

**John LaBatte
Narrator**

**Deborah Locke
Interviewer**

**New Ulm, Minnesota
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**AL = Aimee LaBree
Minnesota Historical Society**

**DL = Deborah Locke
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JL = John LaBatte

AL: This is Aimee LaBree on May 31, 2011 in New Ulm, Minnesota. Interviewee: John LaBatte. Interviewer: Deborah Locke.

DL: Could you spell your name for us?

JL: Capital L, A. Capital B-A-T-T-E.

DL: And John is the regular spelling?

JL: Yes.

DL: How long have you lived here?

JL: I've been in New Ulm nine years.

DL: Where did you live before?

JL: New Hope.

DL: Where did you grow up?

JL: Minneapolis, and Wyoming, Minnesota; Robbinsdale, Minnesota.

DL: What is your heritage?

JL: I am about an eighth Dakota, about three-eighths French, three-eighths Swedish, and about one-eighth English-Scottish-Irish.

DL: Where did you go to school?

JL: I graduated from Robbinsdale High School and then I went to Minneapolis Business College for about a year and a half.

DL: What was the first news story you remember from your childhood?

JL: I just don't remember.

DL: Which relatives had the most influence on you?

JL: We lived with my mother's parents for about five years, so I would say my mother's parents had the most influence.

DL: What did you learn from them when you say they had the most influence? What was special about them?

JL: I'm sorry, I just don't remember. I'm only saying that because we lived with them for five years. We never lived with my father's parents.

DL: What did you learn about family history while you were growing up?

JL: Neither parent nor grandparents talked about their family history. I knew that my grandfather was a Sioux Indian from South Dakota and that he attended Carlisle Indian School about the time Jim Thorp was there. But my Swedish grandparents never talked about their history, and my mother didn't mention much. My father didn't talk much about our history. I may know now more about our Dakota history than my father or grandfather knew.

DL: Did you ever hear of the 1862 U.S.-Dakota War during your growing up years?

JL: No. the only thing I heard connected to that was that my grandfather was raised in Faribault. He was half Dakota, and he said that they would not travel through Mankato during the day. They would either bypass Mankato or go through at night.

DL: What was your grandfather's name?

JL: Leonard John.

DL: Did he ever say why he wanted to avoid Mankato?

JL: I don't remember if he said at that time, but I gathered later it was because of the hangings.

DL: So he just felt uncomfortable in that environment?

JL: When he was with his family, when he was growing up. He spent a few years in Faribault. I don't remember what age he moved to the Sisseton Reservation.

DL: Do you have family members who lived through the 1860s? Were several connected with the war?

JL: I have at least nine ancestors that were in the Lower Sioux Agency area in 1862.

DL: Tell us about them.

JL: Francois LaBatte was half Dakota, half French and he was a fur trader. He was killed on the first day of the Dakota War, August 18. Peter Quinn was full-blooded Irishman from Dublin, Ireland. He was a post interpreter at Fort Ridgely, and he was killed at Redwood Ferry on the first day of the Dakota War. His son George Quinn was among the Indians who attacked Captain Marsh's men at Redwood Ferry, and George Quinn also was among the Indians who attacked Fort Ridgely. Francois LaBatte's wife, Mary LaBatte, was full-blooded Dakota. Her Dakota name was Hapastina, or Hapstie. Her narrative said she fled among the Indians from the Lower Sioux Agency with her children. My great-grandfather Phillip LaBatte was one of her children, and he would later live in Faribault and move to the Sisseton Reservation. I believe that Mary's mother and father were there. They show on the Faribault census after Mary was moved to Faribault. And I believe that my great-grandfather's future wife Susan Quinn was also there at the Lower Agency. I believe she was a quarter French a quarter Irish and half Dakota. That's all I can remember right now.

DL: So the point you're making is that you had quite a few family members who were very directly connected with that war.

JL: Yes, and I also forgot to mention that I had three uncles inside Fort Ridgely who were among the defenders. One was French, one was French and Dakota and one was Irish and Dakota.

DL: You had family members who were both native and non-native.

JL: Yes. And I had a family member who joined the Indians against the whites and family members who were Christian farmers who opposed the war.

DL: And they were Dakota.

JL: Yes.

DL: Christian farmers.

JL: Yes. They had converted to Christianity and were farming under the government's program. And I'm going to say it now: history has to treat all of these people accurately and respectfully. I do not see that Minnesota Historical Society's products are doing this.

DL: Tell us more.

JL: In the Northern Lights textbook, it mentions that the fur traders cheated the Indians three times. It's mentioned three times in that book. I have written to the Minnesota Historical Society asking for proof of this and I have never received an answer. The suggestion is made that the missionaries forced the Indians, put stress on the Indians to become Christians, and I don't find that to be true. The missionaries offered knowledge of their religion, offered membership in their church. They had no power to force anybody to do anything. And I see errors in Minnesota Historical Society's signs and books. If they had a better research group, like they did at one time, they might not have these errors and if they were trying not to please an Indian advisory panel, they might not have these errors. We are seeing a good Indian, bad white attitude come through in these exhibits.

