



Courtesy Minerva Allen

Minerva Allen

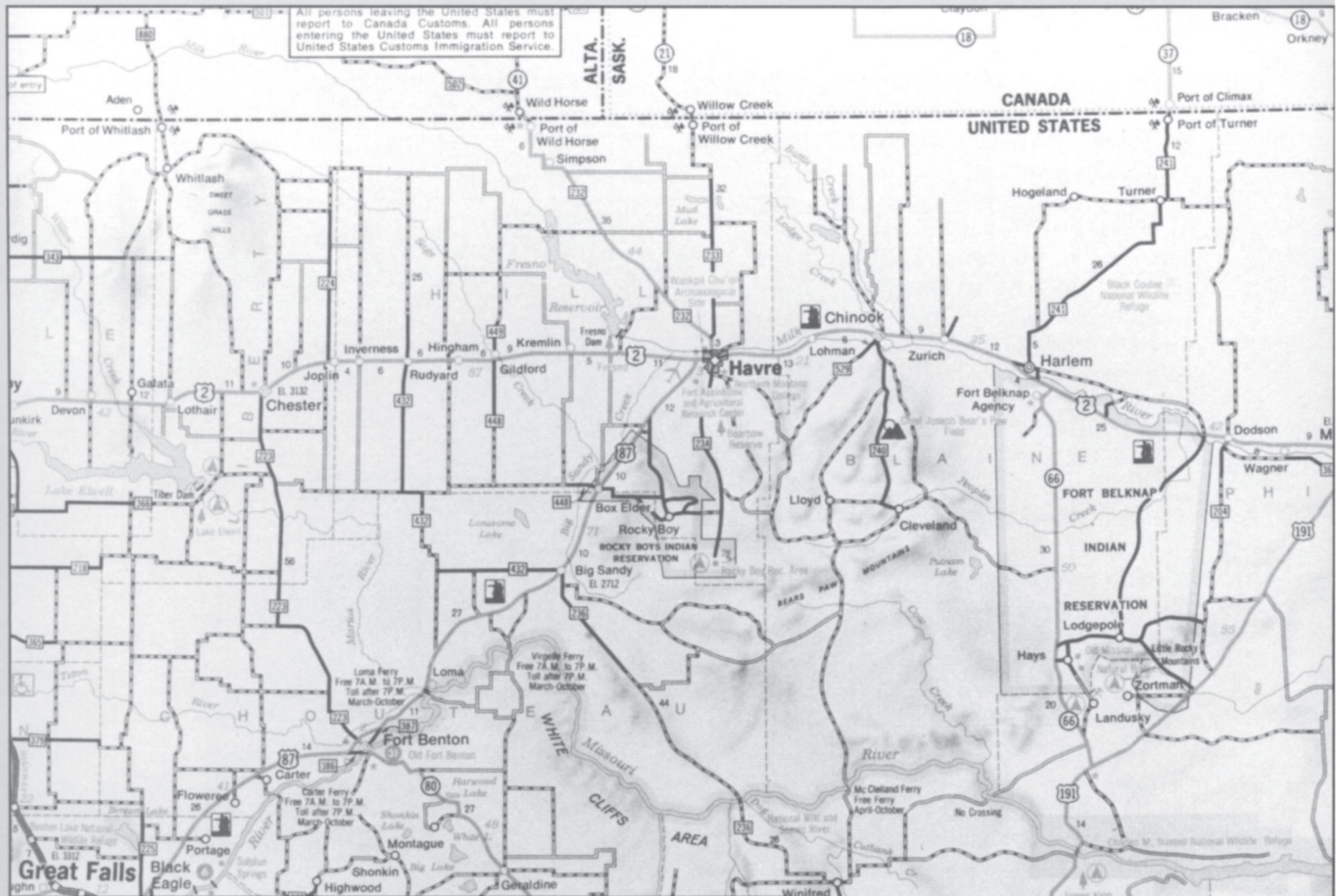
# Minerva Allen

*Educator  
Linguist  
Poet*

Rarely does a single personal history reflect so succinctly an individual's struggle and determination to make life mean something. But then, as Minerva Allen's husband told her on one occasion, "You've always hauled your own water and chopped your wood and did all your own work."

