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Prairie Island Dakota Oral History

INTRODUCTION

Secondary sources provide opportunities to get well acquainted with the topic at hand. However primary sources allow you to capture and see the true life experiences of people. By conducting oral history interviews with tribal member elders of the Prairie Island Dakota community, I was able to capture history, and share their knowledge of our community. Their histories were often told by a secondary source, but now their voices shall be heard through their own thoughts and words. They are allowed to express the history the way they want it told. They are finally able to tell their personal stories of survival, trials, and successes.

Important historical information about the Dakota in Minnesota is needed to explain their situation to those less familiar with the Dakota. Provided is a quick, simple introduction to the Dakota overall, and then more in depth with the Mdewakanton Dakota of Prairie Island as I progress through time. The flow of the paragraphs is chronological.

Before European contact, the Dakota lived in Minnesota near the upper Mississippi River, in woodland and prairie surroundings. “In result of tremendous flexibility, unity, and strategic positioning, the Dakota were able to be autonomous and dominant” (Anderson, 1). However during early European contact in the seventeenth century, the Dakota’s autonomy was

challenged as objects were traded with the Dakota by the French to gain allegiances and furs. Unfortunately, the Ojibwe, a separate group from the Dakota, were the middlemen. The Ojibwe and Dakota were enemies, going back and forth between war and peace, fighting over land, hunting areas, and warfare. The Ojibwe obtained the upper hand in warfare when they received guns from the French, and they pushed the Dakota from the present-day Mille Lacs area in northern Minnesota. The Dakota had a concept of pity, different from what whites had and used it when exchanging furs, which was used in the father-to-child setup. The government was the great father and the Indians his red children.

In the nineteenth century, 1820-1862 (U.S. Treaty Period) peace among the Ojibwe and Dakota was jeopardized after trading at St. Antoine began, since the Ojibwe were the middlemen, and this trading system undermined their position. Anderson would argue that the economic and political processes of European contact led to the division of the Sioux, which was a name given to the Dakota and Lakota, into “woodland” and “plains” segments, and occurred with the dramatic change in buffalo populations in the nineteenth century” (Anderson, 35). The Buffalo were important because it was a source of food, clothing, utensils, and allowed them to be self-sufficient.

“Fort Snelling was established at the junction of the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers in 1819 to keep peace between the Sioux and Ojibwe by facilitating the fur trade, and to keep non-Indian settlers off Indian lands and British fur traders out of American territory” (Gibbon, 5 and 81). 1820 was the year when control by an Indian agent began at Fort Snelling for the Dakota. This century brought a loss of economic and political autonomy for the Dakota, and the United States wasn’t interested in forming alliances with Indian people in its new territory like the French and British sought. The Dakota faced continued warfare with the Ojibwe, a crisis in band

leadership, depleted resources, and an alliance between the Seven Council Fires (Oceti Sakowin) that shifted toward interdependence (Anderson). Interdependence was bad because they were once a family. The Seven Council Fires as Gibbon states, the Seven Council Fires was an ancestral political unit, whose origins extend back to Minnesota; consisted of the Mdewakanton (a Dakota community), Wahpekute, Sisseton, Wahpeton, Yankton, Yanktonai, and the Lakota, became a memory when the Sioux moved westward and southward (Gibbon, 2).

As Gibbon said, due to pressure in 1837 by the government to sell land east of the Mississippi River that belonged to the Dakota due to increasing debt. This was also supported by the missionaries because they wanted the Dakota fixed in one area, so they could teach them reading, writing, and farming. This would also have allowed for tighter control of the Dakota. All that remained was a tiny reservation along the Minnesota River due to treaties signed at Traverse des Sioux and Mendota in 1851 that took away the rest of their land (Gibbon, 5).