DL: Okay let's start with the fur traders. You mentioned the fur traders as being depicted inaccurately in the textbooks. Would you say that it's true or false that they deliberately increased the price for things at the trading posts for Indians - 100 to 400 percent is what I remember reading.

JL: It depends on place and time. Are we talking 1862 or?

DL: Around the 1850s, 1860s.

JL: Okay. I don't know how many different fur traders there were at the Lower Sioux Agency and at the Upper Sioux Agency. If an Indian didn't like the trade, the Indian could go somewhere else. In 1862 the Indians were coming into New Ulm and St. Peter to trade. It was nothing to them to pack up and take a couple of days and come over to New Ulm if they didn't think they were getting a fair deal from their traders. But, interestingly, even Myrick who has a bad name now for telling the Dakota to eat grass still had his Indians, those people who were loyal to him and who always traded with him because they trusted him. Same with my great-great-grandfather Francois LaBatte. He had his Indians and the records show that he did a very good business. Not all of the fur traders decided to stop giving credits. The book suggests that they did. The exhibits and other products suggest that the fur traders were all white, and they weren't. My great-great-grandfather Francois LaBatte was half Dakota, and don't tell me he tried to cheat his Dakota relatives.

There's an exhibit at Traverse de Sioux that says that Jefferson suggested that they use the fur traders to drive up the debts and then force the Indians to sell their land. Being

in the exhibit like it is, it suggests that this was, in fact, U.S. government policy. I've asked them for proof and they cannot prove it.

DL: Nicollet County Historical Society in Saint Peter operates that

JL: That's not an MHS sign. If the fur traders made money in the treaties--many of them were married to Dakota women or had Dakota descendents--you can likely bet that they shared that money with their families and their extended families. To make a general statement that the fur traders cheated the Indians is not correct. I don't like criticism of any group of people from those times, and I don't like misinformation. It's exaggerated. The truth was sad enough, what happened. We don't need to embellish it.

DL: So in your point of view then, the Dakota had the opportunity to choose who they did trade with.

JL: Yes.

DL: And if they felt like they were being cheated at the Lower Sioux Agency, you believe they could have easily gone to New Ulm...

JL: New Ulm, Upper Sioux Agency.

DL: Or somewhere else?

JL: St. Peter was there at that time.

DL: For the same, to get a better deal.

JL: Yes, and we know they were coming in to New Ulm to trade.

DL: Okay. And then you mentioned that the depiction of missionaries isn't accurate, in that you didn't think that the Dakota were pressured into becoming Christians.

JL: There's an exhibit at the Lower Sioux Agency with a quote by Charles Eastman saying that the missionaries forced us to kneel at their altars. Now this could have been true later on, in Charles Eastman's time, and it should be identified. If that's the case, I cannot say. When Grant was President, the different religious groups had reservations divided among them and each one had a certain territory assigned to them. They were allowed to be in that area for so long before other churches could come in. Maybe at that time the church had more power, but in 1862 the church had no power.

JL: The Indians who converted to Christianity were probably the strongest of the Indians. The bravest. They chose Christianity and weren't forced.

JL: Today the notion is that if you're Christian you can't be an Indian. I don't know if you've spoken to Elden Lawrence. He would tell you you're wrong if you believe that. I see in the Indian communities today that the youth are being persuaded or influenced to take up the traditional religion because they are being told that they can't be an Indian and a Christian at the same time, and that's wrong.

The missionaries influenced a group of Indians who helped rescue the captives at Camp Release. If it had not been for those Christians and others who were opposed to the war, the hostile Indians might have killed all of the captives.

And I believe that a majority of the Dakota Indians, even though they were not Christian, opposed the war. That it wasn't Sibley who ended the war, it was these friendly Indians who gathered up the hostages during the Battle of Woodlake and protected them against Little Crow's warriors when they returned. I think the friendly Indians are getting far too little credit. What we hear today a lot is that the Indians went to war with the whites in 1862. And that's a wrong statement. The Indians did not go to war. Eastern Dakota, maybe, some of the Indians went to war. Others were drawn in. And that message isn't getting out there.

DL: We are going to kind of change directions here, briefly. Is your property where you live in some way historically significant?

JL: No.

DL: The next question has to do with how you feel being a product of this sort of mish-mash or quilt work display of family ties from the 1860s.