Born in 1936 in Big Warm, a small community three miles south of Lodge Pole, in north central Montana, Minerva Allen, the daughter of a French Chippewa father and an Assiniboine-Gros Ventre mother, grew up on the Fort Belknap Reservation with her grandparents. Her grandfather always insisted that she "get educated." So she did. At five, she already spoke two Indian languages, Assiniboine and Gros Ventre, then learned English singing songs with her teacher. Until she graduated from eighth grade at age twelve, she tutored other Indian students in the rural reservation school.

She then traveled to Flandreau, South Dakota, to continue her schooling, but the death of her grandfather the same year brought her back to Lodge Pole. Nevertheless, she finished high school at age seventeen, and, when an uncle secured a \$2,000 loan for her, she made plans to attend Northern Montana State College at Havre. But her parents divorced, and her mother, working as a cook for a rancher near Hogeland, froze to death when her car became stuck in the snow eight miles from the ranch. Allen went to live with her grandmother, then with one aunt and another. Eventually she married and



raised fourteen children, eight of her own and six who had been abandoned.

Still, she says, "I always had in the back of my mind that I was going to finish school regardless because I had promised my grandpa." In a way, she did finish her education. She went on to obtain a bachelor's degree from Central Michigan University, a master's degree from Northern Montana State College, and did additional coursework at Weber State College in Ogden, Utah. On the other hand, her education continues. Since 1970, she has held various critical positions with the Hays-Lodge Pole school system. Head Start director for eight years, Allen also helped establish such school-related special efforts as a foster grandparents program and bilingual education. Currently, she is a school administrator at Hays. She has written several books, now used as guides for bilingual projects elsewhere, that translate Indian history and folklore into English, and she has published two books of her own poetry.

What follows is an excerpt from an extended oral history interview of Minerva Allen conducted by Montana Historical Society Oral Historian John Terreo in June 1989 at the public school in Hays. Edited for *Montana* by the publications staff, the interview was transcribed by Carol Frasier of the Society's library staff and is on file among the Society's extensive oral history collections.



The Milk River and U.S. Highway 2 cut through the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation shown in the upper right corner of this section of the Montana state map.

**TERREO:** Minerva, why not start at the beginning? What of your parents, where you were born, your childhood . . . ?

**ALLEN:** I was born in 1936 at home in a log house on April 24, and they had four feet of snow. They couldn't take my mother to the hospital so they had two grandmas, two old ladies that came from Lodge Pole, one was A Lady Goes Flying and the other one was Prisoner Wing and they were the midwives. My grandmother Lucille told me that I took a good thirty-eight hours to be born.

They took me out and held me up to the sun, and they asked the sun to keep me so that I would live and have children and grow up. In those days they thought of women as people to just have children and they didn't do anything else. Then when the doctor came he just looked at us and we were fine.

The Assiniboine tradition is that the firstborn child of the whole family is raised by their grandparents. So I was raised by my grandparents in the traditional way. I dressed traditionally, except the only thing, I was blond and light, you know, so then it was really an ordeal for me to be raised as a traditional person because everybody called me "white woman" because in that time Indians never really married white people.

There were few automobiles. The house I lived in was a one-room log house. On one side was the kitchen area and the other side was the sleeping area. As kids we usually slept four in a bed. I slept with my aunts in one bed and my grandfolks had their bed. That was during the winter months. During the summer months everybody slept outside in tents and tepees because the house seemed to get full of bugs. Different things came in at that



Al Lucke Collection, Northern Montana College, Havre

Tepees rise beyond agency buildings in Hays, in the southwest corner of the Fort Belknap Reservation, about 1953.

time because of no water or sprays. We had to haul our water in barrels. We would hook the team up and we'd go get three or four barrels of water. We had to go after water twice a week. When we bathed we all bathed in the tub. Usually the cleanest bathed first and the dirtiest last. Everything was shared. If it was summertime we never bathed in the tub. We always went to the river.

I spoke two [Indian] languages [Gros Ventres and Assiniboine]. I spoke the Gros Ventre language because my grandfather's people were from Hays. At that time the mission was here and all the Gros Ventre people lived around the mission. All the Assiniboine people lived over at Lodge Pole. My grandfather was half Gros Ventres, so I came with him when we came over here. In those days we traveled mostly by wagon and team. When we went we camped—took the tent, and everything. When we went to somebody's house we just put our tent and our stove and stuff up and camped just like campers. We would stay there for like three, four days so my grandpa could visit with relatives. So, for me to understand what they were

talking about I spoke the Gros Ventres language, too.