Most of the money paid to the Dakota for their land was paid to the fur traders, who allowed the Dakota to gain tremendous amounts of debt by making them dependent upon European goods and alcohol. Annuity payments from the government in the form of farm implements, animals, and annual payments of money and food usually arrived late or not in sufficient quantity. These issues along with broken promises led to the Dakota Conflict of 1862, which was an armed conflict between the United States and several bands of the eastern Dakota. As a result, 38 Dakota men were killed in the largest mass execution in the country's history for killing civilians or assaulting women. Many Dakota people were held prisoner at Fort Snelling in 1862 through the winter until 1893, and many died throughout the year. "At the end of the conflict, the remaining land of the Dakota was seized by the government and opened to homesteading. As Gibbon says, the surviving Dakota either fled the state, were removed to

Crow Creek on the Missouri River in South Dakota, were sent to prison, or were otherwise dispersed (Gibbon, 5). So “the expulsion of the Dakota from the state of Minnesota was a rationale for a racial ideology of American empire-building” (Anderson, 104).

The Dakota were sent to Crow Creek, South Dakota after their removal from Minnesota. Land was barren, marginal and living conditions were unlivable. The Dakota were expected to farm on this new barren land, but the land was so marginal that living off farming was surely to result in starvation. Yet, the Dakota slowly began reconstructing their communities after 1863, and began migrating back to Minnesota primarily from Santee, Nebraska and Flandreau, South Dakota; some families even walked back to Prairie Island and bought back small parcels of their ancestral home. It is unclear exactly when the Dakota moved back to Prairie Island, but Eliza Wells was a resident in 1884. Most people began migrating back to join the relatives who had remained in Minnesota even after the relocation.

In 1886, the Secretary of the Interior purchased approximately 120 acres of land, and it was placed into trust. This appropriation also gave the Mdewakanton Dakota \$10,000 for the support of the full blood Mdewakanton bands of Minnesota, which was to be spent on agricultural implements that included cattle and land. “The people of Prairie Island relied on the government, local hunting, gathering, fishing, and their gardens for food” (Gibbon, 111). When Indians received money it fueled the local economy because the money would inevitably be spent there. Land assignments were small, so it was impractical for the government to think farming was to take off with the Dakota “due to infestations of insects, cold weather, and droughts” (Gibbon, 139). As a result, the appropriations gave the Dakota land and a reestablished relationship with the government.

The Prairie Island Community was recognized and approved by the federal government on June 30, 1936. As a result, “a corporate charter, constitution, and bylaws were drawn up. According to the provisions of the constitution, the community was to be governed by a council of five elected officers with two-year terms; additional committees are appointed by council to address tribal needs” (Gibbon, 164). The Dakota in Minnesota didn’t live on reservations, but were recognized as Indian Communities through the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA), and were able to purchase more land and benefit from the act. “The Prairie Island Reservation, whose name was officially changed to the Prairie Island Indian Community in the 1960s, was established under federal acts of 1888, 1889, 1890, and 1943, when land was purchased for this branch of Mdewakanton Sioux” (Gibbon, 138-9).

Due to the construction of Lock and Dam number three in the late 1930s and the prevalence of roads, and automobiles, Prairie Island was opened up to outsiders. The school was now located off Prairie Island and in Red Wing and younger generations were able to become successful through education and jobs elsewhere. The government Employment Assistance Programs was created in the 1960s to facilitate this movement off reservations. The elderly, who were more traditional, enjoyed the lower cost of living compared to the younger generation, since the reservation provided support from family and friends. So the older generation was less eager to take advantage of the program. In the late 1960s, the construction of Northern States Power (NSP) nuclear power plant brought the modern world closer to the people at Prairie Island. In the late 1960s and early 1970s most residents had electrical power and a few had telephones.

The 1988 Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (IGRA) brought hope to Prairie Island with the establishment of Treasure Island Bingo in 1984. In 1988, due to the success of the bingo hall, it underwent its first expansion and included slot machines and blackjack tables.

Then in 1994, NSP was allowed to store spent nuclear fuel casks within close proximity of Prairie Island homes. The casino underwent another expansion in 1996 to include a 250 room hotel and remodeling of the entire casino.

