THE STORY is a familiar one. A white farm family living in a log cabin on the frontier is visited by Indians. First the visitors peer in the window. Without asking permission, they enter the cabin. They help themselves to food on the table or in kettles on the stove. Without saying anything, they leave.¹

Versions of this stereotyped scenario have circulated throughout Minnesota and other regions of the United States where native people live or once lived. Folklorist Jan H. Brunvand described such stories, using the derogatory terms found in many: "A common theme . . . is feeding the Indians; the redskins arrive at a farm or ranch to beg for food, and the settler watches in dismay as a whole platter of fried eggs disappears down the gullet of one brave, while all of the others demand the same size serving."² Usually these tales are placed in a

¹The author would like to thank Mary Black-Rogers and Deborah Miller for their gifts of insight and information. A version of this article was presented at the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) history conference in 1986.


Bruce White, a historical anthropologist, lives in St. Paul.
pioneer context, often implying that native people were just another of the hardships white settlers endured along with blizzards, prairie fires, and grasshoppers.

In 1932 Antoinette Ford recorded a succinct version of a Minnesota "Indian visit" in Gopher Tales, a reader for elementary-school students. Describing the experiences of many white farm families in the mid-1800s, Ford wrote, "Often a savage face was seen pressed against the window. The Indians usually left peacefully if food was given to them." In these few words she summarized a common stereotype of Minnesota's native people and evoked a folk description about the pioneer past.

Most historical accounts of ordinary life in Minnesota in the mid-nineteenth century contain some story of Indian visits. In tones ranging from fear to scorn to humor, pioneers told of native people entering their homes and interfering with their lives. The accuracy of such stories is hard to gauge. Incidents resembling them may have happened, but it is important to note that most of the existing accounts were written many years later. Furthermore, they portray events only from the whites' point of view.

Most of these anecdotes are not actual reports of the storyteller's own experiences. Rather, they are folk narratives—accounts believed to be true—passed from one person to another. Many have become part of family folklore, handed down through several generations with plenty of opportunity for embellishment, then published in local histories and reminiscences. Some aspects of these stories may be based on the actions of native people; even so, the meaning ascribed to the actions can be disputed. Thus, these anecdotes, rather than being simple, straightforward reports of behavior and conversations, are the record of folk belief and attitudes. They tell not so much what happened but what some people believed happened.

Those who accept these accounts without question will get a distorted and negative view of native people. Ojibway, Dakota, and other groups are usually not differentiated. People are seldom named. Demeaning terms like squaw, redskin, buck, brave, and papoose are used as though they were purely descriptive. Insulting references to the way people smelled and to their garbled use of English abound. These stories are the record of a cross-cultural relationship from one side only—a relationship of fear, misunderstanding, and often hatred.

Given these biases, it might seem wiser to ignore the anecdotes altogether. Unfortunately, however, these stories are not simply pieces of a buried past. They continue to be an important part of the common knowledge Americans have of their history. References and retellings continue to surface in popular and academic writings. They must be confronted.

ABRASIVE ENCOUNTERS between native people and whites were not inevitable. Rather, the conflicts recorded in stories of Indian visits were the product of particular conditions that arose in Minnesota in the 1850s. Earlier, relations between the more-than 11,000 native people and the few white traders, missionaries, and soldiers in the region were relatively harmonious. After Minnesota became a territory in 1849, large numbers of settlers began to arrive, swelling the white population from 6,000 to more than 170,000 in the following ten years.

Many of these newcomers encountered native people for the first time on the Minnesota frontier. Early settlers migrated from eastern states where Indian people had been exterminated or removed in violent clashes. They arrived with preconceived notions about the fierce nature of native people, including traditions about the men assaulting white women. Even if these beliefs were based on native-white interaction elsewhere, they did not correspond to the reality of Minnesota. But the fact that people believed these ideas was a potential source of conflict between the two groups.

