't know how the clans are showed, and which clans were related to what clan. I'm still confused about that, but I'm still learning. It's a learning process every day. But I am learning the Hopi language and cultures and things like that.

CS: What clans do you belong to?

MP: I belong to the Corn Clan.

CS: And can you tell me, Marvin, was there a kind of a natural connection between being a member of the Hopi tribe and the Forest Service, because the Hopis consider land as sacred and respect it, and have always expressed that belief; and the Forest Service is a public land management agency that's here to take care of the land, so in essence the both have been caretakers. Did you grow up knowing that connection or do you see that connection now?

MP: I didn't at first. I didn't know that until I actually went to reservation and learned all that; and then I got a job with the Forest Service and I was able to kind of look at a tree and-- we use Doug fir in our ceremonial dances—and so I was able to look at the trees in a different way than before. I was always kind of hesitant about killing a tree or cutting a tree down. So I had to think twice about what tree to cut, and always saying to myself mentally, I'm sorry to cut your life short but I'm doing this for a purpose, to make the older trees survive. You have to sacrifice in order to make the other ones healthy. And so I t took me a little more time and pride in what I was doing, and just kind of thinking about which tree or what damage I was doing to the land right then and there. But then I thought, well, I'm doing some good. Some trees have to be taken out in order for the healthy trees to survive. And so I felt better after thinking in those kind of terms.

CS: So it sounds like then, teachings of the Hopi tribe maybe help you do a better job in your Forest Service job.

MP: I would like to think so, yes. I think it did. I'm pretty sure it did. I'm pretty sure it helped me in a lot of good ways.

CS: Can you elaborate on some of those? You know, the teachings of the tribe, and when it comes to the land and within the land? Trees and animals?

MP: Hopis believe that everything has a purpose on earth. Animals, trees, grass; just a circle of life. And nothing is taken for granted if you're a Hopi. And so when you stop for lunch out there, anywhere out there, what we do is we always take a little pinch of our food that we carry in lunch pails, we take a pinch of each that we had for lunch; you take a pinch of that and set that aside. That's for the nature; things that we are grateful for. We're giving them part of our blessings. We say, okay, this is for you. And so we never take anything for granted. And a lot of times we carry corn meal. And we use that also. If we don't have food we'll just take corn meal and sprinkle it on the earth and say thank you.

CS: So is that something that you continue to do, like in your present job when you're out [blading?] the road and you're stopping for lunch, is that something you do? And is that something maybe you've gotten your crew to do? The rest of your crew to do? The rest of your crew members?

MP: Well I haven't gotten my crew to do it [laughs], but I do it. It's just meant for the Hopi jus to--- it's not a public thing. It just kind of comes from the heart, your personal heart. It's not meant to be just everybody do it. Everybody's got their own way of thanking for your food. Some praying out loud. You just kind of do it silently and just kind of say a silent prayer to ourselves. Just say than you. Just thank the earth for everything that we have.

CS: Tell me a little more about your weaving, and talk about the skills that you have to have to be a weaver, and is that a traditional that men, Hopi men develop, or is it just the men that weave?

MP: In the Hopi culture the men do all the textile weaving. We do the textile weaving like the belt, the Hopi ceremonial belts, which we have. The Hopi textiles are always woven by men. They do the textile traditional garbs that are worn by the Cochina dances. We have the red, green and black ceremonial belts that we use for the ceremonies. And then there's another belt that's called a white wedding—we call it the wedding belt. It's all white but it's about six inches wide, and it has [fonuts], little fringes on it, about eighteen fringes, and we use that for ceremonies. Then we have others: the kilt sashes, which are different colors, and we use those in ceremonies. And it's kind of a dying tradition right now that not a lot of our younger generation have picked up the skills to continue on this tradition of weaving. But I'm teaching my oldest son how to weave, and

he's gotten to where he can weave the white wedding belt. I hope to continue to teach him a little bit more before he leaves the nest. [laughs]

CS: So how is that skill then passed from generation to generation? How is that passed along?

MP: A lot of these garments are woven in the kivas for wedding robes. And that's where a lot of it was always picked up in the first place. In the kivas where all the weaving was done. But nowadays they don't do that anymore. So it's just kind of a one on one learning process, if you're lucky enough to know somebody—a friend, a grandfather, a dad—that knows how to weave. You've got to ask them now to learn how to weave. They're trying to pick it up on the Hopi reservation by having classes taught at some of these schools to the younger generation, and I hope it continues so the Hopi weaving doesn't die out.

CS: Tell me more about, too, the importance of the skill. You mentioned that it's used to... that you weave these belts that are used in various ceremonies. Tell me a little bit about that; and then, does it vary depending on what village you're from? And tell me what village you're from.

