Voices of Oklahoma

Wilma Mankiller

Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation

1985-1995

Chapter 1 — 1:11

Introduction

John Erling: Wilma Pearl Mankiller was the first female Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation. She served as Principal Chief for 10 years from 1985 to 1995. Before that she served as the first woman Deputy Chief of the Cherokee Nation. In this interview, you will hear Wilma talk about life events that motivated her to become active in Cherokee Tribal Affairs. The interview you are about to hear takes a wonderful glimpse into a meaningful and courageous woman's life. It is exceptionally unique as it's her story told in her own words. We encourage you to explore her work and become inspired by reading about her life and learning from this very accomplished woman. Please consult our "For Further Reading" Section. Voices of Oklahoma is honored to have captured Wilma Mankiller's voice so that many generations from now others will be able to benefit from it.

Chapter 2 — 2:12

Mankiller Flats

John Erling: Today's date is August 13th, 2009.

Wilma Mankiller: My name is Wilma Mankiller. I'm 63. My date of birth is November 18, 1945.

JE: And where are we recording this?

WM: We're recording it at the Cherokee Nation Headquarters in Tahlequah, Oklahoma.

JE: Tell us where you were born.

WM: I was born at Hastings Indian Hospital in Tahlequah, Oklahoma.

JE: In 1945.

WM: In 1945.

JE: Right. You were raised at Mankiller Flats.

WM: Right.

JE: Tell us about Mankiller Flats.

WM: I'll tell you about how it was when I was a child and how it is now. Mankiller Flats where I was, where I lived until we were about 10 is in rural Adair County. It is about 20 miles from Tahlequah, about 15 miles from Stilwell. When I was a kid, there was no paved road near our house, no electricity, no indoor plumbing. So our world as children was pretty insulated and pretty isolated. We walked to school, to Rocky Mountain School, which was about maybe a two-mile walk and home every day. We farmed some things, most things for our own consumption, many things for our own consumption and a few things to trade or sell to people. We have a natural spring on our property which served as the place where we got our drinking water. And we shared that spring with bobcats and mountain lions and wild pigs and other animals that would come through there, there were crawdads in it though it was a freezing cold spring. So I lived there 'til I was 11 and then left to go to California and then came back in 1976, and I've been there, so I've been there most of my life.

JE: This land, Mankiller Flats, was allotted to your Grandfather.

WM: Was allotted to my Grandfather, right.

JE: Allotted, right. How did that come about?

WM: There were a whole series of federal policies and laws that the end result of which was Cherokee land that had been held in common by Cherokee people was allotted out in individual parcels, individual allotments of 160 acres per family. And my Grandfather, John Mankiller received 160 acres on the property where we now live and we still live there. We have 100 acres of it.

Chapter 3 — 3:50
Meaning of Mankiller/Wilma's Large Family

John Erling: The name Mankiller, what is the background to the name?

Wilma Mankiller: It really was a title. In Cherokee historical times there was a central government but a lot of the communities had a very strong local decentralized government structure as well. And one of the titles for one of the leaders in a, one of these villages was called a Mankiller and that's what it translates into English is Mankiller, so when the census – I assume this is how this happened, when the census of the Unites States Government started taking census rolls of Cherokees, the guy with the title put down Mankiller as his name, and that's who we trace our ancestry back to. At that time Cherokees only used one name, they didn't have a first name and a last name.

JE: Your parents' names?

WM: My mother's name and she's still living and, and in very good health. Her name is Irene Sitton Mankiller, and my mother's Irish, and she lives still on the old place at Mankiller Flats, right up the road from me. My father's name was Charlie Mankiller. He was a full-blood Cherokee, and he died when he was 57 years old.

JE: You had brothers and sisters?

WM: Originally there were 11 of us, but I lost two of my brothers. So, there are only nine of us surviving. Only nine is quite a few.

JE: All 11 were being raised in Mankiller Flats?

WM: No, when we left here all but two had been born. There were nine and then two were born in California. My two youngest brothers were born in California.

JE: But even so –

WM: Yeah, that's a lot of people.

JE: There still were 10 or so, in this house

WM: It somehow worked. My father built the house. You know, it seemed to work. We spent a lot of time outside. You know, without all the modern amenities that people have, it's constant work. People are constantly getting water. You're constantly washing things. You have to wash clothes by hand. You have to get wood. There were always things to do. So we grew up spending a lot of our time outside. And I think that's one of the ways we became very close to the land is just being outside and seeing it really as a wonderland. So when I think about my childhood most of my memories are of being outside.

JE: So the house was three bedroom? Four bedroom?

WM: Oh no, it was, I think, I'm not positive, I think it was two bedrooms and then an extra room that was used as a sleeping place and then sort of a combination living room kitchen where the cook stove and the woodstove was.

JE: Outdoor plumbing?

WM: We had no plumbing.

JE: Outdoor, right.

WM: Yeah, outdoor, we went outside.

JE: And of course that's all you knew so none of that was an issue, you just accepted life the way it was then.

WM: No, no, no and all our neighbors, Cherokee people and Caucasian people it didn't matter what their race was everybody was in the same economic situation. There was one teacher who in 1956 I think it was, had a television but didn't actually live in our community lived about, maybe three of four miles away and had a television but other than that we were all in the same economic situation.

JE: Mankiller Flats is in?

WM: It's in rural Adair County. The reason it has been called Mankiller Flats by the old-timers is a lot of our family used to live there. But the community is also alternately called Rocky Mountain. When they built a new road for the road that goes by our house they put on the sign Mankiller Flats / Rocky Mountain so the community's alternately known as Rocky Mountain or the larger community around us is the Rocky Mountain Community and then our space where we all live is called Mankiller Flats.

JE: Is it after your name Mankiller?

WM: Yes, it's after our family's name, yes.

JE: Because your Father was a strong leader in the community? He was an...

WM: No, I think it was just because so many Mankillers lived there up the hill kind of on a flat and so people started saying, "Oh, that's up on the flat, on the Mankiller Flat.

JE: Okay.

WM: It's a good place to hunt.

Chapter 4 — 1:48
Trail of Tears

John Erling: The Cherokees of course came on the Trail of Tears –

Wilma Mankiller: Right.

JE: In 1838 and 39.

WM: Right.

JE: What were stories that you heard of the Trail of Tears? As a child you –

WM: I never heard the complete story in its entirety the way I learned it as an adult. What I heard was little pieces of stories. I remember Mrs. Wolf said, "That pot came over on the Trail of Tears." I remember another, another fellow who didn't speak English hardly at all who was always afraid he was going to lose his land. He thought there would be another Cherokee removal. And no matter how many times we told him that that wasn't going to happen again, he never felt secure, he always felt that he was going be removed so – the other day I was trying to think at what point did the last person who spoke to someone who came on the Trail of Tears what year would that have been? So, what year did we lose the last person in our family who actually spoke to someone who came on the Trail of Tears? It was a very interesting history.

JE: So they didn't talk a lot about it to you?

WM: No they talked pieces, but no one sat down and said, this is the story, the entire story. So you knew about it because the information was around, but not in its totality not in its entirety.

