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Peter Graves
Narrator

Arch Grahn
Interviewer

October 5, 1950
Red Lake Indian Reservation, Minnesota

Peter Graves **-PG**
Arch Grahn **-AG**

PG: —Eighteen Seventy Two. And then later on [unclear] 1889, I went to school in Philadelphia. The agreement was made here during the later part of June and first part of July. My age then was advanced about two years, and the official record is May 20, 1870.

AG: That's the official record, but your actual age then—actually you were born May 20, 1872.

PG: I'm 80 years of age. By the official record I'm 78, according to the church records.

AG: I see. Well, that's very interesting. Where were you born Mr. Graves?

PG: About half a mile [eastside] of the agency building towards the lake. Somewhere there's a trading post [down there], and quite a few Indians living around that [unclear].

AG: When did your parents move here to the reservation?

PG: My mother migrated from Leech Lake and was married to a son of the old Chief [Mustang?] that made the [session?] there at the old crossing in 1863. The first session of the Red Lake [unclear]. She was married to a [unclear].

AG: And that was before—

PG: She had five children and then she became a widow.

AG: I see.

PG: I remember two of them but I can't remember the other three—two brothers and a sister—had died before I could remember anything. And then this Canadian rebel Joe Omen came. And I was baptized at this church that I was telling you about. When the priest came I was about eight months of age then, when I was taken to this priest to be baptized. Those were the days that the Indians didn't [unclear] according to the white people [unclear]. He was my [dad] this Joe Omen and he and [Roderick Mackenzie] came together from Canada—ran away from Canada over the border so that they'd be safe. And they became Canadian [rebels]. When that railroad [unclear]

through [unclear] would be isolated in the winter. Then this Joe Omen was here some—maybe five years. He didn't do anything so very bad I guess in Canada, then he went back later, after the government told them that they could come back and claim their possessions if they had any. He went back and he wanted to take my mother [in law?]
—she wouldn't go. [unclear]

AG: He was your father, Joe Omen?

PG: He was my—Joe Omen. So, later on, although I was a Christian—my mother was a pagan, she did not go to church. One day when the Episcopalians sent missionaries here—I can remember when they were lined up in the church there and they were getting baptized. The preacher—he just made the sign of the cross with water on my forehead because I was already baptized by the other church; I didn't need to be drenched with water or whatever it was. It wasn't necessary—just a sign of the cross. I remember that—

AG: Was the second missionary a Catholic also?

PG: No. He was a Protestant. He came afterwards. See, I remember that.

AG: I see.

PG: I would have been about four, maybe five years of age. That would be about 1877.

Mrs. M.C. English was a teacher at the school and my mother was working there as a seamstress. There was Elizabeth Graves in Boston who was much interested in Indians. This Mrs. M.C. English, who was a mixed blood, wrote to this Elizabeth Graves in Boston that she had a woman here that she wanted to name after her when she was going to be baptized. And in that baptism, why, my mother [unclear] Graves from that woman in Boston.

So, when I went to school—started to go to school—I was five years old when I started to go to school—Mrs. M.C. English was the first teacher here. It was a government school. I went by the name Peter Graves then. They gave me the Graves because my mother's name was Graves. The other—[unclear] mad at the rebel that went back to where he belonged, but I wouldn't have known [unclear]. But he did have another son, and he's still living. His name is Joe Omen. He was named after—

AG: Well, that Omen family is still here on the reservation, aren't they? Let's see—Alvin Omen and the other sons of Joe.

PG: Now this is Joe's sons. We have the same father. He was a Scotsman.

AG: You were know throughout the country as—

PG: They call me—my Indian name is, well, what you would call the Englishman or the British or whatever it is, because this father of mine was an Englishman. He wasn't a French [pakwi] like most of the people here—

AG: How did you happen to be known as the tribal chief? Is that elective?

PG: No. I just—

AG: Because you were a leader?

PG: I was more foolish than anybody else here.

AG: [laughs]

PG: I always acted on impulse on many occasions. Like, for instance, during the Sugar Point fight I was a young man and I was chief of police here. When the Indians had a council I asked the overseer George A Morrison if I could attend that council, and I wanted permission from him to tell the council what I thought of what they were going to hold a council about. [Bad?]. They were going over to Sugar Point to help the Leech Lake Indians in that fight. That's what they were going to hold a council for, so he said, "Yes, go. [unclear]."