MP: The traditional garb is worn—the belts, kilt sashes, and the sashes—are worn by all the Pueblo tribes, so all the belts and sashes that I weave I've sold to the Zuni tribe, the Acoma tribes of New Mexico, and places of New Mexico, and Pueblo tribes back in New Mexico, and they use them in their ceremonies. And back there no one makes ceremonial sashes and things like that. So it's mostly the Hopis that make them, so they come to my village of Hotevilla to look me up. I've had a lot of people come into my house and say, I'm looking for Marvin. They know my work, and they've always been looking for me first before they try looking at another person's weaving materials.

CS: So does the weaving vary from somebody else who weaves from a different village?

MP: Some, but they're all pretty much standardized pretty much. But they're almost the same in all the villages. The only thing that would be different would be the little edges outside. Some of the other villages on some of the kilt sashes, they'll have a red on the border and some won't. That's about the only difference there would be in some of the traditional weaving. Other than that they're about the same.

CS: And how do you decide what designs to weave into the sashes that you're making? Does that depend on what the person wants or what it's for?

MP: No, each sash has a design that represents something. Some of the designs are meant for corn, and some of them are meant for steps that lead up from the underworld that we came from, and each one of those steps are representative of that, coming up from the underground world. And some have the corn design, and that's to represent something also from bringing things up. They said that the corn was the plant that, since it has a point on it, that's the only thing that came up from the underworld to lead us to this world

here. That's what the corn represents. It's a crop that we, as Hopis, always try to plant. Even though we have a drought year this year we always try to plant corn.

CS: So it's a very important crop then?

MP: It is a very important crop, yes.

CS: Can you wear the sashes and the belts that have the corn design... is that just used at specific ceremonies, or does it matter? Can you just kind of mix and match?

MP: You just kind of mix and match. It really doesn't have to be standardized. Everything is just kind of mixed anymore. It's not standardized.

CS: And what if there were no sashes? Would they not be able to do certain ceremonies? Is that an important part of the ceremony?

MP: It is a very important part of the ceremony because it's a garb that everybody wears, and so if somebody doesn't wear the same type of garb he or she would look out of place, and it just wouldn't be a ceremony without it. With all the ceremonies that we have been doing all these years, whatever the garb that's worn, if something was different it wouldn't be the same. It's just what we grew up with.

CS: So if you were going to participate in a ceremony that called for wearing a belt, you just would not show up unless you had one.

MP: Right. A lot of times when somebody didn't have a certain garb, or garment, or a sash or belt, they'd borrow. Like when I first went out to the reservation I did a lot of borrowing. I had nothing. I had nothing. So I started borrowing. I think that's another reason that I started to weave. I didn't want to borrow. I wanted something that was mine. And now I'm at a time where people come to me to borrow anymore, because I've got a lot of my sashes and things that I've woven for myself, and I lend those out to other people.

CS: Now do you follow a standard design Marvin, that's already been established, or are you able to make up your own design?

MP: I was going with the standard designs up until probably about five years ago I just kind of deviated a little bit. Not a drastic change, just a slight change. But I'm still staying with the traditional design. I try to keep that in mind that I'm not trying to change it drastically. And I hope to carry on the traditional design. I don't want to deviate from that too much.

CS: You said that you've been with the Forest Service now maybe twenty-one years, is that correct? [MP nods] And what's the frequency? Are there a lot of members of the Hopi tribe that work for other agencies like the Forest Service, or do you kind of stand out in that respect?

MP: There was at one time a lot of the... like people about my parents' age; probably in their sixties right now, seventies. They were employed by the Forest Service a lot. There's a lot of older gentleman that have retired from the Forest Service. Especially in the Happy Jack area. That was a popular place for the Hopi men to be employed, and a lot of the traditional Hopi men resided and worked at Happy Jack. Right now not that many Hopis are employed with the Forest Service. My wife is always trying to recruit from the Hopi reservation, and even the Navajo reservation; any kind of Native Americans, we're trying to recruit to the Forest Service, but it's hard anymore because of the cost of living; and being away from the family is hard. It's hard to recruit Native Americans into the Forest Service sometimes.

CS: So it sounds like there was kind of a tradition, maybe an informal tradition, that was established where foresters would recruit on the reservation and would employ a number of men. Was it mostly men back then?

MP: Yes, mostly men. It was mostly men. And that's how I got my job. I was recruited more or less. I got laid off from a bus driving job one day, and then I didn't know what I was going to do. I sat down, and I was sitting at the house and somebody knocked at the door and it was some DES official—department of Job Security. He asked me if I wanted a job with the Forest Service and I said sure. And that's how I got started. And there was [emphasis] a big push for Hopis to come to work for the Forest Service at one time. They're still trying, but it's hard. You just have to be at the right place at the right time.

CS: Tell me a little bit about how the tradition and the skill of weaving belts or sashes have changed through time.

MP: Oh, I guess it's the material has changed. Back when I started weaving at first they were using old yarns that was hand-spun from sheep and things like that. And it was all hand-dyed. But nowadays in the modern world we use worsted wool, four-ply worsted wool, and we just spin it a little bit tighter to make our weavings.

