

INTERVIEW OF RAPHAEL WAHWASSUCK BY BRAD HAMILTON FEBRUARY 28, 2022
KANSAS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT, INC.

Brad Hamilton: I'm Brad Hamilton, member of the Kansas Oral History Project [Diversity] Committee. This project is funded by Humanities Kansas.

Today we're here to interview Raphael Wahwassuck, a member of the Prairie Band Potawatomi Tribal Council. Raphael, could you tell us about yourself and your involvement with the Prairie Band Potawatomi tribal government?

Raphael Wahwassuck: Yes. So Raphael Wahwassuck, as you stated, and I currently serve as a member of the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation Tribal Council, currently on my third year serving in that capacity. So part of my responsibilities is to work with outreach for different communities to try and help educate and share a little bit about who we are and what we do.

BH: If you had to select one issue that rises above the rest for tribal policy issues over the past twenty to twenty-five years, but don't limit it to that time period if necessary, what would that primary issue be?

RW: So I would say representation. By that, I mean that as a tribal nation, we are supposed to have a government-to-government relationship with the United States government. A lot of times, that's overlooked when it comes to policy, either by the federal government or the state government, and we are not necessarily included at the beginning of some of those policy discussions. So to me, that is an area that we can really work to improve upon is to make sure that we have a seat at the table on the local, state, and national level because again we have treaties with the United States government, and those treaties we are afforded those rights even though they are not exercised all the time.

BH: Other tribal policy issues that would be high on that list, can you think of some other issues? That's a primary issue, but are there other issues that might be high on that list also?

RW: Sure. One of the things that we're currently negotiating with the state on is some pass-through dollars from the federal government. We're hopefully on the inside of the COVID pandemic now, and there's been some dollars obligated by the federal government for use for broadband infrastructure and those sorts of things.

So what we've learned here recently in the last couple of weeks is the dollars that are being designated for states also has a disclaimer in there that a certain percentage of those dollars needs to be dedicated to the tribal governments as well. I don't know if that's the best way to present that, but that's what we're left with right now. So again those are conversations that we'll need to have with the governor and her staff to make sure that we're all on the same page on what those funds look like and how that's going to work for the state then to pass those forwards to our governments to make sure that we can utilize them as they're intended.

So that's one. Another example would be some of the educational policies for the state and for the nation also. There's what's called "impact aid dollars" for our districts, and what that is, it's

a federal supplement to the school districts for the children that attend those schools that live on federal land. So for the reservation area, for each one of those students, the school district then receives supplement to the loss of tax revenue for those students that then is supposed to be utilized to help fill that gap.

Currently, my understanding is that the state sometimes will back some of the budget for those districts when they receive those impact aid supplement dollars. So that is something that I would hope that we could have a discussion about also and hope that our schools would not be negatively impacted by our students that attend there and their status.

BH: Along with that, you've alluded to it just a little bit about the significant challenge in relationship building with the federal government. So are there significant challenges in implementing policy issues with the federal government. How about state, county, and city governments?

RW: Let me start on the local level first. Today we have a good group of county commissioners. As much as we can work through those COVID restrictions, we've been able to meet with them and have discussions about how we can work together to make the county better overall, and how can we share and assist each other with our resources to make sure that our roads are good and water is what it needs to be for all the communities.

One of the things we have today that twenty years ago was just getting started was we have a really robust law enforcement. Our law enforcement, they're federally certified officers now. So they have the certifications and the knowledge in the background to really help out to make our communities a safer place. Also we have a really robust emergency services, paramedics, EMT, fire department, and to my understanding, we are the only full-time emergency services within the county.

So a lot of times through the interagency agreements, our folks are called upon to help maybe with some of the proximity calls to the reservation. A lot of times our ambulance service or our fire service will be the first on scene, then kind of take control of the situation and hand it off as needed in those situations.