So I went to this council, and after I heard what they were saying, that they were ready to go, I [unclear]. I told them that anybody that goes to help the Leech Lake Indians must stay and belong in that band. We don't want no rebels from the Red Lake Reservation. "Whoever goes," I said, "relinquishes their right on Red Lake, because we're not going to war with the government. We know better." And I says to one old man, [Pa-shi-nass phonetic] was his name, "Let me tell you something"—he was a warrior, he was a veteran, he had been in battle for the Sioux. And I says, "All the government will do with you is to [unclear]." That's what I told him.

When I got through and [unclear]. There wasn't a single one went because they would be stricken off the road, they wouldn't belong here anymore.

In about 1908, old Bugonaygeshig shows up and I was the first one to know about it. He sent word that I couldn't see him, so I sent word that he could see me anytime. He [unclear]. He wanted to know what they're going to do with him. He was the leader of that fight. He went to Canada, lived life for ten years or so before he came back. But he had to trust in me, you see. Whatever I told him would be so, and that's why he came to me. I told him that as long as he behaved himself [unclear]. But if he didn't, if he was arrested for drunkenness or anything, that all this he did in the past would be put against him. He would have to be responsible for his actions in the past. [unclear]. He says, "I'm telling you this." And I says, "I talked to the agent about it. When I got word from you—he sent a messenger. And [unclear] messenger." So he came and he was the best Indian we had. I was in charge of the Indian police there at the time.

AG: And that was about 1908?

PG: That was about 1908. He lived there and died there.

AG: I see.

PG: You see, it's a matter of trust. I tried to do that. I don't want to lie to anybody if I can possibly help it, because if I get caught lying everybody will laughing at me. I'm honest, in a way, so that if I'm [unclear] anything, I'm going to tell you. [unclear].

AG: I wish some of our leaders today had those same qualities.

PG: [unclear]. And I actually know the condition of the minds of these Indians and mental conditions and so on. If I want to tell anything about that, I think I come closer to describing the mental conditions and capacities of the Red Lake Band and I essentially know it's true. I can always tell them just what I think is right. But the only thing that I found [unclear, very bad?] people here, with envy, jealousy. [unclear]. They think I'm too important, that they should take my place. That's why they—you'll see somebody and he won't talk very good about me. And you know why, I was the policeman and I was 21 years of age.

I grew up to civilize this band of Indians here, and I'm always on the side of the government. And if you find any individual around here who's talking to me today, he's either a drunkard or a thief or a criminal or a regular outlaw. Because these two can't live together peacefully. There's a lot of fanatics here that don't care about regulations, law [unclear]. They're not my associates. And of course, they don't like me. They'd like to run me down. [unclear] will tell you better than I can tell you about that part of it. I was always on the side of the government and [unclear] doesn't like it. But [unclear] when I say something I mean it, and that is why I'm here today. A lot of them threatened me. Well, I just tell them, "you better be quick about it or I'll get ahead of you."

AG: I see. Well, you were instrumental in starting this fishery project here. Do you want to tell me how that happened to start?

PG: Well, I was secretary of the council, you see. And the council was used to organize this fishery. After the state stepped to one side—the state operated this fishery for quite a few years. And then one day, [they stepped out] on account of a court order. We had to do something to keep this industry going on. So, Judge Robert C. Bell was our tribal attorney at the time and he made [unclear], and we organized [up in the state]. We had to ship our fish through the state, and the state could prevent us [unclear]. We had to do business through the state. I don't think we had to. I think the federal government would have been sufficient to do business through the organization of this fishery. So, that was in 1929, and we've been operating ever since up, until now. We are still operating but we're a little bit shakey about the present status of the fish. We were not catching as many fish this last season as we should.

AG: I see. Do you [unclear] employ—your industry is the main source of income—this and the lumber industry—for the Red Lake Indians—

PG: Well, in a way, it would help the people if they used the [unclear] properly, but they don't. We are now going through civilization, you see. After we passed drunkenness—we're probably no better, you see. And while we're under this evolution, it doesn't make any difference how much money we get [unclear]. You understand how lumberjacks used to be, you know, when they [unclear] a bunch of money. They don't quit until—well, we're practically about at that stage

of evolution of the Indian. I try to tell a lot of people here, "Give the Indian time. If there's any money, hand it to him. [unclear] That's good education. [unclear]. Experience will teach you how to be wrong. But if you don't get that experience, how are you going to know anything about it?"