JL: I've got very little information from my family and what I have learned is because maybe fifteen or twenty years ago I started studying family history and tracking down different connections. But at the same time I gained more knowledge, I was looking at exhibits and looking at books and seeing that there are many mistakes: a prejudice toward the white side, toward the Christians, toward the fur traders. I have come to the conclusion that you need to understand what happened. Education needs to tell the truth about what happened. If you're going to criticize any group of people from that time or I'm going to say the fur traders cheated the Indians, I want to see proof of that right there. Don't make that statement and then go on. Don't say Andrew Myrick told the Indians to eat grass and move on. Say why he told them to eat grass. I believe that reconciliation isn't possible because you can't reconcile what you didn't have. I believe in understanding on both sides, understanding why the Indians went to war, understanding why the whites were so angry. Nobody talks about the Dakota Indian warfare. This was traditional warfare and it was very brutal. It wasn't like the white warfare where they tried not to hurt women and children. The Dakota warriors declared everybody an enemy. And their tradition was that the battle would continue in the afterlife so they were mutilating bodies, cutting off hands, poking out eyes. It was very brutal warfare. This is what made the whites so angry and why there were thirty-eight Dakota hanged at Mankato. This is why Indians were removed from the state. People

will blame Ramsey for being against the Indians, but Ramsey was a politician -- he was reflecting the wills of the citizens of Minnesota. The people of New Ulm did not want any Indians moved back to the reservation, even friendly Indians. They didn't know the difference back then. They were all guilty. And today there's still some people making them all guilty and I don't like that.

I believe the Minnesota Historical Society should take the lead on this. I believe they should let history rule and not let individuals persuade them away from the truth.

DL: You said you started doing research about fifteen or twenty years ago. Why did you start doing research and how did you do it?

JL: I became interested in my family history. I knew that three of my mother's grandparents were born in Sweden. So, I didn't go to Sweden, I stopped with their entry to the United States. My mother is one quarter French, and I knew that they came down from Canada just by talking to family members. By the time I really got interested both my mother and father had passed away, or my mother couldn't remember. I started talking to other family members, drove over to Sisseton and looked up family members there; the LaBattes. I knew I had an uncle up at Granite Falls, Walter LaBatte. I visited them to find out what they could tell me. Visited county courthouses and all the county history books. Then I started getting into the archives at the Minnesota Historical Society, and I have many, many boxes of paperwork on this time. And on the Dakota unions also.

DL: From what you've read, what was the situation at the Lower Sioux Agency in 1861, 1862?

JL: There was a break going on between the Dakota Indians and their fur traders. I believe up till that time the fur trade was more of a, here's a loan, pay it back when you want to, or they would pay back when treaties were made. But in that last 1858 treaty, when the north side of the river was sold, possibly the fur traders saw that there would be no way to recover their money, their loans. The fur trade was diminishing, the better hunters were still bringing in impressive amounts of furs but others weren't. The Indians wanted the fur traders to start paying for their grass, and for their wood and for fish in the river that they were taking. I believe that's where Andrew Myrick's statement came from. It reached a point where a group of Dakota Indians at the Lower Agency visited Fort Ridgely and said, "We want to make sure you're not going to force us to pay the fur traders." And I'm not sure why they did that, because the military wasn't forcing them to do that. They were going to drive up debts and then refuse to pay the fur traders. Fur traders found out about it and said, "Well, if you're going to do that then we won't give you any more credit. You can eat grass." But they were still giving credits to the Indians they thought would pay. And then this group of militant Indians stopped everybody from getting credit. And one of the things I have to find out is I don't know if they stopped giving credit at the Upper Agency. I don't know if they had stopped up there by that time. And there were still independent traders who were giving credits. And I believe Myrick said, "Let them eat grass" because the Indians had wanted money

for their grass that they were taking for their animals.

DL: What was the full quote - do you recall Myrick's full quote? It had something to do with the word dung, too.

JL: Well one version is "let them eat grass or their own dung." One version says that.

DL: Would you call those fighting words?

JL: It was one of the causes that Little Crow listed when Sibley asked him why he went to war, Myrick's words. But what would you do if you knew these people weren't going to pay you? Would you continue to let them have credit? It's two-sided. It's not just a bad white man refusing starving Indians; it's also Indians saying we're not going to pay you.

DL: You mentioned your great-great-grandfather, Mr. LaBatte, who was at the trading post.

JL: Lower Sioux Agency trading. He had a major trading post there. There were four major traders there at the agency.

DL: I do recall reading something about many of the people who worked at the post who were regarded as taking advantage of the Dakota, because the prices were so high. If an Indian came in to buy something, the price would go up.

JL: I've never read that statement

DL: Okay, so you think the prices were fair.

JL: I believe they were, otherwise the Indians would have went someplace else. Because David Faribault was just across the river and he was a fur trader.

DL: How many Dakota were at the Lower Sioux Agency in 62? They came for their annuity, their yearly payment, right?

JL: I believe in 1861, the census showed 6500 Dakota Indians, about a little more than a quarter were women, a little less than a quarter were men and the rest were children. And the split on that, I believe, [was because] there were fewer Indians at the Lower Agency so there would be less than half of that at the Lower Agency. And I can't remember the breakdown on the numbers, but three thousand or less at the Lower Agency.

DL: Was the Agency a gathering place for this annuity that was promised?