CS: So you no longer dye then? You don't dye any of the wool?

MP: I sure don't. I sure don't. [laughter] I just do a lot of looking. If I can't find the right color I just keep on looking.

CS: Okay. Can you describe a little bit about what you do when you weave? What that involves and what you use?

MP: When my grandfather passed away, he had a collection of battens and little weaving instruments that he had, and he passed them down to me. And the battens were made of ironwood. I don't know where he got the ironwood, but there's some ironwood and battens that he made, that he wove a lot of belts and sashes with. It's amazing how grooves are worn in the ironwood. If you consider how hard ironwood is; it carves

grooves in that ironwood. And that's the biggest instrument he had, is a batten. I was glad to have that passed on to my by my grandfather.

CS: So is that something then that is traditional; that the younger generation would have those things passed on to them by their grandfathers?

MP: Yes. It would be. But now you can make your... Now that ironwood is hard to find, now they're just kind of making them with oak or any hardwoods. Anything that's heavy that they can use. That's a changing style.

CS: Sure. And I imagine too the source of the yarn, the wool, has changed.

MP: oh, it has.

CS: Can you tell me a little bit about that? What they would do, maybe fifty years ago? What they did, what the Hopi did back then. How did they get the wool, or how did they get the yarn to weave?

MP: A lot of the older men, they had sheep that they herded around. And the sheep was always good for the ceremonial purposes, because they had the meat stews that they prepared with the sheep. And then springtime when they sheared the sheep, they saved some of that wool for their strings and things like that, so they could spin the wool and make yarn, and things like that. And they had dyes that they picked, the native dyes, some grasses that they picked would make a different color. That's what I didn't get a chance to learn; which dyes, what colors were made with a certain type of plant. I never got a chance to learn that.

CS: Okay. So is that art dying out too, do you think?

MP: It is. I think that's pretty much... There may be a few people out there that know how to find or select the grasses that produce different colors, but I do not know of any person that can do that right now.

CS'' And are there certain traditions that you have to follow when you're weaving? Standards or— I hate to say guidelines— but are there certain traditions that you follow that's been passed from generation to generation that you use when you weave?

MP: When you start a weaving you just kind of pray to yourself that whoever you're making a certain garment for will use it to its fullest, max capacity. Will use it in good tidings. May it bring that person good luck. And that's what I say when I start a weaving project. I hope that this person has good luck with this piece of weaving that I'm doing for them.

CS: And then if you were to demonstrate or recreate the weaving that you do, how would you do that? How could you do that? In terms of materials that you would use and what else you would need?

MP: We've made looms with just two-by-fours. Just nail some two-by-fours together. Just make a loom so it stretches your yarn. And that was kind of a nice thing about starting to weave. The materials I need to weave would be two-by-fours, just to make a loom that would be long enough to stretch my yarn. Back when my grandfather did it they would stretch the loom between trees and that's how they would weave, but now with two-by-fours we can move it anywhere we want. We can move it outside or indoors depending upon the weather. So right now with two-by-fours you can make a loom and weave almost anywhere.

CS: And how long do those pieces of two-by-four have to be, and how do you position them, or what do you do to make a loom?

MP: You make a base about thirty-six inches by thirty-six inches; and the sides would be two-by-fours five feet high and about thirty-six inches wide. And you just need wool to stretch the yarn, and you've got your weaving material right there. And it's pretty portable.

CS: So all you would need then of course is the yarn itself.

MP: That's all I would need.

CS: And how long would it take you just to make a very simple... maybe not even a full belt, but just even a couple inches of a belt?

MP: A couple inches? About twenty minutes. My traditional belts are usually about a hundred and ten inches long. And if you weave about one inch in fifteen minutes, that takes a long time to weave, but that's how long it takes me. About fifteen minutes for one inch.

CS: And so how long would it take you to complete a full belt?

MP: About twenty-four hours.

CS: Oh. But you would have to be at it for...

MP: Constantly.

CS: Constantly. Okay. And as far as space. You don't need a lot of space, as far as setting something like this?

MP: No. All I'd need is probably a space about six feet by six feet, at the most.

CS: And is there something easier to actually weave? What other things could you weave, if you were to set up this loom with two-by-fours? Would it have to be a belt or something else?

MP: It could be a belt, or a kilt sash or a kilt. But those are a little more intricate. The kilt sashes. On my loom that I weave on, a simpler one would be a kilt. That is just plain white cotton string that anybody can weave pretty much in twenty minutes. You can see your accomplishment, a lot in twenty minutes. So that would be a lot easier to demonstrate to somebody, how to weave that piece of garment.

CS: And it would use just the same loom, but just a maybe different kind of yarn?

MP: Yes, that's all it would be.

CS: What kind of yarn would that be?

MP: That would be a white yarn, white cotton yarn, and a batten, and that's all it would take.

CS: Anything else you wanted to add? [MP shakes his head] That's it?

MP: That's it.

END OF INTERVIEW