Indian gaming has allowed the Mdewakanton of Prairie Island to be once again self-sufficient like the buffalo once did. The success of the casino has allowed the community to help neighboring communities, both Indian and non-Indian. Currently the casino is undergoing another expansion project to build another hotel wing, convention center, and a bowling alley. Treasure Island Resort and Casino is “one of the more successful gaming operations due to close proximity of a large metropolitan area” (Gibbon, 192). However the community’s most recent battle is against Xcel Energy (formally NSP) to find a permanent location for the spent casks of nuclear fuel. Since the “construction of a regional power plant has introduced new health hazards. Studies have demonstrated that radioactive gases from the plant increased the risk of cancer in the area six times the state standard” (Gibbon, 198).

METHODS

Participants

The secondary source data was collected through various books suggested by an expert on Dakota history. The primary source data was collected with research through a graduate school preparation program called TRiO McNair Scholars Program, and was assembled through ethnographic interviews with Prairie Island Indian Community tribal elders. In the present study, I recruited two community tribal elders (ages 55+) by contacting them through the telephone or in person and introducing my research. Then an interview time was selected. I first selected my uncle to set the stage for my interviews and I selected a female tribal elder. All participants are grandchildren from Albert and Lucy Johnson. Lucy's parents were one of the five families to receive nine acres of land by the 1886 appropriation from the government.

Procedure

I first asked my participants to list their names. Each person interviewed was asked: "What memories of your experiences living at Prairie Island would you like to record as part of the history of the Prairie Island community?" We reviewed various topics for conversation, but participants were allowed to steer the conversation whichever way they pleased. Topics included: family history and kinship, experiences growing up and going to school on Prairie Island or in Red Wing, memories of elders who have passed away, stories of community gatherings, powwows, and ceremonies, changes in the landscape and built environment, where people lived, how and where people traveled, connections with other Dakota communities and other tribal communities, economic activities, living conditions, stories passed down through families/generations, knowledge of sacred sites on Prairie Island, traditional medicine, and anything else interviewee considered an important aspect of Prairie Island history.

Instruments

I used a digital camcorder to record the oral history interviews and took notes about the interview in a notebook. I used a digital camera to take photos of the interviewees.

RESULTS

In the nineteenth century Red Wing was a summer campsite that was traveled to frequently by the Dakota. In the 1880s James Wabasha and his wife Isabella were listed among the various census rolls, annuity rolls, and other documentation of the Dakota in Minnesota. Ten were born and only one remained in the early 1900s; her name was Julia. Julia Wabasha married Thomas Williams, and they had five children. The oldest was a son named Joseph Williams, and the rest were girls: Julia, Lucy, Mary, and Emma. My story is about the descendants of Lucy Williams who married Albert Johnson and had ten children. Of those ten children, my interviewees are children of two of Albert and Lucy's children. Vivian Mireau is the daughter of the eldest daughter Elsie White Bear. While Albert White is the eldest son of the youngest daughter belonging to Albert and Lucy; her name was Blanche White.

Albert White was born on June 22, 1946 to Blanche Johnson and Noah White Sr. His family lived in three total places throughout his life. They moved back and forth between Prairie Island and Winnebago, Nebraska throughout his early childhood. In the 1950s the Red Wing school district consolidated the Prairie Island School, so students had to be bused to the nearest school in Red Wing, which was Burnside Elementary. There was no kindergarten at the time so he was the only one of his siblings in school at the time. Albert said, "I didn't like school, I would cry, and wouldn't leave my cousin Mary Jane since I had class with some cousins at the

time”. He went there for a couple of years then they moved back to Nebraska, but came back when he was in 5th grade. He described his teacher as very strict, and he found out he was lactose intolerant. He said he faced a lot of racism among his peers, you could tell because the Indian kids would play amongst themselves; yet there were those few who would play with them. He went to school at an Indian school in Santa Fe, NM for art, and later participated in a museum studies in Boulder, CO.