JL: Yes. There was about a football-sized field there where they would set up and military would come to keep order at the pay tables. And the heads of the family would

be called and they would be paid.

DL: How many thousands of Dakota were there at that time?

JL: There were probably, I would guess there might be three thousand because I think there were Indians who came down from the Upper Agency to be there, and there were probably Western Sioux, Yankton or Yanktonai that came in just to be there.

DL: The historical accounts mentioned that many of the Dakota were starving and dying from starvation. Have you read that as well?

JL: I have read that. When you say many--I don't know if anybody can say many -- but really if any were starving, that's bad enough. I've read that the Indians valued their dogs and their horses and that that would be the last thing they would do is kill their dogs and horses. Also, that there were older people and younger children that were dying from lack of food.

But I've recently read an article from 1852, this was before the 1851 treaty was ratified, that said that the Indians around Lac Qui Parle were starving; that there were groups out there that were turning to eating their horses and their dogs. I believe the fur trade had a bad effect, and that was why the Indians took their food, their game, to get the furs to buy these things that they needed, and maybe didn't realize how rapidly they were killing off the game. Because Sibley said that by 1835 there was a noticeable decline in the animal populations. In the 1851 treaties they treated [signed treaties] with the Sisseton and Wahpeton first because they knew that they were starving and would be more ready for a treaty. 1837 treaties gave the Eastern Dakota, the Mdewakanton-- and I think the Wahpekute were in that treaty -- so much money that some of them stopped hunting. And there were western Indians who also wanted a treaty because they were coming in to live among their eastern relatives off of the money that they were getting on their treaties. That whole process is very complicated.

And I'll mention this: whenever anybody wants to say that the whites stole the Indian land, I ask where did the Dakota Indian get their land? Because before they were here there were Cheyenne, Oto, Arapaho, Iowa. They were forced off by the Dakota Indians when the last of the Dakota were forced out by the Ojibwe out of northern Minnesota.

DL: Was the land exchanged the same? That is, the Dakota came in with treaties and showed them to the Cheyenne and told them to sign here and this land...

JL: No. They took the land. The same way the Ojibwe took the land in northern Minnesota. But I don't think a lot of people know that many of the Dakota Indians had already started their migrations. It was only the last group, the Mdewakanton, the eastern Sioux that were forced out of northern Minnesota by the Ojibwe who had muskets at that time. And one reason some believe that the Dakota Indians moved way down the Mississippi River - Red Wing, Winona, and into Iowa - was to be closer to the fur traders coming out of Prairie du Chien. They wanted the muskets, they wanted the

firearms. But they were killing off their animal population to get these things and by 1851 they were ready for a treaty.

DL: You mentioned Little Crow. What are your thoughts on him?

JL: I believe that Little Crow was a reluctant leader. In traditional Dakota society if a person was elected or voted Chief by the soldier's lodge, tradition said they had to take it. Chief Little Crow tried to talk them out of the War. One of the things the government had done was to take the chiefs to Washington D.C. [so they could] see how strong the government was by demonstrating their firepower at the Aberdeen testing grounds in Maryland. Little Crow tried to talk to the Indians who wanted war. There is other evidence that the Indians didn't believe him. His people didn't believe the things that he had seen. And you might say that they wanted war that bad; that they were that angry. But they also didn't believe - I don't think they believed--what he said. They knew that there was a Civil War going on, this was one of the primary causes of the Dakota War. When they saw whites coming down the trail, all the young men were gone. They didn't think the government was strong enough to raise an army. They thought that they could sweep right into Minneapolis, up the river. So I believe Little Crow was a reluctant leader. There's a letter from his daughter later on to one of the white historians that said that had her father not taken the appointment they would have killed him. And Chief Big Eagle offers another clue on that. He said that although he opposed the war his warriors voted in favor of it and he chose to lead them. And he might have been killed too if he hadn't taken the lead.

DL: What do you think was the origin on the war? Was there more than one origin?

JL: I do a speech called "Causes of the Dakota War." There are, I believe, at least six primary causes. And I would say the primary cause was that change was too sudden. Village Chiefs and spiritual leaders were losing their power as Indians moved out of the villages onto the farms and started joining churches. Dr. Williamson was a missionary and he would take revenue or income away from the spiritual healers and medicine people, men and women. I believe that the government tried to make the change too quickly, didn't give the Indians time to adapt to what was happening. There was too much pressure put on by the government to convert. The government was offering food and special issues to the farmers, to the Indians who would become farmers and offering nothing to the traditional Indians. One example of that [occurred when] the Indians reached Fort Snelling. They threw away many of their medicine bundles and idols, and there were mass conversions to Christianity after the Dakota War, both at Mankato and at Fort Snelling. I believe that in a way it was a religious war; that the Dakota Indians saw that their Gods were not as powerful as the white God. And if you track their progress to 1900 or so, even after they were released from the prisons and reached Santee, Nebraska, there were still large Christian congregations among the Dakota Indians.