JE: You think they just thought it wasn't important enough to talk about or – it was a bad experience obviously for their heritage and maybe they just didn't catch the significance of it cause they were so close to it?

WM: No, I think that people understood the significance of it and I think that when the adults got together they spoke about it. But I don't think as a family we ever sat down and talked about it.

Chapter 5 — 2:16
Education System / Sequoya

John Erling: YWhen Tahlequah becomes the County Seat of –

Wilma Mankiller: Right.

JE: Cherokee County. Was it through your people? What role did your family have?

WM: No. No, my family didn't directly have a role in the founding of Tahlequah. But the Cherokees founded Tahlequah as the capital of the Cherokee Nation. It was a place of unity for various factions of Cherokees who met after the removal.

JE: And then they established the school system? And the Court System?

WM: They established a very extensive system of day schools. What's always interested me is that you know in the 1840s for them to establish a school system was pretty neat. But then they established a school system for the higher educational women, which was a really radical idea for this part of the world at that time in history. And then the Cherokee Tribal Leaders didn't really know how to establish a school like that so they sent emissaries off to Mount Holyoke and met with the women there and at that time they met with some of the women there and said, "When you graduate, will you come back and help us with our school?" Or to some of the faculty there, "Will you come back and help us?" And they did. So there's an old historic connection between Mount Holyoke and the Cherokee Nation. But that's always fascinated me, that they had the foresight to do that. And then they established a male seminary. Then they printed newspapers in Cherokee and in English. It was sort of a Golden Era for the Cherokee Nation given what had happened to them. So they just began rebuilding.

JE: As we sit here in this conference room, we have a picture of Sequoya. For history's sake it would be interesting to have you talk about Sequoya and how important he was to the Cherokees.

WM: Well, he was incredibly important not just to Cherokee people, but to all of humanity I believe. There are very few people in all the history of mankind who have created an entire syllabary, an entire workable language. And his creation of the Cherokee syllabary

enabled Cherokee people to publish material and keep their members informed. They published the first native newspaper in the country. They also published their own books. So, it had a huge impact on the population and it's an incredible intellectual achievement. His importance is enormous to Cherokee people.

Chapter 6 — 4:03
1907 – Broken Promises

John Erling: Take us to 1907 the federal government basically ignored the Cherokee constitution, and divided up the land and your family received their property.

Wilma Mankiller: Right. That period of history is a very dark day I think in Cherokee history. When Cherokee people were removed from our old homeland in the southeast to what was Indian Territory, we were granted land and told we could live here uninterrupted forever. Though this was a territory and when the land was individually allotted, it had a profound impact on people. Also, the federal government did everything it could to try to destroy the Cherokee Nation. But it didn't. And it came very close to it but, Cherokee people during that long period from statehood to the 70s when we started electing our own Chiefs again met and never ever gave up the dream of having their own government again. Of having some control over their own destiny again. It's really remarkable if you look at the spirit of Cherokee people and Bill Keeler who was CEO of Phillips Petroleum at the time but also a Cherokee member used his influence to help us earn the right to reelect our leaders again. It was a very dark period of time. It was a horrible period of time. In Muskogee, if you read Angie Devoe's work, there were unscrupulous people who would go to the courts in Muskogee and get themselves appointed as guardians of the Cherokee people who had been given allotments of land and then you know do whatever they wanted to do with the land. Chad Smith always says that now we have one half of one percent of the land we had after the removal. But that history of that period of time that the Dawes Act and all the subsequent things that happened to Cherokee people during that time is one of the greatest land thefts in history.

JE: Mankiller Flats, was that part of what you received in this allotment in 1907?

WM: Yes. Part of it was allotted to our family the part that our family still has, and then other Cherokee families were also allotted land. A lot of them lost land. We have come to accept the fact that one of our relatives Arch Mankiller had a piece of land that was lost during that period of time and there's an old Mankiller graveyard on that property but – yeah, there's no legal way to get it back.

JE: I should have started out with 1907 and then you tell the story. And that's when Mankiller

Flats was given to your Father.

WM: You have to think about it in a different way. Here in Eastern Oklahoma in the Cherokee Nation, community is very important. People identify themselves by their community. I just met some girls out at, Northeastern – Cherokee girls and my second question after their name is, "Where are you from?" "I'm from Kenwood." "I'm from Cherry Springs." "I'm from Eucha." So, I'm from Mankiller Flats so while a map wouldn't say Mankiller Flats or Cherry Tree there in rural Adair County that's we identify them, how Cherokee people identify them. At one point I thought, though nobody else thinks this has any validity at all, Cherokee people used to identify – when you would meet them and greet them you would say, "Hi my name is Wilma and I'm from the Wolf Clan." And then you would know right away, who their family is where they were from, what they were like. When I worked in a lot of the rural communities in the late '70s and the early '80s, people had such a strong identification with community that I almost thought that communities replaced the old Clan system cause people don't use it that much anymore their clans except for medicine so you can't think of it as a geographic space necessarily, more like a grouping of families – I don't know how to explain that, but you see what I'm saying.

JE: But again it was in 1907 that that all happened for you?

WM: Right. Right. That's when our family was allotted the land, when it started being called Mankiller Flats I don't know.

Chapter 7 — 6:04
Federal Government Relocation Program

John Erling: Well then the federal government had a relocation program that went into effect in the '50s.

Wilma Mankiller: Right.

JE: And the government then seemed to want to break up these tribal communities.

WM: Right. In the post-World War II era the federal government thought that they should terminate any federal relationship they had with tribes. And they wanted to terminate their federal responsibility to tribal governments and also abrogate the treaties and just have people go out and become part of the mainstream. So there was that sort of national mentality. And as part of that whole overall strategy of what we call the Termination Era, this policy of relocating native people came into being. What they did was administered by the Department of the Interior, through the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and most of the people that were affected by relocation were half Cherokee

or more. What the federal government would do to entice people to participate in the relocation program was promise them a better life for the children and education, a job for the adults. So it was called the relocation and employment and training program. They would relocate people from places like our community and rural Navajo Nation and other places like that to Chicago or Los Angeles or Denver or Phoenix or San Francisco places like that. Our better life, our first night in San Francisco was in an old hotel in San Francisco in the tenderloin district, which is the red light district of San Francisco. If you try to think of getting on a train in rural Adair County in the late 1950s, it was like landing in Mars. And my Mom, who's not Cherokee, was still a very rural person. And so this whole thing was as bewildering to her as it was to the children or the other families that participated in the program. But the better life for my family ended up with my father and my older brother getting a back-breaking job at a rope factory. And our family eventually ended up in a very rough housing project called Hunters Point in San Francisco. And so the better life that a lot of people were promised didn't turn out that way at all. It was a misguided federal policy.

JE: You were ten years old I believe.

WM: Right. Right.

JE: What sort of education did you have up until ten years old?

WM: I was in the fifth grade. I went to Rocky Mountain School. I don't know how many kids were there, less than 50 I am sure. The school also didn't have any plumbing, so we used out houses for the bathrooms and everybody knew everybody and to go from that kind of community to San Francisco was pretty amazing. And the only place I'd ever been was to the Muskogee State Fair on a school field trip. That was it.