While Vivian Mireau, who is 70 years old lived on Prairie Island all her life and attended the one room school house. “The school on Prairie Island was a one-room school with grades one to eight. Each row represented a grade.” While everyone played together because they grew up together; when they were sent to school in Red Wing her mother encouraged her to make friends with everyone. Her mother stressed the importance of getting an education, but she quit school in 11th grade to start her family, she wishes she would have finished today.

The two most notable elder for Albert were Eliza and Solomon Wells. They received money through some land claims. They spoke only Dakota in their household and relied on their grandchildren to translate for those who didn’t speak the language. Another he noted was Moses Wells, “who was a storyteller. He would go to Shakopee and Lower Sioux to exchange stories.” Then, he recalls his mother’s early years, “my mom went to boarding school when she was in kindergarten or maybe even younger. At one time she was the youngest student at Pipestone Boarding school.”

Vivian recalled how growing up they respected and listened to the elders. “The elders [in the community] could discipline us, and parents wouldn’t say anything. Now with the younger generation they say you’re not my parents. We respected the elders. We listened to our elders

growing up”. She recalled how all of her aunts and uncle were very comical in their own way. She recalls how her mother said, “she had good parents. She missed them and wished they were still here with her” growing up.

After Albert and his family moved back to Prairie Island permanently while he was in the 5th grade, he gave a sense of just how strong the community was back then because “we stayed with my aunt when we returned and she let us move into a vacant house of hers”. As for gatherings he remembers, “In 1962 we had a large 100th centennial of [the] Sioux Uprising in Minnesota, it was a fairly large pow-wow; a lot of singers and dancers came. [It was the] first time the community got together and sponsored a pow-wow here at Prairie Island. We fed the people; the governor came with other state dignitaries in stage coaches from [train] depot to pow-wow area.” When “my family came back [we] started pow-wows again here on Prairie Island. We were pow-wow people and [we] carried word of our pow-wow to different reservations”. Then there were “a lot of big gatherings for any occasion: birthdays, weddings, funerals, anniversaries; they were big celebrations”.

There were a lot of mini pow-wows that Vivian’s mom would take them to. Besides going to pow-wows her mother “would go to, my mother went to the Ladies Aid group located on Prairie Island. It was a women’s group, they would sew quilts and things they could sell in the community. She would take us girls with her. It was held at different families’ homes because there was no building, so one mother would have it and take turns. There were services before we started. The person who hosted it would do all the cooking.”

Albert remembers where NSP sits today use to be a good fishing spot because of the channel back there. He shares the concern of how NSP has drastically changed the landscape,

but one positive outcome was that “when NSP was built [they] hired Indians to clear the shrubs out of the way; everyone had jobs”. Yet Vivian says “NSP will always be there no matter how hard we try to stop their nuclear storage. Nuclear storage is a continuing battle.” She also recalls how where the casino is currently located today is where the one room school house used to be.

Just by listening to these two elders’ speak you get a sense of the connection between people living at Prairie Island; “[My] mom visited with her sisters constantly. [Her second oldest sister’s house] was the meeting place. Someone would bring cake and always have coffee” said Albert. Especially when Albert explained that few families had cars back then; families asked those with cars to take them to town for groceries/ shopping, usually on a Friday or Saturday” are you shown the connection among one another.

The residents of Prairie Island throughout these two elders’ years growing up made a variety of items to sustain themselves, and support their families. Albert said that “when [we] moved back here Prairie Island was in a large drum making industry. People made drums for two companies; one was Bloom Brothers, located in Minneapolis. Each Friday [we would] take drums loaded up on skids and go up to [their] office to get paid”. Vivian’s family along with many others living at Prairie Island participated in this same economic activity of making drums. Vivian also remembered how her family made dolls for a company in Minneapolis, MN to help support the family. Birch bark canoes were also a common economic activity to make in order to support them selves. Among other things “my grandparents would make birch bark canoes, the small tourist trade items along with tipis out of birch bark. In Upper Island in those hills back there were large strands of birch bark. [They] would make other items like corn cob pipes for tourist industry to sell, take and setup little shops in town. They were big at state fairs and

county fairs” said Albert. “These crafts were another source of incomes for families and everyone was doing it” said Vivian.