My grandfather always believed in education. He sent his kids off to school, to the boarding schools they had. They had boarding schools for Indians all over the United States, some to Carlisle, to Chemwa, Flandreau way down in Chilocco, Oklahoma, and all these different places where they sent Indians to be educated. See, that was the great era of sending Indians away to teach them English—to become citizens. So they were willing to send the Indian kids away, sometimes for twelve months, sometimes for four years, sometimes for nine months at the minimum.

My grandfather always had his children—younger children that weren't married—sent away, like to Chemwa, Oregon, so they could go to school and become high school graduates. He always believed in education but he never spoke hardly any English. I had to speak to him in Indian.

When I was five years old he sent me to day school. They didn't start children until they were six years old [but] he asked the teacher if I could stay with her and learn English. That was really an ordeal for me because I

really couldn't speak to the teacher. We did a lot of sign language and body language. She taught me English by singing. She taught me to play the piano. She'd sing a song and then I'd sing it. That was how I learned to speak English—by singing.

My grandfather was an Indian policeman for twenty-five years before he died. So he was really an advocate of education and he always told me that I was different. He always told me, "In your time it is going to be different. You are going to have to have education if you are gonna survive because everything is gonna change." My grandfather was a great philosopher.

**TERREO:** The teacher you started learning English from, was she white?

**ALLEN:** She was white. She must have been Italian, Polish, or German. I don't exactly know what her nationality was. She did have a little accent and she had a daughter and they taught school from first grade to the eighth at

Lodge Pole. I became a tutor after I learned English. All the kids my age and older . . . they were [in the first grade] because they did not know English.

**TERREO:** You were six years old and you were a tutor in English?

**ALLEN:** I was the tutor in English since I learned it a lot better than the others. I would sit with them and say, "me," "spot," or "run." I would sit with them. I would know when they had to go to the bathroom.

This school as I remember had a room with a little kitchen. It was the first time I ever saw dolls, beds, and dishes, and everything my size. I can remember setting the table and saying "dish" in Indian and saying it in English to the white kids. We did hands-on types of things in the playroom, and that's how I tutored a lot of the kids because they would poke me and they'd say, "What's this in Indian?" "Naydockoo." I'd just tell them "dish."

So I worked a lot like that. By the time I was in the seventh

grade—there were boys in that grade twenty and twenty-five years old learning that language. They weren't married or anything but just so far back in learning. When I graduated eighth grade I was twelve, and my grandfolks sent me to Flandreau, South Dakota, where I was a freshman. This was the beginning of the late 1940s or so. Then, everything was changed. The war changed everything. My aunts were wearing high heels and nylon stockings after the war. The traditional clothes started to go out and English started to come in really strong. The assimilation and the changeover—the transition in those days after the war was tremendous.

**TERREO:** So you were very self-sufficient then in comparison to what came later and right now. Are you saying that during and after the Second World War, people became less self-sufficient?

**ALLEN:** I don't know how you'd explain that. How they became like, to me, I thought they

Henry Chopwood stands next to Coming Day (also known as Returning Hunter) in Lodge Pole circa 1930. About eighty years old when the picture was taken, Coming Day had fought in the Indian wars.



Courtesy Minerva Allen



MHS Photograph Archives

St. Paul's Mission in Hays as it looked in the late 1920s or early 1930s

became bums. That's a really hard term there, [but] they became more dependent on the federal government—the Bureau of Indian Affairs for commodities, or rations. They became more dependent on the BIA to help them, and the BIA seemed to like [it].

**TERREO:** This moving away from self-sufficiency, if the parents are not being required to be so self-sufficient is it communicated to the next generation?

**ALLEN:** They lost a lot during this transition. There are surveys now saying that the kids or Indian adult students who kept their traditional values tend not to go into drugs and alcohol. And the kids that don't have an identity, the kids that have not been raised in the traditional way or have not been involved with parents who are really responsible, they tend to lose their identity.

**TERREO:** It seems they had to choose between traditional values and those manifested by the prosperity of the modern white society. Many Indians it

seems felt the traditional ways were no longer needed.

**ALLEN:** Yes. They liked the better and faster transportation. A lot of them tended to just stay in town and drink, and some became hookers and that which was never done before and which was frowned upon by the elders.