JE: Why did you go to California when you referenced earlier so many other went to Chicago and other places? So why –

WM: Well my Mom's Mom was sort of a sturdy adventurous woman, and she had lived in Adair County and went to California, settled in California. So my Mother's mother lived about 80 miles from San Francisco and that was the main reason we chose San Francisco, it was closer to San Francisco than Los Angeles.

JE: What if your family said, "No, we don't want to go?" What would happen to you then?

WM: I think our lives would have just played themselves out as many other Cherokee families had. Here, we would have continued to farm. There were a lot of children, so there were a lot of children to work some would have gone to school, some wouldn't have. Life would have been very different for us I think.

JE: But you could have stayed?

WM: We could have stayed. You had a choice. You weren't forced to go. It was more a matter of guilt-tripping parents and you know they would come out to our house and there

were all these children and besides our farm stuff my Dad and my older brother would go off to Colorado to cut broom corn as a way of getting cash to help buy our school stuff. So you're telling them, oh you can have a nice house and education and that sort of thing so while they weren't forced to go, all the families we met had certainly been painted a dream of a better life for the children.

JE: Do you remember the day you left that day?

WM: I do.

JE: In the morning or how–?

WM: I remember, for one thing I think it's important to know that we couldn't conceptualize San Francisco, or even California. We had no basis for thinking about it. There was no kind of orientation program or anything like that, so we couldn't think, oh well we're going to California cause we didn't know how to think about it. All we knew was that we were going and we weren't coming back. It was a sad day, a very sad day, as we got in a car and went to Stilwell looking at everything, past the school and nobody wanted to stop they just wanted to get to the train station. And so at that time we had passenger trains that came into Stilwell and I remember we – I don't know why I remember this but we had chili at the Stilwell Café before getting on the train. And then the train ride was something we'd never done before and kind of a quiet time. We didn't know completely what was going on but we knew that it was a huge change than what we'd known.

JE: So the land you left, did that still remain in your name? I mean you talk about it today but you left the land.

WM: We left the land and what's really interesting is that we always had very little money and then when my father became ill, my parents had a lot of financial pressure and he would not sell the land. He had offers from our neighbors here in Oklahoma to sell the land, and he wouldn't sell it. He kept it in case we wanted, which we all appreciate very much. So we still have the 160 acres that my grandfather was allotted, my cousins have 60 and we have 100. Of course it's all together.

JE: Who maintained the land when your family went to California?

WM: No one. Someone lived in the house and it burned down. When we came home to stay it had all grown up and people were using it as a great hunting place so there were hunters riding around that we had to get rid of, that sort of thing.

Chapter 8 — 5:44
California – Education/Activism/Alcatraz

John Erling: Well let's jump ahead, what about further education then that came in California?

As you were a ten-year-old, you were in the fifth grade. But when you came to California, then you continued your education.

Wilma Mankiller: It was radically different, it California they're hundreds of students in the schools, not like a little tiny school like ours and so we all went to the public schools and went to junior high school and went to high school. Some of us went to college and, and all hated school quite frankly. My poor brother, one of my brothers, we got new clothes when we went to California, but my brother had a pair of overalls that he liked to wear which didn't work in San Francisco. And we had an unusual last name and spoke with an Oklahoma accent. It was quite an adjustment. Looking back on that now, I think it was an incredible adjustment.

JE: What years are we talking about? The year you moved to California was what year?

WM: It was 1956.

JE: Okay. So then you did go on to college?

WM: I did go on to college.

JE: And where was that?

WM: I went to college at a junior college in San Bruno California, Skyline College, and I went to San Francisco State. And then when I came back here, I went to the University of Arkansas. I went to graduate school for a little while. And then while I was in graduate school I was in a car wreck.

JE: And I want to come to that.

WM: Okay, after I had the car wreck it was so extensive that I did not go back to graduate school. But I have 18 honorary doctorates, so I guess it's okay.

JE: You were married at a very young age in California.

WM: I was married at 18.

JE: And then you had children from that marriage.

WM: I had two daughters. One of whom was supposed to be today but she's out today, Felicia who's Chad's assistant, and the other is Gina.

JE: And when you refer to Chad that's Principal Chief of the Cherokees, Chad Smith.

WM: Right. Right.

JE: So it was during the '60s that your political conscience perhaps was born.

WM: Right. Right.

JE: Your concern for Native American issues became major to you I think when students occupied the abandoned prison of Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay. That was a big time for you.

WM: It was a big time. At that time when the occupation occurred it was in November of 1969, and I had been married for about five years and my daughters are very young. We were living a pretty middle-class life. I was involved somewhat in the San Francisco Indian

Center, but the world was changing around us. In the San Francisco Bay area during the late '60s you could go hear Janis Joplin in a park or hear Jimi Hendrix in a park or go to the Fillmore and hear some of the most famous bands like Jefferson Airplane. The music was changing. The politics were changing. San Francisco was the home to a huge anti-war movement. UC Berkeley across the Bay was where a lot of the free speech movement occurred. And then there were a lot of women's right issues being discussed. Civil rights issues were very prominent, so the occupation of Alcatraz Island happened within that context, of the music's changing, civil rights, women's rights. Middle-class white kids coming to San Francisco trying to find a way to live that was different than how their parents lived. It was a time of just change everywhere. During that time some students from UC Berkeley and San Francisco State occupied Alcatraz Island citing a provision of an old treaty that provided that excess federal land would revert to Native American people. I was 24 or 25 in 1969 and so these were people who were a little bit younger than me or about my age who were literally standing up to the United States government and talking about native rights and about the conditions in tribal communities across the country. And I didn't know people like that. There was something very liberating about seeing people talk about those issues. My Dad had been active in the San Francisco Bay area Indian community I remember seeing him on television one time talking about the need for a clinic. And so we were used to issues and people being involved and my parents bringing home people who were down on their luck to stay with us for a little while or finding money to give them when they didn't have money to give to us kids but they found some to give to a stranger. So we were used to issues, but not that way. It had a profound impact on me and it's kind of like when I took my little girls and went on the boat from San Francisco over to Alcatraz, my life changed and I never went back. Never looked back from that time. I became much more involved in native issues and you know eventually all that work led me home.

JE: The occupation of Alcatraz Island, they felt that island needed to be returned to the tribes?

WM: Right. Right.

JE: Because that was rightfully theirs and the government had taken it away.

WM: Right. They had proposals. One proposal was to turn it into a museum, a Native American museum, a tribute to the California Indians. There were lots of you know ideas thrown around for the long-term use of the island.

JE: How did that come to an end? How was that resolved?

WM: Eventually people drifted away. A lot of the people who occupied Alcatraz Island one of them lives here in Oklahoma in Okmulgee, Linda Arrinato (sp?) was one of the original students who went over on the boat. She's a doctor, a physician and she was a student

at UC Berkeley. So as time went on the students went back to school and new people came and as with any organization some of the new people didn't have the same vision as the older people. And so the population dwindled and then eventually, the last few remaining people were removed by the federal marshals in 1972.

JE: The federal government didn't try to remove anybody in the height of this?

WM: No, no.