So that's locally. With the state, the current administration has been open to listening and talking with us. Again we would really hope to have more of a place at the table and be on the front side of some of those discussions. Again, that's an ongoing effort. It seems like every time there's an election here at the state, we have to start re-educating folks, especially if they're new, even with folks in our own district that are supposed to represent us. That's something that is an ongoing task, educating those folks, talking about who we are as a tribal government, and what that means, and what those agreements with the United States means as far as the nation-to-nation relationship there, which is again working with those representatives is a bit of

a task, but we're hopeful that as we move forward, we can have these conversations and make sure that we do have that relationship.

Then on the federal level of things, that really comes down to some of the national organizations that are in place to kind of represent our voices. We've had a really good relationship with our senator here. Help me out, Brad.

BH: State or federal?

RW: On the federal side, Moran.

BH: Jerry Moran.

RW: Yes. Senator Moran has been really good to work with, and I apologize. I get a little bit of that COVID fog. I had that a couple of months ago, and I'm still recovering. So apologies if I kind of misplaced some words there or whatever.

Federally, Ms. [Sharice] Davids and her counterpart up there is helpful. I feel like at this point in time, we have more representation than we ever have in the history of the country. So that's really promising, and again that makes me hopeful that for our future, we can then maybe hold the federal government to some of those agreements that we made with them back in the 1800s via some of those treaties.

BH: Following up on that just a bit, what are significant areas of success—and I'm not talking about just the mild successes, but what's a really big area of success that's improved in relationships or in building policy issues or in making policy issues or changing policy issues? Have you had some area that's really been like a big, that's moved the needle as far as relationship building?

RW: I would like to say that we have, and again I'll refer to the local level with the local county board, county commissioners. Like I said, they are very receptive. When we call or if they call, I feel like we have a good line of communication with them. And that is something that wasn't necessarily the case even recently as ten or fifteen years ago, and it has improved.

And then again I would like to say with the current administration here at the state, that is something that I've seen an improvement in also is that the line of communication is better. And so as it pertains to policy, at least now we can have those conversations, whereas maybe before, again, we may have been kind of considered an afterthought. But like I said now, we're involved in those conversations.

BH: And then on the flip side of that, what are areas of policy implementation that still really need significant development?

RW: Well, again, and I'll refer to our treaties. We are supposed to have the nation-to-nation conversations. There's some programs and departments within the state that either aren't aware or—and I guess aren't aware or uneducated about that would be the best term to use there. So for us to really have those conversations with the secretaries that oversee those departments would be super helpful. So that way, like I said, we can educate who we are, what we're working on.

One of the things that comes to mind is the ICWA, our children. By our constitution, by the Prairie Band Potawatomi constitution, we have jurisdiction over any of our minors, no matter where they're located within the United States. So ICWA, the Indian Child Welfare Act, is a protection for those children to make sure that they have an opportunity to be raised around our culture, their families, and experience that part of who they are. Prior to that, there was external options that, some were detrimental because some of those children weren't afforded that opportunity. Now they come back years later as adults, wondering, "Who am I? Who is my family?" So, again, that's just an example of areas that those conversations are going to improve the relationship and improve the processes for us.

BH: Let's talk a little bit about policy issues that were necessary to develop and implement with the advent of casino gaming. That was a major world changer, I know. What did you have to do as far as the nation to make that all work?

RW: So we really had to expand our own law and order codes. That was #1, and it's still #1. That is a constant that we review those on a regular basis to make sure that they're still appropriate. Prior to gaming, we didn't have a lot of the resources that we have today. There's many factors that played into that, but thankfully due to our gaming, we're now able to have law enforcement. We have our own court system in place. We have jobs for our members out there. We have Boys and Girls Club for our children to participate in.

That's not just for our children, but it's for all of the children in Jackson County in the area. That building and facility is open for all the children to come out and be a part of. We have Social Services now. We have our Elders Center. All of this is made possible through again the gaming revenue.

I just want to clarify here on that point. We don't have a tax base. We cannot collect property taxes from folks that live within a reservation boundary. So we are really at a disadvantage compared to other municipalities and governments because again we don't have that tax base to pull from. So when we had to shut down our gaming operations at the beginning of the COVID pandemic, that really put us in a tough spot. We had to really take a hard look at what our operations were, and what we could do with that. Thankfully, previous leadership has been mindful enough to put us in a position to where we were able to buffer that and make it through.