**TERREO:** You were saying that you were sent to South Dakota for high school. What was that like for you?

**ALLEN:** It was really hard. A year before I was sent away, my grandfather died. When he died he called me to his death bed. He said, "I want you to promise me that you will become educated and that you will be the first one to go ahead and do this for all of the family." You know, he put a lot on my shoulders, and I told him I would. I promised him I would do this. That was always behind in my mind.

He died that year. Then my grandmother and I and my two aunts were left. They [the government] didn't start my grandmother's pension right away. My grandmother was illiterate. She couldn't speak

English. She was learning. She was young-minded. I started to teach her English. I said, "Grandma, you gotta do this in order to order stuff at the store. You gotta do this."

When we left there we were almost destitute. We left the home place, which is still there. We moved to Lodge Pole, which was a bigger settlement than the one we were at then. I remember we were living in a one-room house that had a dirt floor. We rented, and I don't know why we

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**"We got so hungry that at one time we had a man come and kill one of our teams so we could eat one of the horses."**

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moved from our own house, which had a wooden floor. I never could get that out of my mind. My grandma said it was because it was closer to people, and since we were women it would be better. We would get more help than if we stayed out there on the homestead, which was five miles from here.

We got so hungry that at one

time we had a man come and kill one of our teams so we could eat one of the horses. My grandma had not gotten any help at all. So then finally when we moved to Lodge Pole she got welfare for me because I was a minor and the other girls were eighteen or older. So she got welfare for me, and I remember she was getting thirty-five dollars a month for me, and that is what we lived on. Later when her son got killed in the war—about a year after we moved to Lodge Pole she got his pension monthly. Then we were better off, and we could move to a better house with wooden floor and beds and everything.

I always had in the back of my mind that I was going to finish school regardless because I had promised my grandpa, and this was what I was going to do. I finished high school when I was seventeen. When I left there I wanted to join the Air Force really bad. There was no money to send me to college. I wanted to go to college, and I thought if I went into the Air Force I'd be able to pay my way through college. But I was only seventeen. I went to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, where I got my physical and I enlisted and everything. They said no. I would have to have my folks sign something allowing me to go. By then my mother and dad had divorced. I was seven when that happened. In those days marriage between people that weren't of the same race didn't work good. Dad just couldn't hack it anymore, I guess. I don't know what it was, but they got a divorce. I begged and begged for somebody to give me a signature so I could go. I didn't care who it was—just give me the right to go, but nobody did. My grandma said, "No, the Korean war is on. You are not going." So, I came home and went to work.

I was seventeen years old and had no place to go. I went and

stayed with my aunts. I stayed with one aunt who had a crippled husband and four children. I had to sleep with the four children and that wasn't a very good situation. I stayed with her about a month or so and then I went to the other aunt who had a lot of children. The houses were small, and there was no way you could have privacy. I lived out of a suitcase. I tried to get into Haskall Junior College in Kansas City. They said I couldn't go because the school was filled up. In the meantime, my uncle got a loan for two thousand dollars for me to go to Northern Montana State College in Havre.

So I went one quarter, and this was the winter quarter my mother died. She froze to death in Hogeland. She was working out there as a cook for a rancher. She had gone to Chinook to buy some stuff. She was going back to work and it got about forty or fifty below. When she was going back that evening the snow—there was snow on the ground. She couldn't make this one hill. She probably had slick tires on her car, I don't know. She slid back on a culvert. Her car high-centered so then she walked. The ranch was eight miles away and she walked seven miles and laid down and died, I guess, just in view of the ranch. It was so stormy and cold that nobody even noticed until the next day. The rancher rode his horse and saw something black out there and it was her. She had frozen to death.

I had to come back from college because I had a sister and two brothers. In those days they sent you away to Minneapolis to foster homes or Baltimore, Maryland, or some place, especially if nobody wanted you. I decided to go home and that is when I met my husband. I knew him all my life, and he said if we got married we could take care of my sister and

brothers. So I got married. I raised my brothers and sister and sent them all to school, and then I had my own children.

**TERREO:** How large a family did you have?

**ALLEN:** I had eight. I raised fourteen children in my life. I picked up three or four abandoned children and raised them until they were eighteen years old. I have maybe six or seven college graduates out of my family. I took the philosophy of my grandpa that I was going to make sure everybody got educated.