Chapter 9 — 7:30
Return to Oklahoma – Gender an Issue?

John Erling: So that had a defining mark in your life. So then you took on Native American issues other issues while living in California.

Wilma Mankiller: Right.

JE: Some of those?

WM: Well, what's interesting you know at this point in my life and thinking back most everything I've ever done I've done it because I was motivated by the issue. And so, after Alcatraz I was watching the news and I saw a group of Indian people who reminded me of people here at home, and they were fighting to get their land back. And they were from the River Tribe of northern California. So I called them up and said, "I'm a volunteer, I'll help you do whatever you need to do to get your land back." And what they needed most was help at their legal office so I learned to type real fast so I could help at their legal office. Later, I got involved in the Native American community in the Bay Area and what they needed most was programs. And so I learned how to write grant proposals so I could help them write proposals I found a lady who worked for Oakland Public Schools and followed her route and asked her if she would show me how to write grant proposals. So I learned how to write grant proposals not as a career move, but because I wanted to develop programs In my volunteer work at River Tribe I learned a lot about treaty issues and tribal sovereignty. You know and all that eventually helped me here. But most every time I've ever done anything it's been because I really care about the issue, a lot. Being involved, I directed a youth center, a street after-school program in Oakland for Native American students, just did a lot of different things there. I was very active, very involved.

JE: You were beginning to lay perhaps the groundwork for leadership back then. Was it unusual for you as a female to be in that work or were there any other females at the time, or was it a man's world?

WM: There were other females at the time. There were other female leaders of their tribes.

And I actually did some research on that and found out that when I was elected, in the first election I was elected as Deputy Chief and President of the Tribal Council, there were either 69 or 79 other leaders of tribes at that time. There are now about 560 federally recognized tribes at that time there were probably around 500, I'm not sure. And now there are approximately 130 that are led by women. So, there were certainly other women leading tribal governments and the things I did here at the Tribe before I ran for office were not things traditionally that women did. I founded the Cherokee Nation Community Development Department, and we built waterlines and built houses and that sort of thing you know I think that's one of the reasons I got elected, because a lot of the rural men felt okay, we're not sure about this, but she can get things done. It never really occurred to me not to do things because I'm a woman. When we came home from California to Oklahoma, we rented a U-Haul. I put all my stuff in it. And me, my daughters and their guinea pig and dog and made some sandwiches and we took off across the country. I don't think I ever sat down and thought, well, I can't do this because I'm a woman.

JE: That's never occurred to you.

WM: No. No. I don't know whether it was because there were so many children, my Mom and my Dad never did this to us – but I'm so grateful that our parents didn't confine us. My Mom never made me feel like there were things we couldn't do because we were poor or things we couldn't do because we were Cherokee or things I couldn't do because I was a woman. I never ever felt like that and I see so many adults with all kinds of hang-ups and problems and that sort of thing caused by things that happened during their youth, or their childhood, and my Mother never did that to any of us. This is what good girls do. I didn't have any idea what good girls do. She didn't ever say silly stuff like that to us. Anyway, I'm very grateful to my parents because of that. My Mom is someone who just had all these kids and no matter what we did she gave us unconditional love, may not understand it. My Mother's a Republican and a conservative, but my brother Richard wanted to go off and join the Wounded Knee Occupation it was like, okay, well take care of yourself.

JE: Before you hooked that trailer to the car, you divorced your first husband.

WM: I did. Yeah.

JE: So, you had some of this problem at home as you were also out being a leader –

WM: I did.

JE: In the community.

WM: I did. He was very handsome. He was very nice. We lived in a nice place. And as I started to get more interested in things outside our home I used to look at him and wish I could want to live a life like that but I didn't want to live life like that.

JE: A traditional marriage?

WM: No I did not no, no traditional marriage.

JE: No that's what he wanted.

WM: Oh he did very much wanted a traditional marriage my life and focus was to be on him and going to his soccer games, he was a soccer player, go to his soccer games and cheer him on and be concerned with the kids and not with anything else outside that. So that's what he wanted and I couldn't live like that.

JE: Then that was time to move back.

WM: It was time to move back, yeah.

JE: But you did mention Wounded Knee maybe we can talk about that –

WM: Okay.

JE: history because your brother –

WM: Richard, my brother Richard –

JE: Your brother Richard, let me just say for the record that Wounded Knee which began in February of '73, when the town of Wounded Knee, South Dakota was taken over by followers of the American Indian Movement –

WM: Right.

JE: And those that occupied controlled the town for 71 days while the U.S. Marshal Service and other law enforcement agencies cordoned off the town. That's the setting there, why did they take over Wounded Knee?

WM: Well I think it's very complicated. There's lots that's been written about it, and there are at least five films about it. But I think that very few people provide the historical context for what occurred. It's very complicated. The situation's very complicated. The government, some of the people there felt was very repressive. And they couldn't change the government within the boundaries of the tribal government so the elders called the American Indian Movement people in and it was the elders not the federal government, not the young people but the elders who called an end to it. I think after someone, maybe that second person, anyway, I think it was after someone was shot. But it was about the stress between the more traditional faction of people that lived there and the formal tribal leadership. That's what it was about.

JE: But with your brother Richard going there – did you think about doing that yourself?

WM: I thought about it but it seemed more like a war. You know, and I think it was. It wasn't something that I felt that I could be of any particular help in. My brother was actually in training to be a producer at KQED, was it KKAD? I can't remember the call letters of one of the local stations and he left that to go do that.

JE: Well, in '76 then I believe it was that you moved back to Oklahoma with your daughters.

WM: Right.

JE: And that's when you then attended classes at the University of Arkansas.

WM: Yeah. A little after that. I worked here for a while, and then I went to the University of Arkansas

Chapter 10 — 7:10
Traffic Accident/Positive Attitude

John Erling: Then in '79, the fall of '79, you were returning home from school and you were involved in, in an accident –

Wilma Mankiller: Right.

JE: Talk about that for us.

WM: Yeah, I had worked at the Cherokee Nation for about three years or four years. You know I had done some planning and started some programs and that sort of thing. And they offered a really good program at the University of Arkansas in the School of Architecture which is community development. Which is basically developing the infrastructure and I knew I knew how to develop the people, but the infrastructure and that sort of thing. Anyway I was in that program, full-time, living on a graduate assistantship, just not making it. So I called Ross Swimmer who was the Principal Chief at that time and asked if I could do some consulting work for the Cherokee Nation and he said I could. I took the day off of school and was on my way to Tahlequah. When I just turned on to Highway 100, about maybe four miles from our house about when my friend Sherry Morris passed another car, and I couldn't see her I was coming up a hill and she was in my lane and we hit each other head on. She was killed. Two ambulances came, they used a lot of equipment to dig both of us out of the cars, and Sherry was dead in the ambulance on the way to Tahlequah. I was taken to Stilwell and stabilized and then for some reason, only The Greater knows, I was taken to Fort Smith, Arkansas. And there happened to be a guy there who was an orthopedic surgeon who developed a proprietary method of sewing bones back together using stainless steel thread. He showed my Mom an x-ray of my leg and there was no bone from my knee to my ankle, it had all gathered in my ankle. And he asked my Mother, I was of course unconscious, if they could amputate my leg and she said I am not going to give you permission to do that. She said, "When she wakes up, if she wants to do that, she can give you permission but I'm not going to do that. Try to figure something out." So he spent hours and hours and hours there sewing the bones back together using stainless steel thread which is why I've been able to walk all these years. If Alcatraz was a turning point, the accident was a watershed. I went from being a 32-year-old graduate student to being in a wheel

chair and my friend being killed, so it had a profound and lasting impact on me.