DL: How does Acton work into this picture?

JL: Acton was the spark. I think they needed a reason. They were afraid of retaliation from the government and they didn't want to turn over the Dakota men who killed the settlers at Acton. I think that that was the spark. I think that once they reached the village, war was inevitable.

DL: Do you think there were any misunderstandings that led to the war as well?

JL: Whites had been among the Indians for, let's see...Fur traders came in probably middle 1700s, 1775 area. Missionaries came about 1824. The government made their first treaty in 1805. As soon as that first treaty was made, the first settlers started coming in. There was a lot of interaction between the Indians and some of the whites. The new settlers on the frontier were a variety of people. Some were afraid of the Indians, some welcomed them. There's a story about a woman out here in Brown County who always made extra bread for when the Indians stopped, and they were among the people who were warned by the Indians to flee before the war started. There were other people who tolerated the Indians. There were also angry Indians, that even though they agreed in their treaties [that] they would stay on the reservation, they continued to leave and were seen as far away as St. Croix River Valley, their former hunting grounds. But every year they would go there, there would be more and more settlers, more farms that they would have to go around. And then there would be petitions from these settlers saying that they [the Indians] were supposed to stay on the reservations and the state should be doing something about this. Some people call it a clash of cultures. I don't, that's too general. I like to get into more specifics, first-person accounts. There have been a lot of causes of the war offered since 1862, but if you go into the first-person accounts I think you're safer, or you have a better idea of what happened. Because each of the missionaries, the Indian agent, Chief Little Crow, Chief Big Eagle and others gave primary reasons for the cause of the war. Chief Big Eagle said the change was too sudden. And I believe that's correct. Chief Big Eagle didn't say it was that we were starving, he didn't mention food. Chief Little Crow did.

DL: Would you expect them to have mirrored each other?

JL: If food had been a problem, I would have thought that they would have -- that Chief Big Eagle would have at least mentioned it.

DL: Is it possible his band wasn't starving?

JL: It's possible

DL: Whereas Little Crow's was?

JL: But, I would also have thought Chief Big Eagle would have spoken for the group rather than just for his band. Because when he said the change is too sudden, he was speaking for everybody, I believe. And he also said that we wanted to go where we wanted, hunt where we could, and take game and then trade. This was their way of life

and they didn't want to see that ending. So that's why I believe he said the change was too sudden.

DL: You can look at that from a more broad way as well, and extrapolate the fact that the land was reduced, which means the hunting was reduced, which meant that fewer people were eating as well. There's sort of the logical ending to that claim. The change came too fast, you could look at that in terms of, well doesn't it always seem to get back to land. Because he didn't say specifically, "my granddaughter died of starvation," that doesn't mean that there wasn't starvation that he was aware of.

JL: Right, right, I agree. Another thing regarding food was that, in my great-great-grandmother's testimony, she was asked when the traders stopped giving credit. And her reply was, "About the time the corn was commencing to be good to eat." This was going to be a bumper year. There was going to be plenty of food for everybody. All reports were that there was going to be plenty of food. I believe there was a good reason to start the war at that time, to get it going. And I believe that these people who wanted war thought that, traditionally, the eastern Sioux would join them. But they didn't. Traditionally they were allies - Dakota means allies. But even the Sisseton and the Wahpeton, a majority of them opposed the war. Throughout the entire war there were only maybe a couple of the Upper Sioux leaders that joined. Chief Standing Buffalo and Chief Red Iron opposed the war. And they were very influential with their people to keep them out of the war. There's a story up at Camp Release that the reason for Camp Release is that Chief Red Iron lined his warriors along his boundary. He claimed the land and said to Chief Little Crow, "You can cross, but if you try to cross with those hostages we will attack you." That was a very brave thing for him to do, he was well outnumbered.

DL: When you look at your Dakota ancestry, was that side of your family involved in the war to the extent that they fought it, or were they the farmers? What was their role?

JL: George Quinn, in his narrative in Through Dakota Eyes, said that he was nineteen about the time they moved up to the Lower Agency area, and he decided to join his people against the whites. I believe that part of it was the valor. I don't know if there were many scalps taken during the Dakota War. But before that, the scalp dances, the eagle feathers were all signs of a brave person. And this was important in Dakota society. My great-great-grandmother-married to Francois LaBatte, who I believed converted to Christianity before 1862-was connected to Chief Little Crow's people, Joseph Iron Shield was her brother, and Taopi was her cousin and these were strong Christian people. After the Dakota War, Bishop Whipple brought his Lower Sioux congregation to Faribault. So she, Joseph Iron Shield and Taopi were among those Indians who went to Faribault. They were not removed to Crow Creek with the others. Iyasamani, I believe was Christian before 1862. In his narrative he said that his wife and he were married by ceremony, which I believe means Christian ceremony. I don't know that the Dakota Indians had a marriage ceremony. I haven't read about that. Iyasamani was forced to attack New Ulm. Sibley wrote at Wood Lake that at least one-third of the Dakota Indians who were there were forced to be there. These friendly

Indians among the Lower Sioux Indians were told "If you don't join us we'll kill you." Only when they reached the Uppers Sioux Agency and started making connections with the Upper Sioux Indians who also opposed the war, then they became more outspoken and more ready to take action.