**TERREO:** You've mentioned your husband a few times. Did you have a traditional wedding ceremony?

**ALLEN:** Yes. My husband had to bring some horses to my uncle to ask for me. When I was eight years old, I was given to a boy [to] be my husband and to be married after we graduated—after I got of age, I guess. We knew each other. We were good friends, and then when I got seventeen or eighteen, and he got nineteen, twenty, his parents expected us to get married. He fell in love with another girl. So, I told him, "Well, I don't know." We were really good friends and if he didn't fall in love—I don't know, we probably would have had to get married in order to save face. I told him to go ahead and I would tell his folks. I would tell mine, and I would say that I want to go on and get educated and this was a good way of getting out of it. I told my uncle and my aunt that I wanted to get educated, I don't want to be married. I don't want it to hold me down. And so when I told his folks they talked together about it. They thought, well that would be about it, and then he had to

marry the girl that he fell in love with [and] “got in trouble.” So that was the end of that. So I was really glad. I felt free then, you know. I’ve always had that in the back of my mind.

So that’s the traditional way, but then when I met my husband, he had to bring the horses to my uncle and tell him that he wanted to marry me. So then we went ahead and set a time that we were going to get married and exchange gifts.

We had the regular [wedding]—it was a big, big thing—really big. Had a big dance, and then they had in those days a big rodeo. We had to ride out in the

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**“So that’s the way they have a traditional wedding. And later we got married by the priest, because they said it wasn’t legal.”**

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arena and then our friends gave us all our gifts. We accumulated a couple horses and then they went to our—his house. They had redone the whole house. Threw out everything old, put everything new in it. That’s the way you do when you get married long ago. The tepee—they fixed your tepee and they fixed everything up new. Like I had new dishes, new bed and [bedding], and new blankets. And all the old grandmas got together; they did all that for us, and so all we had to do was just move in. So that’s the way they have a traditional wedding. And later we got married by the priest, because they said it wasn’t legal.

**TERREO:** Did you eventually return to college?

**ALLEN:** I did after my baby got into Head Start. I told my husband I was going back to

college. He said “OK, I’ll help you as much as I can.” They had said there was money for Indians to be educated. But they said you had to be head of the household. I wasn’t head of the household—my husband was. There was no way I could go to college. I said well I’m going anyway. The BIA has never financed me to go to college. So when I decided to become a parent I got involved in everything. I became a community leader. I just thought, “I’m gonna take all this opportunity while I am married, but I’m going to college even so.” I started writing to places. The Montana Indian Scholarship out of Denver paid for my Head Start training, and then I took a two-year college course.

I went two years, and then they would let you teach school. That was the way teachers were at one time. I got two years of college and became a teacher. I taught one year at Lodge Pole in 1968. In 1970, I became a Head Start director because it was opening up and it was more money, and I thought I could save money and finish my college education. So, through Head Start and through the United Scholarship—Northern [Montana State College] gave me a scholarship—through scholarships I became educated.

I went and got my [bachelor’s degree] at Central Michigan University in Mount Pleasant, Michigan. I went on and got my master’s degree at Northern and then I went to Weber [State College]. I sent two daughters to Weber. I went down there [to Ogden, Utah] and went to school with them. I got an endorsement [for studying] in early childhood because at that time, I was working in early childhood. Since then I have been to various other colleges getting endorsements. I really worked to become educated.

I did a lot of work with the

Montana Legal Services for awhile before I went to college. I worked with lawyers. I’ve always wanted to be a woman activist. But like my husband said one time, “You’ve always hauled your own water and chopped your wood and did all your own work.” A lot of people want to do their own thing, and I’ve always been able to do it—to do what I wanted to do.

**TERREO:** What of your time as director of the Head Start Program?

**ALLEN:** I was director here at Fort Belknap, and I had three centers. I had one here at Hays and one at Lodge Pole and Windham. It is a federally funded program, and every year you have to write [grant] proposals. You hire teachers and teachers’ aides to work with about fifteen kids in each classroom. I had two classrooms at Fort Belknap, two at Hays, and one at Lodge Pole. We worked with over a hundred children.