JE: You talk about your leg but I believe your face was crushed?

WM: My face was crushed and I still –I'm always coughing because I crushed the front of my face and it messed up all the plumbing in my nose and that sort of thing, and so there's been a permanent impact with that. And then my ribs were crushed, my right leg was crushed but my left leg was broken so I had a cast on both legs. That was a very, very tough time and Sherry was, I just saw her husband yesterday, or her widower and anyway Sherry was young, and very beautiful, she'd been either runner-up to Miss Mississippi or Miss University of Mississippi, and just that period of time she had said you know I'm sick of wearing makeup all the time and exercising obsessively. She said, I think I'm over that. So she was kind of coming into her own as a woman. She was interested in education, she was a Mom, her daughter's now in graduate school. My own injuries were bad, but that was horrible. Very horrible.

JE: You spent about a year in recovery?

WM: I spent about a year in recovery, not all of it was related to the accident. Part of it was related to the accident, but in a bizarre circumstance I developed Myasthenia Gravis while I was recovering. I couldn't hold things. I lost control of my eyes, I lost about 40 pounds, I started having trouble chewing. At first all the doctors thought that I'd had brain damage in the car wreck and couldn't diagnose it. And this is the value of television, I was laying on the couch watching the Labor Day MDA Telethon and there was a woman on there who had Myasthenia Gravis and her symptoms were exactly like mine. That was on a weekend, a Labor Day weekend. The following Monday I called the MDA in Tulsa and said I think I have that. The MDA took me into their office and diagnosed me that same day and so I had a thymectomy, the removal of my thymus and other treatment – all of this was while I was in a wheelchair or on crutches and so it was a tough year. You can think about that one way, or you can think about it, and think, I'm alive. I've lived to have an exciting life since that time and so I can't fixate on having lingering injuries or health problems related to that. It's just all in your perspective and how you choose to think about it.

JE: And you were thirty? How old?

WM: I think I was thirty two.

JE: Thirty-two. Did you ever envision you would never come out of this? Did you think that or...

WM: I did more in relation to the Myasthenia Gravis than I did the car wreck because by the time I was diagnosed it had started to affect, it affects your muscles and so it had started to affect my breathing. I thought at that time that I might not survive that. But I had been blessed with just the way my mind clicks off that negative stuff. It just goes to something else.

JE: Depression set in?

WM: No.

JE: Because of that ability apparently to click off –

WM: Yeah, for some reason I thought most of my adult life that if you start focusing on all the things that are wrong, in your work or your health or your marriage or your children or you know the world, it's a slippery slope and I always thought that it's not a slope I want to get on. And so I think that we don't have much control over what the Creator sends our way in the course of our lifetime. We can't control everything. But we can control how we think about it. So that's been what I've done. I've made a conscious, deliberate choice that I was not going to do that. People can look at my health history, I've had cancer three times, I've had two kidney transplants and my response is, I could down a hospital corridor any day of the week and find people worse than I am. And people who don't have health insurance and I have health insurance.

JE: Yeah.

WM: So it's all a matter, you know, you can control it in your own head and if there a defining characteristic about me that's different, it's probably that. Otherwise, I'm pretty ordinary. I would have never been able to do the things that I've done if I wasn't a positive person. So I think that I was just given this gift. My Dad always described me as a sunny child. The only thing that differentiated me from all these other kids was that I'd always find, if there was something bad going on, I was the one who would say "Yeah but this" or "yeah but that" or you know find another way of looking at it.

JE: To help you come out of this too I think for therapy you continued to work?

WM: I continued to work. I came to work in a wheelchair. Ross Swimmer was always very good to me, and made sure that I had work – mostly writing at that time. But I stayed busy.

Chapter 11 — 8:05
Bell Community Project

John Erling: Along about '81 you headed up the Bell Community Revitalization Project

Wilma Mankiller: Right.

JE: Describe that, what was that?

WM: It was an experiment in development and I think an affirmation of the human spirit really. Bell is about 12 miles from where I live, and you know there's some similarities between that community and my community. But Bell had at that time in 1980, 1981, a lot of dilapidated houses, a lot of people living without indoor plumbing, probably 25 percent of the families. People would get water at night out of the outdoor spigot

at the Bell School, sometimes from unsafe creeks. Young people were leaving the community, school enrollment at Bell School was dropping. And Ross Swimmer had this idea that rather than helping people family-by-family and piece-by-piece that we should try to figure out a way to help an entire community at the same time. And he liked the idea of having people rebuild their communities using volunteers. It was my job, and Charlie's, Charlie was my partner on the project, to go out and meet with people and try to develop a partnership between the Cherokee Nation and the people in the community whereby the Cherokee Nation, through me and through Charlie, would provide an engineer, technical assistance and materials, and the people in Bell would agree to physically build their own water line and physically rehab their own houses and physically build new houses. And since they saw all around them that other people were just getting contractors to build their water lines, and just getting contractors to build their houses and give them the key that was not an easy task. So we met with them probably for a year. It was the people in that community who decided their top priority was water, their second priority was housing. That's what they wanted to work on. It was a very inspiring project. CBS Sunday Morning News came out to film the project. They thought they were going to film a failure. And filmed some of the meetings and some of the people talking about building a water line which they thought was inconceivable. And they were there to film the end of the project, which was a great success. Anyway that sort of set the foundation for the self-help movement within the Cherokee Nation now. It was a community that very few people believed in, and most people's attitude at that time was – well most of those people are living on welfare they're sure not going to get out and work as volunteers. Without thinking that thought through and saying work, the only place to work was in a chicken factory over in Arkansas it's not like they had a lot of options of places to go to work. For me, I think, I've always believed that poor people, not just Cherokee people and Native people but poor people in general have a much greater capacity for leadership and creativity, than they're ever given credit for. And that a lot of people who work with poor people want them to just be passive recipients of services and not really be involved. So Bell was really an affirmation for me that if you give people resources and an opportunity they will help themselves. They'll rise to the occasion, they'll help other people. And Bell, other people saw all the physical things that I described, dilapidated housing, lack of indoor plumbing, kids fighting, settling disputes with violence and that sort of thing. But we saw people who still help one another. We saw people who would hunt and fish, and then take whatever they caught or captured and give it to older people. We saw people getting wood for older people in the winter when they needed it for their heat. If there was a fire or something people came together and helped one another. So we saw, underneath what we were talking

about earlier with Chad something people external to the community didn't see. We saw a sense of reciprocity and interdependence. It didn't mean that they loved each other, but they would help each other. And so we tapped into that. The day that we started the Bell project after organizing people very tightly for a long period of time to work on the waterline and build the waterline themselves, we assigned certain families to a two-mile section. And then that would be done and then another family would take over the second two miles. And when we drove down to Bell that day I remember we had CBS Sunday Morning News there and Ross Swimmer was there and coming around that bend to where the project was starting I had a moment, where I hoped, I just thought, what if they don't show up after this is what I believed all my life was people would do this – so when we turned around the corner and there were cars there and people there and you know we had our old dilapidated backhoe ready to go. It was just an incredible sight. That was a very inspiring project, very inspiring project.