DL: What's your view of some Dakota who we have talked to who say that their fellow Dakota who became farmers, or scouts for the Calvary or, who aided the enemy in any way were a bunch of sellouts, and that as far as they were concerned, the Dakota in Minnesota were all loyalists, loyal to the U.S. government and basically not even legitimate Dakota? We've heard that.

JL: I've heard it too.

DL: I noticed you were smiling.

JL: These were very brave men. For anybody to call them cowards, they don't understand what happened. These Indians who opposed the war were very brave men. They had their families they had to be concerned about, and so they had to be careful. Gabriel Renville had been a Christian and I believe at the time of the War maybe he wasn't. He had four wives and there was trouble with the church because they wanted him to give up three wives. And he said, "No, I will not be a member of your church if I have to do that." I believe Gabriel Renville, even though he was part white, was probably the greatest Dakota person who ever lived. But I have cousins through Francois LaBatte and also under Gabriel Renville who tell me that there are people who say that Gabriel Renville was a coward and a traitor. I don't know what these people get out of that. I don't know what they get out of criticizing their ancestors. Traditional Dakota people do not criticize their ancestors like that. And so I have to wonder if these people are traditional Dakota people, or what they are. Elden Lawrence may have used a term, "neo-traditional" - people going back to being what they think Indians are. Another person calls them "born-again Indians." And it seems like the Mendota community are born-again Indians. They believe they have to act like Indians in order to get recognized and their goal is a casino.

DL: It is?

JL: Yes.

DL: You know for a fact that they want to build a casino?

JL: Yes. They were after the Camp Coldwater area, are you familiar with that?

DL: I've been there.

JL: Okay. Even Sheldon Wolfchild, from Lower Sioux, was after that so bad that they changed our creation stories. The creation story that the Dakota people emerged from Mille Lacs was one. And then for a long time it's been that the Dakota people came on

to earth at Mendota. [Sheldon] was working on a video that said that our ancestors originated with the constellation Orion; came to earth and fell into the Camp Coldwater Springs, and then emerged as the Dakota people and populated the continent. They wanted Camp Coldwater Springs, and to get it they made it a sacred site. They believe that if we call this a sacred site, the government will give it to us. And I don't like that. I don't like changing history for a personal gain like that.

And it appears to me that whenever a site is desired by the Indian community it becomes sacred, and I don't like that. And when it comes down right down to it, all land is sacred; should be sacred to the Dakota people.

So anyway, I believe that Gabriel Renville did more for his people. That Sisseton Wahpeton Reservation out there in South Dakota was -- if you look at other reservations -- a very good reservation. The land was good and I believe he did a very good service in helping to negotiate that treaty. I also believe that Sisseton Wahpeton Reservation was maybe a gift to these people because they opposed the War of 1862. Five or six years later here they are on their own reservation. And I believe one purpose was to provide a buffer to more hostile Indians to the west. One of my cousins told me the Indians to the west didn't like the Sisseton Wahpeton for that reason. I don't agree with people who talk that way about ancestors.

An example is the Cavenders. They say that anybody who opposed the war was a coward and traitor. But their own ancestry opposed the War. Now, doesn't that dishonor their ancestors, when they say that? We have the casinos now, in the Indian communities, and one Indian member at Lower Sioux told me that the casino has caused more trouble among the Dakota Sioux than any other single thing in Dakota history. I know that there are first cousins who are not permitted to become members at Lower Sioux. They're fighting to keep people out and imposing these five-year wait periods. They have to check in every month over there to prove that they had been a resident. What's happened to traditional Dakota culture? These people should be sharing with their relatives. And I know that Grand Casino has had quite a few problems up there too, trying to figure out who should be included and who shouldn't be.

DL: What you're painting then is a picture of Dakota people who are definitely not speaking with own voice.

JL: I think part of the problem was 1862 Dakota people fled into Canada. Dakota people fled west. The government moved a good number down to Crow Creek and then to Santee, formed Sisseton Wahpeton Reservation, the Spirit Lake Reservation in North Dakota. Today there are at least sixteen Dakota communities, and they try to unify but they just can't seem to get together. There is no central Dakota language repository--whatever the word for that would be. A person who lives in Granite Falls speaks a different dialect than somebody who lives in Sisseton. They're too spread out, I think.

DL: The war led to a tremendous scattering of Dakota people.

JL: Yes and then there's a great number of Dakota people who have left the reservations, living among the whites. Like me. Well, I was never on a reservation, but my grandfather was.

DL: Were any members of your family directly related to the march that took place from Fort Snelling then down the Mississippi?

JL: The commemorative march or the original march?

DL: The original.