**TERREO:** What was the general attitude of the community when it first began?

**ALLEN:** It was something different, and they were very suspicious of it. They wondered what the federal government was bringing us again to eventually phase out. They were afraid of it. I have always been one of those people who trust. I had to go to the homes and recruit people, recruit children, talk to parents, tell them the best positive parts about it. I told them, “You have to pay for the baby-sitting services.” They said, “Well we don’t have any money.” I said, “Yes but you can pay for them with volunteer hours with being involved with your children’s education, and you gotta come to the classroom. Bring something that you can do so that you will

Courtesy Harlem News



Lodge Pole third-grade students performing at the Fort Belknap Education Conference in 1981 when Minerva Allen was honored as the Fort Belknap Educator of the Year

be involved in what your child is doing.”

We worked like that, and we had regular parent meetings—monthly parent meetings. We brought in first aid, how to fix your car if you are a woman. We brought in extension agents. We worked all that into where the parents could learn about it. That was the main emphasis on Head Start—train parents and also work with their children. It was the country we went by—how to do things for frostbite, car accidents, drunks, and stuff like that. That’s what we worked on—training parents.

I went to Washington, D.C., and got money for training programs. I educated eight teachers here that are my age and still are teaching someplace. I received funds—I brought in college courses. I fought husbands. I did everything to get these kids, these people educated so they could be self-sufficient.

That’s what I did for about the eight years I worked with Head Start. After that, I resigned in January or March, I don’t remember, 1978, I think. I resigned because in April, I remember, I had to have a

kidney operation. It was giving me heck since 1975, and I just [had] hung in there. So, I had the operation and the doctor told me I would probably be tied up for six months. I did the operation in April, and by August I was all right. The school was looking for a community education director at the Hays/Lodge Pole schools. The superintendent came to see me and asked me to apply. So that’s what I did. I applied there, and I started working here at the school, and I’ve been working here ever since.

**TERREO:** The Foster Grandparent Program . . . what exactly is that?

**ALLEN:** Oh, that started back when I was in Head Start. The Foster Grandparent Program doesn’t have to be parents, it has to be anybody that is sixty years [old] or older. It’s a volunteer program, which is funded by the federal government. When I started the bilingual program here in 1980, I needed some aides. The kids needed foster grandparents, who spoke the language and who could work well with the kids. Because like now, you know, these kids speak

almost all English. I brought them in to help teach the language and to help the kids,

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**“They always say the other language . . . is backwards. . . . But it’s the English language that’s backwards.”**

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because, when you speak another language—I don’t know if you do—but when you speak another language besides English, they always say the other language like French, German, and Indian is backwards. But it’s the English language that’s backwards, you know. So what you have to do is translate it in your head before you could say it in English. A lot of Indian kids will hesitate when they speak because they have to translate. It makes them speak different, or something, and not the real perfect English. Like in Alaska they call it bush English.

In 1980, we were working with the language, both languages. In 1984 Congress passed a new law and said that we cannot teach restitution of the native languages. So in 1984, we changed it to transitional bilingual programs. We could use the language to teach the children if needed, but otherwise we had to teach English proficiency. So that’s what we are doing now in our bilingual programs.

**TERREO:** What kind of opposition to the bilingual program did you run into and on what levels?

**ALLEN:** On all levels. Many [parents] said, they don’t want our kids to have bilingual. Because they said they don’t want their kids to learn their language, they don’t want their

kids to go backwards. They finally got them where they are speaking English. "Why should we have them speak Indian?" A lot of parents had made it out as a kind of a communist act. They said "you [bring] the language back and then want to control us with the language." And yet it wasn't. I had to fight the superintendents, had to fight the principals. The principals said the same thing, because they didn't understand what bilingual meant. And the teachers were the worst because they felt you were infringing on their territory, that you were going to put people in there [their classrooms] who will watch them teach and criticize, and that you were taking their time and their space.

**TERREO:** From perhaps a historical perspective, do you feel that you really can't obliterate someone's heritage, history, or culture?

**ALLEN:** Yes. And see, they finally realized that. That's why bilingual now is different from 1980. We have more people involved in bilingual because they want to know, they want to use it to help their children and also to help themselves. They ask us for materials, or ask us for all these books that I've helped to publish, and worked on and translated. I get people from everywhere—all kinds of Native Americans, trying to use it for a guideline—a format to do their own culture and language and history and stuff.