AG: About how many Indians benefit from your fisheries?

PG: About six hundred [, seven].

AG: Six hundred? Derive an income of some sort from the fishery?

PG: [unclear] fishing, you see. [unclear] fishing around 200. [unclear] you can add that to 200 to 400 others. They go out and help the others and they [unclear].

AG: [unclear].

PG: Oh, well that's different. But actually, the Indians can benefit from the fishing. They got there and help and then in the meantime, they have fish to eat. It's a wonderful thing if they [unclear] to use the revenue that they get through that. It would almost feed them year-round if they knew how to use this money.

AG: And how about the lumber industry?

PG: Our operations here is sometimes almost \$300,000 gross. And that's only just a few months. That's a wonderful thing, you know. You can do a lot of other things after you get through with the fishing. [unclear] ... a good price. [unclear] the price of fish is good now and so is the lumber. And we're getting a lot of money from that sawmill [unclear]. But the end is in sight, because the resources—timber is nearly used up.

AG: [unclear] a little bit on the relations of the Indian Agents—the government agents here and the people. Do you think that the government are doing a good job? That the agents are doing the best that they can for the Indians?

PG: That's a question of an individual way of thinking. It's an Indian problem when you come to that, you know.

AG: Well, we want your opinion.

AG: My opinion is this. The only salvation for any people—Indians and anybody else—is to get enough education to compete with the way of life in which they are living—why, then they're all right, you see. But, if they're not, you've got to give that [part of them] a chance to come up to the standard of living. And it's only through education—that's what I had a long, long time ago. If a young man is educated, he can compete and make a proper living. And his wife, if she's a good cook, well, that ought to be sufficient. If you don't get too many wives, and so on—if you get a good wife, there you are, you have a family and you can get along. Well, get the Indian in that condition. [Re him up]. And if the Indian is not there, you are not through with the Indian. So, that's my way. Try giving the Indian a chance. [And they say,] "that takes a long, long time."

Well, a lot of white people had a chance a long, long time, but isn't this little reservation there to—and most of those are going [unclear]. [unclear] wants the Indian to be thrown overboard before he's fit to compete with the present civilization. That's my idea, and I'll tell that to anybody.

AG: They want to put the Indian out in the world with the white people, to compete with the white people before they are ready—

PG: [unclear] the Indian before that Indian is educated enough to take care of himself [unclear]. I don't have to listen to anybody day in and day out to find out who he is. I just listen to a person talk for fifteen minutes and he tells me all about himself.

AG: The Indian education problem has been a difficult problem and is a difficult problem—

PG: I went to school. I've told you about going to school. Those words—I read second reader and third reader, I didn't know what I'm reading about but I got to know those objects. [unclear]. I got to know that here and then the way that thing is written in the book. After awhile I could see that's a common word [unclear]. It would be just like you or I reading Chinese character writing. That's just about the same way that things looked to me when I went to school.

AG: Well, we have had quite an interview. I would like—if you can think of any stories of the early days here that you'd like to record at this time.

PG: Well, I don't know. I've taken [unclear] of most everything of any importance that's happened on the reservation. The only time that I ever was any from here was thirteen and a half years, and that's Leech Lake, and [unclear]. He wanted me there. He wanted me [to take charge of the] police. I was assistant clerk [unclear]. I worked with one fellow there. He was a clerk. He was a [unclear] Indian. And in the first World War he got down at the front and that night he said, "We're travelling to go to relieve the front lines, and that was Armistice Day, the next day." But it was a funny thing happen, he said, "When I went there to the front, I was thinking about you." He said, "I wished Pete was with me." That's what he told me. [unclear]

AG: What is your Indian name Mr. Graves?

PG: Sha-ga-na-shi [phonetic].

AG: And what is the interpretation of that?

PG: "Englishman." At the time [Battle of Quebec?] [unclear].

AG: This has been very fine. I want to thank you.

This has been an interview with Mr. Peter Grave, the tribal chief of the Red Lake Chippewa Indian Reservation, taken on October 5th, 1950.