Besides making crafts for tourism, both participants remembered going to the State Fair to dance. Vivian said, “as a young girl, we would go to the State Fair to dance, and people would throw money at us; we split what was collected among the dancers”. Albert thought that “they enjoyed throwing money at them”.

In referring to living conditions Vivian said, “things were hard for us, but then like I said as Native Americans we laughed a lot, and we were always happy. We were happy and satisfied with what we had. Especially at our meals, it wasn’t much but we were always happy and gave thanks for what we had”.

Not only were there connections among themselves as a community, but Albert remembered connections with other Indian people growing up. “Prairie Island was in close contact with the Winnebago tribe of Wisconsin. When the Prairie Island Sioux would camp at the Winnebago pow-wows [they] were given a section to camp in called an eyanpaha (crier, announcer); [to] speak various languages, say in Winnebago and Dakota to inform people of the day’s events, like if someone was feeding [feast], having a giveaway or naming [ceremony]. That carried over until the 1960s”. He also remembered visitation to Flandreau, SD in the 1930s since so many Indian children went to school there at the boarding school. Yet there were no visits with the Western Sioux, just with those around in this area, and sometimes with the Meskwaki of Tama, Iowa.

When asked, Albert said there were no sacred sites on Prairie Island. However he thought there were probably “some burial mounds on the bluffs [surrounding our community and

Red Wing] since the Sioux, along with all its divisions prayed from high tops in order to be near the grandfathers/spirits”. While Vivian refers to the numerous burial mounds located all over Prairie Island as sacred sites.

Again you feel the connection among the people living at Prairie Island when they were younger since “my mother would go with her female relatives, and [they would] all go in the morning during the fall and come back with bundles before winter. A lot of [the traditional medicine] you had to boil to become a tea” said Vivian. People were more than willing to help one another out in times of need.

Albert described Prairie Island as “a small satellite community. We were called the Eastern or Mississippi Sioux. We still had our own language and culture in all households; [it] was still a vibrant community. We are called Tinta Wita. Large families lived here, and there was large interaction with others”. Then he continues to say, “there are a lot of memories of the old times. Families took care of each other; they were sharing and caring, and looked out for each other back then”. While Vivian wanted to record “I know back when I was a girl, life was a lot better here on Island compared to today with the high prices of everything. If you can budget your money, you can live a good life here on Prairie Island” as an aspect of Prairie Island history.

DISCUSSION

Oral histories contribute greatly to understanding the elders lived experiences. Not only is it important information, but it gives the community members at Prairie Island a sense of identity. By recording these two oral histories, it has given us younger generations a sense of Prairie Island history to which we are connected. It is important to record these oral histories

before this knowledge becomes lost to us all. Overall, this research has been of particular interest to me because of my membership in the Prairie Island Indian Community. Due to a personal duty to my daughter and the younger generation, along with personal fulfillment in knowing the history of my community, this research has become a priority.

Not only is oral history important amongst many Indian People, but the history of Prairie Island would be incomplete without the help of the tribal elders' commitment and willingness to share their stories. Also, after listening to these two elders' life experiences and stories I feel better connected to the history of my community, the Prairie Island Indian Community. In result, this research allows me to share this knowledge of the history of Prairie Island elders' with the overall community so they can feel connected as well.

Next, I will continue to interview tribal elders' throughout the summer and fall for my senior project. However, I may take a different direction once I decide to further my education. Or I may focus my research within the Prairie Island Indian Community. Later, I anticipate returning to these interviews for further academic research comparing past and present life experiences.

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