**TERREO:** So there is a more positive outlook being bicultural.

**ALLEN:** There is! At first the kids wouldn't respond too much. They found out from their parents and from their grandparents and everybody else that it is OK to tell the teachers what you know. So they just

came out—kids that you think didn't know their language came up and started talking their language. It was like you open a curtain and all of a sudden all things stopped and they just started blossoming out, saying, "Oh, I know that. I know! This is what my grandfather told me. Come and tell us all kinds of stories relating to history."

**TERREO:** It seems to me that the Native American language is more descriptive than English.

**ALLEN:** Yes, it is. You write a sentence in a Native American language that long [Allen indicates about twelve inches] and it might be this short in English [indicates about three inches]. But you have to describe all things. Like cars, they never had cars. They had to invent words for those terms. Like car, in their native language, is "it goes by itself." That's a car. "Goes by itself." If a truck, it is "goes by itself and carries." They didn't add on to the language.

**TERREO:** How do you feel about the 1984 law in which Congress has mandated English proficiency?

**ALLEN:** You hear of the English-only law that's been passed. It is

don't realize that the Hispanics, the Asian people, the Vietnamese, the Moslems, are learning English faster because they want to be assimilated. Whereas the Indians don't want to be assimilated, you know. They don't have to be. They are here. They were here first. They don't have to be and don't want to be assimilated. But the others want to. That is the difference.

**TERREO:** Do you feel that certain factions have favored the one-language-only law not necessarily from prejudice but from the view that one primary language is needed to better facilitate communication between the various elements of United States society?

**ALLEN:** Yes. Bilingual has always been a bad term to people who do not understand it. So they use it as a derogatory term and don't realize that it means the ability to speak two languages rather than wanting to be different. But they treat you different. I'm always afraid to use bilingual. When I talk to people nobody understands it, even some of the teachers here. I have to explain bilingual completely to them continuously every year. I'm glad the older teachers here have been involved in bilingual as have the principals and can

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**"The Indians don't want to be assimilated. . . . They don't have to be. . . . They were here first."**

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mostly, I think, to get back at the Hispanics. They claim that by 1990, 20 percent of the population in the United States is going to be speaking Spanish. Congress feels that [by] having one language, one group can't dominate the United States. That's what they think. But they

explain it well. And you always have to get your administrators into it or you are just fighting a blank wall.

**TERREO:** What of the series of [bilingual] readers you have published for the classroom?

**ALLEN:** With one of the bilingual programs, I decided to do some readers so the kids could take the readers home and work with the parents. That is how that came about. So, I told the kids if they brought traditional stories and every-day type stories we would write them both in English and the native language on their grade level. So we did that on the first-grade level. And now we're doing them on first-grade to third-grade level. We're doing them now on fourth- to six-grade level. I wrote the stories that they told me, and then I translated them in both the Gros Ventre and the Assiniboine languages. That was another way of reinforcing our bilingual program.

**TERREO:** Aren't you also a poet? How did you get interested in poetry?

**ALLEN:** I was raised alone, so, I've always had this—I don't know what it is—I think it is I've always been curious. I've always listened to a lot of stories that my grandfolks told me, their friends, their neighbors, and I've always sat there. I was a quiet child. So I always sat and listened. As I went into grade school or high school, I started writing down things, keeping like a diary. I still do it. Later, VISTA workers came to Fort Belknap. I got to know them real well. One was an English major, and his wife was an artist. One day they happened to see some things I wrote. He said, "WOW!" He said, "You are pretty good at this. You should just start writing more." So I said OK. And that's how I got started.

**TERREO:** Is poetry a tradition in the Native American languages?

**ALLEN:** Yes, poetry goes along with songs. They sing the songs at powwows, the honor songs,

the victory songs. In the modern day now, it's the "Forty-Nine Songs," or the "Round Dance Songs," the "Love Songs," the "Owl Dance Songs," all have short poetry in them. And it tells a story. My grandma told me a lot of stories which I wrote into poetry. She told me stories—Indian stories—when she would be putting me to sleep. We have a person I wrote a lot of stories about. His name is Inktomi. He was—is—the trickiest of the tribe. He was always doing things that had an antidote—a disciplinary type of an action. And so you read it to your grandkids. I still read it to my grandkids. It tells them why you should not do this. Like fairy tales but in Indian version. And I guess other tribes have the coyote man, or spider man, or different things like that. Tales like legends and myths to the tribes. So, we have one and we call him Inktomi. I use that, like some of the stories that the kids brought me were about their trickiest, which told antidotes of why you don't do this or do that because this will happen to you. Why the sun, or why the chinook wind blows, where they came from, little things like that.

