

# A Conversation With Walter Pinchbeck

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This conversation was recorded by Professor Elades shortly before the death of Mr. Walter Pinchbeck, a beloved member of our community. We reprint the article as a tribute to Mr. Walter Pinchbeck, a gentle and caring man who contributed mightily to the character of "his boys" who scouted with him. Professor Elades is a history professor at Pembroke State University and co-author of "The Only Land I Know," a general and well-received history of the Lumbee Indians. The article appeared originally in Pembroke Magazine.

DAVID K. ELIADES

## A CONVERSATION WITH WALTER PINCHBECK

In our conversation Walter Pinchbeck remarked at the start that he was "a common man, not well-educated, an unexceptional man." Nothing could be farther from the truth. Mr. Pinchbeck's life has been one of adventure and accomplishment; he has done many things and seen much, but even more, he has been an influential man, helping to shape the lives of hundreds of boys and young men through his long years of association with the Boy Scouts of America. Indeed, my own memories of this man go back over twenty years to a period when the barriers of segregation were just beginning to break down. I still recall Mr. Pinchbeck and his Lumbee scout troop coming to various jamborees and camporees and showing the rest of us what scouting was all about. Inevitably they were the best all-around troop present, excelling at everything from knot-tying to first aid. Moreover, Mr. Pinchbeck and his troop won the admiration, respect, and friendship of all wherever they went. No one who knows Walter Pinchbeck could ever accept his description of himself—he is an uncommon man educated in the ways of the world—an exceptional man who need never apologize.

**DKE:** Mr. Pinchbeck, you're not from this area originally. Would you tell me a



WALTER PINCHBECK (Photo by PSU Information Service)

little bit about yourself?

**WP:** I was born in 1904 in Missoula, Montana, in a freight wagon. My Daddy was a full-blooded Cree. He didn't want to live on a reservation—life on a reservation was tough—and so he became a blacksmith. My Mother was also a full-blooded Cree.

You know, it's the darndest thing. A few years ago I was talking with this fellow Norman Macleod—he teaches English here at the college—and learned that he was in Missoula during the same years I was. We never met there, but isn't it something that over sixty years later we both ended up in Pembroke.

But to get back to my story, when I was about six or seven my daddy decided that I should go to school. He didn't have any education but thought I should. He sent me to a Catholic boarding school in Missoula. There were about one hundred white students there and me. At the time I couldn't speak

English, had to learn. No one there liked me because I was an Indian, except for one little girl. There was one little girl who was nice to me, a pretty little girl. At night I would cry because I was homesick and that little girl would come and crawl in bed with me and put her arms around me to get me to stop crying. I was about seven at the time. I've often wondered what happened to that girl, she's probably a grandmother somewhere. I stayed at that school until I was about eleven and then left to hobo over the country. Hoboed as far south as the Gulf of Mexico and then back north again. Went where the climate suited my clothes and pocketbook. During that time I decided to become a professional hobo. A fellow told me that if I was going to be a professional, I ought to put some money in a bank so I'd always have something to fall back on if I needed it. I did that—put a little money in several banks and it did come in handy later. As a hobo I always followed the flight of the geese—when they went south, I went south, and when they went north, I went north. Didn't pay any attention to the flight of ducks cause ducks don't have any sense.

**DKE:** While hobbing gave you a chance to see much of the country and meet many different people, you still had to live. You told me once that you'd worked at many different jobs in your life. What kind of jobs have you had?

**WP:** You're right. I've had all kinds of jobs. You know when you're traveling around it's important, when you go look for work, to claim to be a professional regardless of the job—doesn't matter whether you're going to work in a man's garden or break wild horses—you get the job if you can convince the man you're a professional. I once took part in the Calgary Stampede—a big rodeo in Canada—and came within a few seconds of winning big money by riding a wild horse—what they call bronco busting in western rodeos—but me and that horse parted company before I could do it. I've been a big game guide in Canada. Killed a couple of grizzlies who got in my way. I can remember taking parties of hunters out for twenty dollars a day. Took one English aristocrat out who was an interesting fellow. He was an excellent shot so long as he was shooting at a target but he always got "buck fever"—shook like a leaf in a high wind—when he aimed at a live target. He'd shoot and shoot and wouldn't hit nothing. Scared all the game for miles around just blasting away. Finally solved the problem by getting behind him and killing the animals for him. He went home a "successful" big game hunter with antlers and everything but I don't believe he ever did hit anything. I've also tried my hand at trapping and panning for gold—both are hard ways to make a living.