So, again the casino has been very helpful in those regards to not only us, but the entire northeast part of the state. We did an economic study back in 2018, and it was found at that time that through direct and indirect contribution to the revenue, there's over 180 million that is produced for the northeast part of Kansas due to our operations. That's another educational piece that I feel like we can promote more to let folks know that yes, it's helping us, but it is also helping Kansas as a whole just beyond our community.

BH: This next question is kind of a broad question, and you've touched on it a little bit with your last answer, but I'm going to go ahead and ask it, and then if there are some areas where you feel like were particularly difficult or easy or that they're works in progress or not, and you've really done well with them, please go ahead and let us know about that.

And the question is: How did casino gaming impact the development or implementation of law enforcement, judicial, education, economic development, jobs, advertisement, community relations development, business management, roads and bridges, youth and social services, senior services, veteran services, housing, lobbying, and any other critical building of government infrastructure because that's exactly what happened?

RW: You touched on it. Again, we're fortunate to be in the position that we are. Thankfully in large part due to our gaming revenues. As I mentioned, our law enforcement, they have top-of-the-line equipment. We have a great staff over there, and prior to the gaming, that was a service that was lacking in our area, but now we have a fully staffed law enforcement facility. Our judicial center is top notch. We have, of course, our own jurisdiction out there.

So through the judicial center now, we can handle some of those things that may have been kicked out to the state prior to that, like domestic civil matters. We have weddings, marriages that take place. There's adoption for family members that are recognized through our tribal court. These are all positive things for our community now that like I said, maybe twenty, twenty-five years ago, we didn't necessarily have education.

I'm a recipient of the education benefits as are many of our members that eased the burden of me to further my education and receive those higher degrees that I think is a really great option for those folks that want to pursue those things. Now I'm not opposed to technical or trade school because sometimes those things just fit better. But again through our education department, folks that want to go that route also, they can receive assistance with some of those things.

I can just go down the line of what you mentioned because we are really fortunate to be in a position to provide those services, like I said, not only for our community, but for the larger community as a whole. The school, Rossville, they've got a lot of tribal members that attend down there. We've been fortunate to partner with them on a few projects to recognize some of

the students and their achievements here recently, back-to-back state football champions. Let's make a note of that.

Royal Valley School District. We've been fortunate to be able to work with the Royal Valley District on a number of initiatives because of where we are today. Again, I want to give a shout-out to past leadership to have the vision to put us in a position today to where we can accomplish those things.

BH: How did traditions and culture impact or affect the development of policy issues in the Nation?

RW: So that's a tough balancing act, right? Obviously now we have day-to-day businesses that need to operate, but at the same time, we still have some of our traditional beliefs where things have to come to a stop. So, yes, it's a tough balancing act there in some of those areas, but always we want to keep in mind our future and who we're looking out for. That's one of the things that when we talk about policy, we talk about what we're going to implement or change, how could this potentially affect our members down the road in the future? So that is one of those teachings that we keep with us and try to have, when we have those discussions.

At the same time, how do we protect in what we provide for the ones that came before us. Those folks, they're the reason why we are where we are today. Without them, we wouldn't be in the position that we are. What services can we provide and offer to those folks?

BH: Last question: what message would you like to include about the impact the Prairie Band Potawatomi Tribal Nation has had on policy issue development in Kansas history or the history of?

RW: I think the #1 takeaway I hope would be to have those relationships, to build those relationships and have conversations. Through those conversations, have an understanding, understand different points of view in how we can work together to benefit our entire community as a whole, like I said, grow to the point of recognizing each other and be willing to come to the table and work together.

BH: Thank you, Mr. Wahwassuck, and thank the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation for participating in this interview.

RW: Thank you.