**TERREO:** Have you found that the attitude towards women has changed.?

**ALLEN:** Yes, I have. And it took a long time—even for my husband. It took a long time for him to realize that women can do things just like men or can be responsible and can do other things besides raising children and working at home. Long ago you couldn't even be past twenty you were considered, I guess, unable to get married. You know you had to get married young. If you didn't get married after you were twenty-one, there was something [the] matter with you. Now-a-days, it [has]

changed. The Indian people believed that you should get married and have children and keep the tribe going. And now it's not like that. You can marry anybody you want to. You don't have to just marry whoever they want you to marry. And so that's why, you know, there never were too many mixed marriages. And since the 1980s that's changed. Since the eighties, there's been a lot of mixed marriages, which is acceptable. Before, they weren't. That was one reason my dad and mother couldn't be together because they weren't accepted by either side.

**TERREO:** Do you find that with students in the classroom now there is more projecting of themselves into future occupations because there's a greater variety of things that they [women] can do now than before?

**ALLEN:** Yes. In my day, all we could think about was being nurses or teachers. That was acceptable. Now you can do most anything and be accepted. Yet there is still a lot of discrimination on women. Like me, for instance. I might be educated and everything, but I'm still Indian. I'm still a minority, and I'm still a woman. And it's really hard for me to be on the level of men. They won't accept me. I still have the problem. Especially in Native American society because Native American men are number one.

In a way I still do that myself. I've kind of had inbred into me as an innate type of thing that my husband is number one in my family and then, my sons are, and they get served first, they get everything first. They don't do anything hardly. They gotta have all the clean clothes, they gotta have it laid out, they gotta be tended to when they come in.

They are the masters of the house, that's the Assiniboine tradition. And I still do that. And I've taught my daughters to be like that and my sons' wives are like that. That is the way I was raised—that I did everything for the males in my family and my grandmas did that for me and my mom did that for her and it's just the traditional thing. So my girls, I've trained them to do that, but, it does make a good marriage. My brothers and sisters have never had any divorces. But it's a two-way street. The woman is held—without the woman you won't have the man. We were always held high as a woman, but in your place.

**TERREO:** In your past experiences as an educator have you had many difficulties with teenage pregnancy?

**ALLEN:** You never had any

[teenage] pregnancies when I was growing up. You never had any kids out of wedlock. You were shunned out of the tribe if you did. You had to leave the country. And then all of the sudden after World War II—just like [that], it's acceptable. [Then] all of a sudden it just quit again. You know. It just quit. We started working with parents [and] with the public health people. I just wrote letters galore and did everything trying to curb it and work with the teachers. So these last two years its been pretty good. We haven't had any problems with it. The school is the center of the community. And without the school there wouldn't hardly be anything here.

**TERREO:** Would you say there are fewer distractions, say in comparison to a large urban area?

**ALLEN:** Yes, thank goodness.

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**“Drugs and other things haven't reached us yet. It's mostly because of the isolation . . . and then no money. . . . So we are lucky.”**

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Because our greatest problem here is alcohol and then that isn't that bad, but its pretty bad with the kids. Drugs and other things haven't reached us yet. It's mostly because of the isolation, I suppose. And then no money. Our kids don't have that much money; our parents don't have that much money, and the money is used for more important things than to buy things that are not necessary. So that helps a lot. That's their life: just teeny bits of money. So they don't have enough money to buy drugs. So we are lucky. *M*

### Look Into the Clouds

Moving forward and back from the lands across the sea.

I am a bird, if you wish to see me?

See me in the clouds.

When sadness falls, I will bring rain.  
My feathers will sail with the breeze,  
and the clear sky will echo my words  
with a pleasing sound.

Across the earth everywhere my voice will be heard.

If you seek me look into the clouds,  
and in the silence you will hear me. Listen.  
I pity myself, for the wind carries me across the sky.

From *Spirits Rest* (1981) a book of poems published by Minerva Allen. “Look Into the Clouds” also appears in *The Last Best Place, A Montana Anthology* published by the Montana Historical Society Press in 1988.