JL: Yes. Two of my grandfathers were sentenced to hang at Mankato. They were marched by New Ulm, not through New Ulm, and were waiting at Mankato for hanging when President Lincoln granted them reprieves.

DL: What were their names?

JL: Iyasamani, and George Quinn. They ended up serving time at Davenport Prison, and then Iyasamani went and got my great-great-grandmother and my great-grandmother from Santee and went up to Sisseton, and he became an elder in Mayasan Church. My great-great-grandmother Mary LaBatte and my great-grandfather -- and I suspect his future wife -- were among the Indians taken to Fort Snelling. Her brother, Joseph Iron Shield, and her cousin, Taopi, were there. That spring they were taken to Faribault and spent many years at Faribault under Bishop Whipple and Alexander Faribault, with their help. So yes, both marches.

DL: What is your opinion of President Lincoln's decision to pardon the vast majority of Dakota but to go forward with the hanging of thirty-eight? And then two later at Fort Snelling?

JL: And then one later at Mankato. People forget the one at Mankato. A white family was killed down there and I think it was a Campbell hanged at Mankato. They blamed him and some others for that. Originally three hundred and three were sentenced to hang. They didn't know when they convened that military trial what the terms were. They didn't know what constituted a hanging. And I believe the system worked when President Lincoln asked to see the trial transcripts and had his people narrow it down to thirty-eight. I believe it worked. And I think there was still some who were hanged at Mankato that should not have been. I think the punishment did not fit the crime. At first, Stephen Riggs -- the secretary at the trials -- said, "I grew tired of writing the sentence to hang by the neck until dead." But after he had seen and talked to people who were affected by the war, he said that maybe Mankato was necessary. That maybe there was some closure to hanging. So I think the system worked, but I will also say to you, what do you think would have happened? I do a speech at Fort Ridgely, a battlefield tour. New Ulm and Fort Ridgely were similar. Within a week each was attacked twice by Dakota Indians. The second attack [included] large numbers. What do you think would

have happened to the citizens of New Ulm if the Indians had broken through the barricades? Do you think they would have stopped to have trials? They would have killed everybody. Maybe they would have seen a child or a woman who struck their fancy, as in other places, and taken them prisoner. But they would have went about killing everyone. Why do we judge Lincoln or whether the trials were fair and not judge the Dakota Indian trial system?

DL: Some might reply that that is warfare. That if you are in a moving group, if you are a moving war party, whether you're in Vietnam, or whether you're in Germany, France or Minnesota, you don't have the ability to take captives, because again you are moving. And for that reason, everyone's an enemy. And I have also heard this argument: why weren't people spared? Weren't their innocents? Wasn't there an innocent player in this picture? Why would you kill the children, for example? And the reply I heard was, "they should not have been there in the first place." That they are there illegally.

JL: They're invaders.

DL: That they have invaded this area, and that is the justification.

JL: I believe that term invader is a modern term. I believe that when the Dakota Indians declared an enemy, it didn't matter if you were man, woman or child. There was one story about the Dakota Indians finding out that the citizens -- and I can't remember the location -- had an Ojibwe child, and I don't know how they came upon the Ojibwe child. But the Dakota sought out that child and killed it.

DL: And weren't Americans the same in Vietnam? How many kids died? How many kids died in Iraq?

JL: And what kept Sibley, when he reached Camp Release, from killing everybody up there? All the Indians that he could? Instead he convened trials and there was a process, although it may not in some people's minds be fair. There was a process and it was double-checked, and there were two hundred and sixty-five men that were commuted to prison sentences.

DL: So, you understand I'm not defending the killing of non-military. I'm not necessarily in favor of even killing military soldiers or Dakota warriors. But I do see a point of view that these people did declare a war, and war is horrific.

Some might even say--and maybe you'll want to speak to this too--well if the U.S. government policy toward the Dakota and toward Indians in general was extermination, then what would you call the Dakota Indians who were moving through Milford? In their point of view that looked like genocide to them.

JL: There are Indians today who are using the terms genocide and ethnic cleansing--but in regards to the whites. The whites committed genocide; the whites committed ethnic cleansing. But if you look at the Dakota warfare, they were attacking across the

frontier. Not just Milford, but Lake Shetek, Randall County, way up toward Fort Ripley, that direction. They were attacking across the frontier, and some of them were killing everybody. And if that isn't ethnic cleansing -- I don't know what is. If I could say I was qualified to be an expert, I would say: yes both were, or one wasn't and one was, I don't know. All I'm saying is that it's very similar. And if you look at it, Indians were forced marched to Mankato. The Indians taken to Fort Snelling were not forced marched. It took about seven days to travel that, maybe a hundred and forty miles, twenty miles a day. That's not a great distance to travel and there was food along the way. But compare that to the people who were taken captive by the Dakota Indians near St. Peter around Milford/New Ulm area, and force marched up the river to Camp Release. There was another forced march that nobody talks about. It's very similar to both sides, and that's why I'm saying that I believe the key is understanding -- treating everybody respectfully and truthfully. And I think it's got to start with Minnesota Historical Society. This year—2012 even-- I hope it will go back to history roots. Take the politics out of it and deal with it from a historical aspect.