JE: All these were volunteers?

WM: All these were volunteers.

JE: To do projects that could require maybe skilled folks to do it. Did you have expertise? I mean some of these people probably didn't know about burying these water pipes. There was a way to do it right.

WM: Right. We had –

JE: Building houses and so forth –

WM: Yeah. We had a guy, named Jim Coffman who ran the Cherokee Water District who came over to a meeting one night and trained people on how to put the pipe together and then put it in the ditch. And then we had Charlie's brother, Johnson Soap, who'd actually worked on water lines and he was one of the volunteers in the community. Actually, there's a lot of expertise out in communities and sometimes people don't take the time to listen to their story – you know that probably from being an interviewer is that you can be sitting beside someone and ask them, "So tell me a little bit about yourself" – They're a decorated World War II veteran or you know or whatever, but we found a lot of expertise there was one guy his name was Shorty McChristian. He was a white guy. I don't think he knew had to read and write, I'm not sure. But his skill was fixing machines, and so he became the most important person in the community because we had this dilapidated equipment, and every time something would break down Shorty would be there to fix it. So we tried to make everyone feel important. And we did a little symbolic thing that I think meant a lot when you think about the community context that I talked about earlier. When we met in the community meeting when people decided to volunteer after a long period of talking and that sort of thing, we had a list up on a board we had flipcharts all over and people would literally go up and sign in front of the

community so they're making a public commitment –

JE: To that job –

WM: Yeah, yeah. To their two-mile section so there was a lot of nuance, people think now that a lot of that had to do with my personality and Charlie's personality and it had to do with having a very highly organized and very structured way of getting the volunteers to build the water line. Everybody knew exactly what they were to do, when they were to show up, when they were to finish, and what their role was.

JE: You reference Charlie who became a friend, you met him through the project?

WM: I met him through the project.

JE: And then he became an important part of your life?

WM: Right he did. He was separated and I was divorced and we were both very happy being separated and divorced. And I think we kinda fell into a relationship and married in 1985, and have been together ever since then.

JE: Charlie Soap were talking about –

WM: Charlie Soap, yeah.

JE: That must have been something to be friends and it didn't dawn on you that it could develop into more of a relationship.

WM: Right. Right.

JE: Did it one day occur to you or to him first or I don't know how –

WM: It occurred to him before it occurred to me. Because I remember asking one of my friends, she still teases me about that I said Charlie's asking me to go out, do you think I should do that? And she said, "Are you crazy?? Of course you should do that." But I remember asking her, do you think I should do that? I'm not sure about this. So.

JE: She probably says are you crazy because he's a very handsome man she probably…

WM: I don't know.

Chapter 12 — 5:45
Project Becomes Model/Deputy Chief

John Erling: The Bell Project became a model for other Native American tribes.

Wilma Mankiller: Yeah it did, it became a model for other Native American tribes, for other communities in this area. People all over the world have been interested in the proprietary methods of how you develop a community. And we've been thinking about developing a website that has the process of how you develop a community, most people who start some community project, or you know some thing that they're interested in that never goes anywhere. This, there are certain rules and things you need

to do and so we are thinking put that up. In a rural, low-income community, like I said earlier, one basic principle was everybody's important and there's a role for everybody.

JE: And it must have bonds today among people that go back to the Bell Community Project.

WM: Yes there is. Yes there is, but it was such a long time ago. I think that, that people remember that fondly. They remember people working together. It caused people to trust their own thinking to believe in themselves. It was an important project for them.

JE: You'd been friends of Ross Swimmer for some time –

WM: Yes.

JE: At some point and then he was the Principal Chief –

WM: Right.

JE: Of the Cherokee Tribe. And then because of the way he observed you and your work he asked you to run as Deputy Chief.

WM: Yes he did.

JE: Talk about that.

WM: That first race when I ran for Deputy Chief, looking back on it now, it was a very interesting time. Ross is a Republican. Ross was a banker. I came out of a social work, community organizing kind of a background. I'm definitely a Democrat. And I think that what Ross and I shared is that we both believed in people. Anyway when Ross asked me to run I thought about it and you know didn't want to do it at first. And then it occurred to me that I had spent a lot of my adult life trying to convince people in positions of power to support things that I believed and this would be an opportunity to allocate resources myself, or do something myself. And I also remember to this day we were doing housing, I was Director of Community Development at that time, and I remember a family, a Cherokee family living in a car. And they had a stove outside and clothes on a line outside and I knew something about housing so that had an impact on me. I could keep telling people you need to do something about housing, or I could do something myself. So I told him I would run. Ross had a rough time through that because most of the people who were running on his slate and his council opposed my running with them on their team. I would have been on their team, not just his team. And there was a lot of opposition to it.

JE: Because? Because you were a female?

WM: I think part of it was because I was female and part of it was because of my work. I was running around rural communities talking about grass democracy and things like that, and I was fairly outspoken. So I think part of it was because of the fact that I hadn't been home that long, at that time, maybe six years. I had no political experience, I was a Democrat and I was a woman. So I don't think it was just one thing, I think it was a lot

of different factors and so to Ross' credit, he said to the Council that were running on his slate, It was a Chief, Deputy Chief and a Tribal Council all ran together as a team, and they all said if he didn't get rid of me that they would not run with him. And he said, "Fine, then Wilma and I will run on our own." I don't know what his private conversations were, but I know publicly he never wavered in his support of me ever.

JE: Life could have been real easy for him –

WM: Life could have been very easy for him, he could have chose any number of people that had served on the Council and that sort of thing and I asked Ross one day, he was going through lymphoma during that time his Deputy Chief was running against him in that election and I asked him, "Why do you want me to run with you?" And I remember he was behind his desk and he came over and he sat by me, in a chair by me and he said, "Because you love what you're doing and you're honest with money." That's it.

JE: Wow.

WM: He's not a very profound person but that was his whole thing, and so we always were an odd pair. But we got along, respected one another. And Ross is the most secure male I know. So I could go out and do something opposite of what he believed and that was fine.

JE: So that would have been in nineteen –

WM: I ran first with him as Deputy Chief in 1983. At that time he became Deputy Chief and President of the Council too, so I eventually won that election, and Ross won the election. Ross resigned in 1985, two years into our four-year term, to go to the Department of the Interior under Ronald Reagan. By our Constitution, I automatically moved up to his position, and then a member of Council moved up to my position.

JE: So this decision with Ross Swimmer going to Washington and you becoming Principal Chief had to have gone over like a lead balloon sort of –

WM: It did. I don't know if you remember Lynn Howard who worked here forever, but she was in public relations and she has a photo of me being sworn in because I had to be sworn in the day he resigned and he was in Washington and then I was formally sworn in later and I'm obviously crying, this is not something where I was saying, "Oh good, you know, he's gone and now I'm Chief!" I was thinking I am not ready for this.