**DKE:** I seem to recall that you told me once you'd even tried your hand at boxing.

**WP:** Hey, your memory is good. In the late 1920's I was working at a loggin camp in Washington. It was tough work with tough men. Doing that kind of work you just naturally stay in shape. One of the ways we killed time when we were off was by boxing. I was light—135-138 pounds—but I could beat anybody in that camp. One day we went to Seattle. Went to a gym to work out. Fellow came over and asked me if I wanted to spar some. Got in the ring and this guy said don't hit too hard. Let's just mess around. Well, I don't pull no punches. He left himself open and I knocked him out. Then another guy came up and said he wanted to try me. And the same thing. Then this fellow came over and said the Pacific Coast Lightweight Champ was looking for a sparring partner. He said the champ wants to work out with you and would pay \$25.00 per round. I watched him for a few minutes and knew he was good but he looked like he had a tendency to get careless, so I agreed. Thought I'd see what I could do. So help me gosh, I caught him on his weak point. I dropped his guard a little and I got him. I jabbed him with a left and hit him with a right and spun him around and hit him again. I knocked him down twice that day but he finally knocked me out. I never knew how he did it but he did. Guess that's why he was the champ. When I went into the service I continued to fight. Fought across the Pacific to Manila where this mixed Oriental—he was part Filipino, Chinese, Japanese and I don't know what all—knocked me out. Never felt so bad in my life as from being knocked out that time. That's when I decided to quit boxing, after that mixed fellow did me in.

**DKE:** Obviously you tried your hand at a number of things during your hobbing career but does any one episode stand out in your mind, any one incident that you recall more vividly than others?

**WP:** Well, actually there're a couple of things that I especially remember. I was once in a train wreck in the Rocky Mountains. I said to myself before it happened that the engineer was drunk, crazy, or blind because he was going way too fast for these mountains. That's something you learn if you hobo

long enough—when a train is being run tight. Well, he hit a curve and didn't make it. I was in a boxcar that rolled three times. There was me, a Frenchman, and a Irishman. The other two tried to get out and got messed up—I stayed in and survived.

But you know the toughest spot I've ever been in was jury duty. I was the only one on the jury that could read. It was a case where one Indian had killed another Indian, using a .30 caliber Winchester. We could have acquitted that fellow if he had shot him from the front but he'd shot him from the back. Used a soft-nose bullet—made a small hole in the back but a mighty big one in the front. Darned if that fellow didn't then carry his victim a hundred miles to try and save him. Didn't work. We had to convict him and he was hung. This was up in British Columbia in Canada. I sure didn't like that business.

**DKE:** You didn't spend all your life hobbing. What else did you do before you came to Pembroke?

**WP:** I'm coming to that. But first let me tell you one other story from my hobbing days. I was traveling through Saskatchewan on the Canadian Railroad "blind baggage." That means I was riding between two baggage cars. We pulled into town and stopped. I was just lazying away the time when this policeman with a beard to his hips showed up and threw his forty-five in my face. He said I was trespassing and to get off that damn train. All the time he kept waving that thing in my face and so I reached out and grabbed it. Darn thing didn't even have a bullet in it. He then ordered me to go to jail, and so I went, not having any place else in particular to go. We got there and the door was locked and he couldn't find the key. We broke into the jail with an ax and I cleaned it up. I was sentenced to two weeks. It didn't really turn out to suit him, though it was fine with me—I had a roof over my head and he had to feed me. After one week he wanted me to leave but I said I better serve out my sentence. From then on that got to be a right sociable place. In fact I took a job there when I left jail. When I finally left, it was just like I came—on the train.

But you asked what else I did as a young man. In 1929 me and another fellow joined the army in Salt Lake City, Utah. Both of us got sent to the Philippines. During the trip over, our ship was caught in a storm—somebody said it was a typhoon—whatever it was, that boat heaved here and there and most everybody got sick. I sure was glad when we got off that boat.

I had a good time in the service. Got a chance to visit Formosa and mainland China. I was given a twelve-hour pass in China but went AWOL for two days. I wanted to see the Great Wall of China and so went. That thing was built by slave labor and is 2500 miles long. They say that sick slaves were killed and buried in it. Had my picture took there hugging a girl. Later I visited Japan—jumped ship and got drunk as a "fiddler's bitch." Then on the way back to the states, got in a barroom fight—that was more blessed fun. My outfit finally got back to San Francisco in 1931. After we landed, the army said all men who want to be discharged step forward. I stepped and got out of the army with an honorable discharge.

**DKE:** When did you come to Pembroke?

**WP:** December 28, 1931. I remember it well. I'd been hobbing across the country and just jumped off the train right in front of Old Main, a building of Pembroke State University. The next morning I went into town and ate breakfast. I asked if they served eggs and ham; they said yes and I said I'll take six eggs, six pieces of toast, and the biggest piece of ham you've got. All that cost me 35 cents.

**DKE:** What made you decide to settle down here?

**WP:** Well, I'll tell you. I stayed because of the people I found here. They were Indians but weren't like those elsewhere. They had ingenuity and ambition—they could compete against the white race—a tough people. But that's not the only reason I decided to stay. There used to be a little wooden church here—a Holiness Church—and they had a big meeting there and I went. I saw a girl there. I asked a fellow who she was and he told me her name was Bertha Lowry. I told this guy you're looking at my wife. He said no, I want to marry her. I got myself introduced to her and though it took me two years to land her, I finally did. We have three boys and three girls. I've had a good life and a lot of fun.

**DKE:** How were Indians treated when you were traveling around the country and what kind of reception did you get when you settled in Pembroke?

Continued on page 8

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