[00:21:51.02 Formal Interview ended, but camera remained on to capture another conversation about the American flag which was in the room]

BH: You know Garnett Potts told me a story one time about the flag. He said, "Our people" —he said that eagle is our flag. He said it like that, the feathers of the eagle. He said he's sitting right where he's supposed to be, right on top of that flag.

RW: Yes, that's right. I didn't share that story. I didn't know that would have been a fit in here.

Joan Wagon: It's a good story to share. Go ahead.

RW: Would you like me to? Okay. So speaking of an experience that I had when I was a young child, I came home excited from school, explaining to my folks that it was going to be my turn to lead the Pledge of Allegiance, and I was told no. I didn't understand that right away. I didn't understand because everybody else was doing it in the class. So I waited all year for it to be my turn to stand up in front of the class and lead the Pledge of Allegiance.

Then I was given a short history lesson. Part of that lesson was how the meaning of the American flag was not the same for everybody in that classroom, and more specifically, what it meant for our people and how in certain circumstances, it could be viewed as a sign of oppression to our people.

I left that day, knowing I didn't have to, but I was free to lead the Pledge of Allegiance if I wanted to. When my day came at school, I chose not to lead the Pledge of Allegiance. I was then promptly sent to the principal's office for not wanting to participate in the Pledge of Allegiance with the rest of the students.

Again, that's just an early experience that I can recall, and it wasn't until later on in my life that I had an opportunity to speak with one of my uncles because, as you know, you know my family, I've had numerous veterans in my family throughout the entire history of this country.

One of the ones who was a career veteran, I asked him, I said, "Why do you do what you do? I'm confused. I don't understand. If the United States came in and they imposed everything on us, they took so many things away from us, why do you then proudly serve in their Armed Forces?"

He said to me, "The first time around when we had people coming in, we didn't stand up like we should have. We didn't stand up like we should have, and it put our people in a position where we are today back then." So he said, "I'm going to do my part to make sure that I can do whatever I can to protect our people today and make sure that our area and our land and our beliefs are protected today."

So that really resonated with me, and it really helped me understand his perspective as Potawatomi and serving in the United States military.

JW: Would each of you give me just a very brief paragraph about you that I can use on the website, a brief biography?

BH: I'm Brad Hamilton. I have a Bachelor of Arts in History major with a Political Science minor, a secondary degree in Education. I also have over a year of Law at Washburn Law School University, and I was a former county commissioner for Jackson County, Kansas for eight years. During that time, I was president of the Kansas County Commissioners Association. I also was the Native American Affairs liaison for Kansas Governor Bill Graves, and I also at that time during Governor Graves's eight-year administration, was appointed to be the director of the Kansas Office of Native American Affairs.

RW: My name is Raphael Wahwassuck. I grew up between Topeka and our reservation most of my life. I have a higher education [degree] in Organizational Management and Leadership. I worked in our judicial system for a number of years, also worked on federal grants for different tribes throughout the country. I currently serve as a member of our Tribal Council for the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation and try to be an actively involved member in our communities. I really enjoy working with the school district, folks like Mr. Hamilton. I really enjoy the opportunity for these situations to help share and if possible educate folks if needed. Like I said, I don't know. I don't have a list like this guy does.

CREDITS

This interview is part of the collection, Diverse Voices in Public Policy Making.

Videographer is David Heinemann, former Speaker Pro Tem of the House of Representatives

The **Kansas Oral History Project** is a not-for-profit corporation created to collect oral histories of Kansans who were involved in shaping and implementing public policy. Recordings and transcripts of these oral history interviews are available to researchers, educators, and other members of the public through the Kansas Historical Society and the State Library of Kansas and on our website, ksoralhistory.org. Funding for the project is provided by volunteers, individual donors, and Humanities Kansas, a nonprofit cultural organization connecting communities with history, traditions, and ideas to strengthen civic life.

For more information about Raphael Wahwassuck and his activities as spokesperson for the Potawatomi Tribal Council, see this article: <https://cjonline-ks.newsmemory.com?selDate=20220311&goTo=A01&artid=7>

[End of File]