JE: Yeah, you were two years into being –

WM: A Deputy Chief –

JE: Deputy Chief –

WM: And I'd never served in political office before that.

JE: And probably just beginning to feel a little comfortable with that –

WM: Absolutely, when Ross left, he left me with his staff and his Council. Over time, I developed a relationship of trust with them but it took some doing.

Chapter 13 — 6:34
Opposition to Wilma as Principal Chief

JE: Were you the first principal female Chief of any tribe in the United States?

WM: No. Only of the Cherokee Nation, there were other Chiefs of other tribes when I was elected.

JE: Okay. But you were in this man's world here

WM: Right.

JE: In the Cherokee Nation. So talk about the resistance, the struggle, maybe death threats those type of things.

WM: Most of that occurred during the first election of Deputy Chief, the real strong opposition to me. When you look back on it now, it's actually funny. We would drive from Stilwell to Tahlequah and there would be a Swimmer Mankiller sign and someone would have painted out my name. So a lot of the sentiment was not toward him, toward me. Another place here going out on Highway 82 someone tried to burn down the sign. So some of it was just stupid stuff. One night we came back from a meeting, I'd left my car in Stilwell, the tires were slashed on my car. Only two really scary things that happened to me, are: One, someone kept calling my house and then there was a funny sound and then they'd hang up. And Charlie listened one time and it was the sound of a gun. So someone was doing that, and that was pretty scary. And then another thing which sounds innocent – you'd have to be there to understand how weird it was. But I was in a parade, this is after Ross left I think, I'm not positive. And I looked, something caused me to look to the right and there was a guy standing against a wall doing a gun thing, shooting me with his finger. But it was the way he looked that was chilling. So it was just an interesting time. I think I'm pretty thick skinned and don't dwell a lot on personal attacks or anything like that but I think the most difficult time for me as a woman was that first time when I was out running for Deputy Chief and people just thought – I remember people saying I didn't have a snowball's chance, and just stupid things like that – were very hurtful. The conventional wisdom was that there was no way I could win. So then I won three times, three, four-year elections.

JE: As the public then reacts to you then you had to sit down as Principal Chief on the Tribal Council and they were all men.

WM: No, they weren't all men there were some women.

JE: Did you feel that you had then the instant respect of them or was that kind of –

WM: No I did not.

JE: Or what that sort of a contentious relationship at the beginning, is that true?

WM: I think that they resented my being there, most of them. And I think they were

determined to give me a hard time. In the beginning, probably the first two or three years I just stayed very level in thinking. Maybe it was from living in a housing project, but I had good street smarts. And so I could anticipate a problem before it occurred, and always handle it diplomatically. And so they got the picture that they weren't going to rattle me after what I'd been through there wasn't a whole lot that was going to rattle me, so I just stayed steady. I stayed steady and kept focusing on the work. And I think we finally developed a relationship then, but I don't think they respected me at first.

JE: Is that because you were a female?

WM: I think that that's only part of it. People focus on that alone and I think that's certainly a big part of it, but I also think it was because I was different and –

JE: You were an activist.

WM: I was an activist and because of my politics and because you know I just – and I hadn't paid my dues. As you know the Cherokee Nation is a big tribe, much smaller then, but still a big tribe, and running for office in the Cherokee Nation is like running for Congress. I remember one fellow saying that I wasn't cut out of the right cloth to be Chief or something like that. I mean it was just really, kind of, you know what I mean it was more of a class thing. I think, there was being female and there was some "she's different" kind of stuff. And just also, my being very direct and outspoken.

JE: You're forty, forty two years old at this time, right?

WM: Right, yeah.

JE: Was that held against you? Was the Tribal Council, were they mostly older than you?

WM: They were mostly older but there was some not much older, but the majority of them did not support me, and I don't think respected me. By the time I left they did. But that first – you know I remember asking Ross, which seems really stupid now – but I remember asking Ross when they first resisted me so much, should I give them a copy of my resume? So they can see some of the things I've done? This was politics, so my resume was not going to make much difference to any of them. But I'm not a very divisive person. I don't believe in solving problems in a divisive way, so I just stayed steady, was respectful to everybody no matter how they treated me. I tried to keep them involved and tried to be diplomatic and we eventually managed to get along.

JE: I suppose you could have fought, but you didn't but yet because you didn't you had to show strong leadership. I mean, maybe they never thought you were passive, but if you didn't fight back?

WM: I thought about that but I think two things occurred, one is that I think that because I would handle whatever they threw at me in a pretty diplomatic way, I think that there was a danger that they would think that. But on the other hand, if I said I was going to do something, I did it and they saw that. I remember telling the Council in a very nice

way that if they voted against our putting this Job Corps in Tahlequah that they were all opposed to – there's a fellow from Delaware County who wanted us to put up a community center and some kind of small business there and I said, "If you vote against this, I'll veto your project." And he did, and I did. So, it was polite and respectful but they also understood that I – I meant what I was going to say. And so, and I think sometimes because I didn't bang on the table or something I remember telling people here who were running here unlicensed, wildcat smoke shops, if you don't come in and start paying taxes and come under our purview and let us inspect your facilities and all that, then we're going to close you down. And they didn't, and I did. And they were shocked when we actually sent the Marshals out and closed them down. Chad was one of the people that went out and closed them down. So I think, you know though I was soft-spoken, relatively soft-spoken and diplomatic and polite and I think that they eventually began to see that I meant what I said, so that helped.

Chapter 14 — 5:18
Advice to Female Leaders

John Erling: You Father was an activist too, wasn't he?

Wilma Mankiller: My Father was. He was always in the community, not to the extent that I am, he saw his main role as keeping us fed, but he was involved in the community, yes.

JE: And then you were already elected to, you've already referred to it though let's do it again here, you were elected on your own in 1987.

WM: Right.

JE: And then reelected for three terms was it?

WM: I was re-elected in '87 and then in '91. And then I didn't run in the '95 election.

JE: And by healthy margins too, I mean –

WM: By healthy margins, yeah.

JE: You proved yourself –

WM: Yeah.

JE: Accomplishments that you were most proud of or, or the most effective as you were Chief?

WM: I think probably being able to facilitate a group of health professionals. First of all I never did anything by myself. Anything that I've ever done in my life has been with a team. I think the fact that we were able to set out a plan over a decade – say we're going to build free-standing health clinics, develop a prevention program and then actually stay focused on that and get it done. That sounds, you know, not that exciting – but at that

time we had no gaming money. So we just had to figure out how to work with the Indian Health Service and the Congress to get things built. I told the people in Stilwell that I would build them a clinic when I was first elected and I was going to get it done one way or another. So we built a clinic in Stilwell and Sallisaw and by the time I left we had bought a hospital in Jay, turned it into a clinic and started building another clinic. Just in terms of just staying focused on a goal, that's probably very high on my list.

JE: Let me come back once again to being a female leader. He we are in 2009 and talking about this, you were leading the way in many ways in the '80s and '90s.