DL: It's interesting that you said that the Dakota people were fed along the way, on this march to Fort Snelling. We've heard different accounts of that. We've heard of tremendous hardship on the way to Fort Snelling -- and beyond. That there were many, many deaths, there was a great deal of illness.

JL: There was a measles outbreak, I believe, at Camp Release. There's an interesting aspect. A Dakota Indian person can claim, "that's my oral history. I know there were a lot of deaths because I was told by my ancestors." I have come to wonder whether this was a farce, and just how much of this oral history actually occurred. I can say that there was at least one missionary along with the Indians going to Fort Snelling. These soldiers defended the Indians at Henderson with their lives. One story, I believe it was someone who later became Reverend Charles Crawford. One of the citizens of Henderson was about to shoot a rifle at him. Colonel Marshall, who was in command, knocked the gun down with his saber. Crawford would later become a minister at a church up at Sisseton. The soldiers weren't there to punish the Indians, they were there to protect them. Sibley sent the majority of his army with this group to Mankato, he sent only three companies to Fort Snelling. They weren't force marched. The Dakota Indians were strong people. They had wagons, if you look at the inventory of wagons at Fort Snelling. If they chose to ride, they could ride. To me, there's an element in the Dakota group, and maybe in the Ojibwe, maybe in all Indian communities, who want to embellish the situation, make it worse, to get more sympathy. Maybe some actually believe what they are saying, but there's no proof that there was any more than that one baby killed in Henderson, who died along the way. I don't remember the number of people that died at Fort Snelling, but even that number has been embellished.

DL: Why today is the subject of that war still so heated? Almost 150 years later.

JL: Okay, I'm part Dakota and when I moved to New Ulm I didn't list my phone number because I heard rumors that people at New Ulm didn't like Indians. Angela Cavender, in her speech over at Winona said, "My son is on the commemorative march, they're

marching through New Ulm today and I'm worried about him." There was an Indian woman who came here and said to me, "Will my car be safe in the parking lot?" I think I've gotten more attention because I am part Indian. I've never heard a negative remark to me about my ancestors, about what they did to New Ulm. I'm not mad at the people of New Ulm for attacking a wagon train that had my grandfathers on it. I'm not mad at them, that's too long ago. I can visualize it, going by up on the hill, and these people coming out, but I'm not mad at those people. But there are people that are actually mad at the white people, they speak that way. One person might say "All of the whites should have been killed, they all deserve to die."

DL: And there are whites who think all three hundred three [Dakota] should have been hung.

JL: But I don't see that so much. I don't think I'll ever understand Dakota Indian history. Elden Lawrence explained it as being circular, where white history moves in a lineal fashion

DL: Does it actually move in a lineal fashion or is that the way that it's perceived?

JL: Well, that's what he explained. I don't know. I still could not understand the difference between white history and Indian history. I dare say that the Dakota War is more visible, and more discussed among the Indian community than in the white community. They celebrate here -- or commemorate I should say -- about every ten years. Elden also said in one of his speeches that before the whites and the Indians come together, the Indians have to come together because they're still fighting the Dakota War among themselves. And I see it in my family, when my cousin tells me that he still has people tell him that Gabriel Renville was a traitor.

DL: Do you think it's a good idea to commemorate the events of the 1800s?

JL: Yes. It's historical. People have to understand history. It's interesting, I think New Ulm was formed in 1855. I'm going through a German friend of mine who has translated some German newspapers for me. The Indians were here often. One account says that the Indians were in New Ulm before the shops opened, knocking on doors to spend their annuity money. They were coming in here to trade furs. They were passing through New Ulm on their way to their sugar camps and coming back. Scalp Dance down in German Park. I'm trying to figure out what happened, why all of a sudden it seemed like the whites were enemies and they wanted to kill everybody in New Ulm. What happened to that relationship? It appeared to be at least a working relationship, although it may not have been friendly. The Indians didn't have to come here to spend money, but they were doing that even though the traders had stores. I don't know, but I suppose with some research a person could find that they were going to St. Peter, too.

DL: If you had a magic wand, what would you wish for the Dakota people today?

JL: I believe they need the understanding. They need the education, or books; people that are telling them what happened here without embellishment, without trying to get them to be angry about what happened. I think that especially younger people need to understand what it is that happened without anger and without hate. But I am afraid that there are too many people in the Dakota Indian communities now that are speaking out in anger and hate. I should say, those that are speaking out are speaking out with anger and hate. A lot of people, even within my family, I would say, if you know they aren't telling the truth why don't you say something? "Well, we don't have to because we know they're not telling the truth."

DL: That concludes our interview. Thank you.

U.S.-Dakota War of 1862 Oral History Project
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