WM: Right.

JE: Where do you think we are today, where now it's more accepted for females to be in leadership positions? Are we still behind in that area?

WM: I think we're behind as a nation, I think it was interesting and very difficult to watch the Hillary Clinton campaign play itself out. It was just very fascinating to watch that. There was still more opposition to her being a woman than I, than I thought there would be. And some truly, truly sexist things were said about her. So that was really tough to watch. She's a highly qualified candidate, as was Barack Obama. So I've thought a lot about that issue after this election started. I started to write about it, but it's too complicated, it would take me a lot of time to think through all of that. And I think that watching both her and Sarah Palin, who I have nothing in common with an probably wouldn't want to be in a room with, but watching some of the comments about her I think they are terribly inappropriate. So watching both those things I think has been very, very difficult and so I have to think about that and think about where we are and one of the things I'm interested in is women's leadership. Whether there's a different way that women lead. Just women's leadership in general so I'd like to actually be thinking about that issue some.

JE: And no matter how sophisticated we are, maybe the media just switches and they just almost like they can't help themselves they treat a woman differently.

WM: Yeah, they do. They do. And they can't help themselves. I mean I think that people tend to overlook the enormous intellect and skills of women. And if you really think about it, men bring certain attributes to leadership that we need and women bring certain attributes to leadership, and we need both those attributes. If you'd asked me 30 years ago I'd have said by now half of our Senate would be women. So I think we've got a long way to go.

JE: So maybe students listening to this, due to today's technology, we – who knows, 25, 50 years from now –

WM: Yeah.

JE: And so young women –

WM: Yeah.

JE: I know you're asked the question, what kind of advice do you give, let's say young women in college who are looking for careers and they should be looking at areas of leadership.

WM: They should be looking at areas of leadership. I think that it's very easy to sit around and say, they should solve the problem, I don't know who "they" is but, everybody's always talking oh they should solve that environmental problem or – they should solve that housing problem but I think that what women need to do is that they need to stop looking elsewhere for leadership and look to themselves for leadership. So I think that's very important. Also, I think it's really important for women to define for themselves what it means to be a woman. I have two daughters and during most of their young adulthood, they're bombarded with magazines and peer groups and that sort of thing, to focus on how they look, rather than who they are, and they're both very beautiful. But I think that girls should not let other people define for them what it means to be a woman. I think they should not let magazines, or the culture of the larger society, or their boyfriends, influence who they are as a person. That they need to figure out how to define for themselves, what does it mean to be a woman, for me? And that sounds like a small task, but it's a really big task.

Chapter 14 — 5:08
Gloria Steinham – Kidney Transplant

John Erling: Activist Berry Friedan said, "No girl child today should be responsibly be brought up to be a housewife."

Wilma Mankiller: Right.

JE: You knew her –

WM: I did –

JE: But you also, I think were closer to Gloria Steinem.

WM: Yes, I'm still very close to Gloria.

JE: Talk to us about Gloria Steinem, she's an American feminist icon, journalist, social, political activist. Those of you who are interested in her, you can Google her and find out she was a Founder of New York Magazine in the '60s and developed a movie on Playboy in 1985. It was an investigative report on how the women of Playboy were treated. I could go on and on about her. But you became friends with her, was that back in your California days?

WM: No, I met her after I'd moved here and I was asked to join the Board of the Ms. Foundation for Women. Gloria founded the Ms. Magazine and Ms. Magazine helped set

up the Ms. Foundation for Women. Which is a very successful foundation for women. And I was asked to join their Board in the '80s. Gloria actually called with the invitation. And so when I met her we just clicked and became friends and I know much more of the private Gloria than I do the public Gloria. She's very witty and very kind and absolutely totally dedicated to helping the world understand the value of women and making sure there's gender equity in the lives and work of women everywhere. She works on it every day.

JE: Did you help her when she actively campaigned for the equal rights amendment? Were you involved in any of that?

WM: I was involved in that a bit, not totally.

JE: And she actually founded or co-founded groups like the Women's Action Alliance.

WM: Right.

JE: The Coalition of Labor Union Women, The Women's Media Center and Choice USA.

WM: Women's Political Caucus. Lots of different things, she's just a whirling dervish. And she's 75 now and hasn't slowed down a bit.

JE: Big age difference here, you're –

WM: I'm 63 and she's 75. Yeah. Gloria was married at our house in rural Adair County, when she married very late in life.

JE: Interesting story again about your physical condition here. You've had a physical set back as you were Chief. You needed a kidney transplant.

WM: I did, yeah.

JE: And who gave you a kidney?

WM: My brother Don gave me a kidney. Gloria found my doctor in Boston. He was a transplant surgeon that had helped her friend get a transplant. I kept getting sicker, and didn't like the people I was seeing. So she said you need to go see this guy. A very prominent, sort of the grandfather of kidney transplantation and so she called him and I went down there. When I had my transplant she came down. When I was treated for lymphoma, she came down and brought bright, red things to decorate my room and called doctors and convinced me I needed to see people from The Harvard Mind Body Institute. And she would sometimes just sit with me when I was sick. I remember eating Hershey Kisses and watching Helen Mirren movies with her. One of a big thing of hers is that she eats Hershey Kisses. She doesn't eat sugar, and I don't eat much sugar, but we did that day.

JE: So in your relatively young life here.

WM: Yeah.

JE: I mean I don't know you've had four of five major health issues that you've had in your life –

WM: Right.

JE: Still active and moving ahead and you're to be admired not just that you're a female leader, but that you've overcome those issues as you progressed.

WM: Right.

JE: And I guess, you've explained it earlier you're able to mentally just –

WM: Absolutely – it's all in perspective. It's all in perspective. It's just a matter of I feel so blessed to be alive. ????? and it's kind of a cliche but I just feel so happy, so fortunate to be alive that I'm not going to complain about challenges that I have because I am here and I am able to enjoy life. It's just a matter of the way you think about it.

JE: Your Nation, the Cherokee Nation –

WM: Right.

JE: And do you see a future have you visioned them 25, 50 years from now, what you see for them? Is it vastly different from what it is now, or any comment on that?

WM: I think that when I think of the Cherokee Nation I don't think of the government necessarily, or the structures, or the institutions, but I think of the people. And my thought is that if Cherokee People have survived such unspeakable tragedy over and over and over again throughout history and they've managed to pick themselves up and keep moving forward and keep their vision fixed on the future, then I think future generations will do that. A simpler way of saying that is – that if you want to see our future, look at our past. If we've survived all that and we're still standing in 2009. We'll be different 25 or 50 years from now. We're different than we were 25 or 50 years ago, but we'll still be here.

JE: Thank you so–

WM: You're welcome.

JE: Much for this time.

WM: You're welcome.

JE: This was very good.

Chapter 15 — :43
Conclusion

John Erling: Thank you for listening to Wilma Mankiller share her story. Her voice may have inspired you to research her life of leadership and community building. In spite of her various battles with personal health issues, Wilma was a fighter who remained strong, faced her problems with courage and maintained a positive attitude. For more details about Wilma's life we encourage you to visit our "For Further Reading" Section here at voicesofoklahoma.com.

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