Another source of conflict was land. Native people used this resource in ways fundamentally different from whites. They did not have a concept of exclusive land ownership. In a pattern that has come to be called "the seasonal round," they moved throughout a communal area in a regular pattern, tapping a variety of


2For example, historian Glenda Riley recently wrote of how Minnesota's pioneer white women were "distressed" by native people who "silently stared in their windows at them while they worked, or begged for food and medicine, or forcefully seized food from limited supplies." Many such accounts exist, but their acceptance as objective reality by a historian who, in her other writings, has described the complexity of native-white interaction, suggests the insidiousness of common knowledge. Glenda Riley, "In or Out of the Historical Kitchen? Interpretations of Minnesota Rural Women," Minnesota History 52 (Summer 1990): 63. For some of Riley's other discussions of native-white relationships, see Frontierswomen: The Iowa Experience (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1981), 177–81, and her introduction to Edith E. Kohl, Land of the Burnt Thigh (Reprint ed., St. Paul: MHS Press, 1986).


4On the enduring myths about Native Americans, see Raymond W. Stedman, Shadows of the Indian: Stereotypes in American Culture (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), especially 105–17. Riley also discusses the stereotypes and their effect on Iowa women in Frontierswomen, 177.
food crops were a part, but not the main base, of subsistence. Whites, particularly white farmers, believed that such land use was a waste. It was important for people to be "rooted in the soil." A particular person or family owned and cultivated a piece of land full-time; others who passed over that land, or camped on it, were intruders.  

Several federal treaties with Minnesota's native people appear to acknowledge native beliefs about the use of land. Treaties with the Ojibway in 1837 and 1854, for example, guaranteed them the right to hunt, fish, and gather wild rice on the land they ceded. These provisions meant that they continued to be a presence in the region where white farm families were settling. Although the Dakota ceded most of their land west of the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers in 1851, many also continued to hunt and travel through the area for the next ten years.  

A visual symbol of these conflicting points of view about land and subsistence is the state seal. The version that was adopted when Minnesota became a territory shows a white farmer plowing a field, his gun leaning against a nearby stump. In the background, a native man rides across the field on horseback toward a sun low on the horizon. This image symbolized the belief of many whites that native people were nomads who would one day leave the region, riding off into the sunset.  

The continuing presence of Ojibway and Dakota people was an irritant to many whites. Throughout the 1850s and later, local newspapers reported a variety of "Indian scares," which often turned out to be unfounded. Rumors also spread during and after the Dakota War of 1862. The actual events were frightening enough to both whites and Dakota people: five hundred settlers were killed and a larger number of Dakota died either during the conflict itself or later, during the imprisonment and deportation out of Minnesota. In addition, many unfounded rumors spread about Dakota assaults on white women and mutilation of corpses. These stories appeared to validate folk attitudes about native people as "savages."  

Such rumors were a logical outgrowth of the attitudes of white settlers. As the sociologist Robin M. Williams, Jr., noted, "Ethnic and racial relations often combine scanty communication, inaccurate and unreliable information, many stereotypic beliefs, strong affects, and low levels of trust. An inevitable side-effect is that in times of tension or of large-scale conflict there will be a proliferation of rumors."
The same conflicts over the use of land and food resources that contributed to rumors are evident in the many stories of Indian visits. The crux of the problem was the extent to which whites and native people were willing to share their resources outside their families or communities.

**THE KINDS OF MEMORIES** that whites in Minnesota recorded about their encounters with native people in the 1850s exhibit striking patterns. These patterns are especially apparent in one popular source on the early settlement period, *Old Rail Fence Corners*. This 1914 collection of first-person narratives was compiled by Lucy Leavenworth Wilder Morris with help from members of various Minnesota chapters of the Daughters of the American Revolution. It contains the stories of many whites who arrived in the region during the 1850s and later. While the shared outlook of the compilers and editor may have shaped these narratives, the patterns evident in them are also found in many other county and local histories.

Settlers’ accounts of Indian visits describe native people who violated many standards of what whites considered to be polite behavior. Particularly noted were the ways in which they approached settlers’ homes. Native people are described as peering through the windows of log houses, apparently not knowing that, for whites, windows were for looking out, not looking in. Whites insisted that native people were intrusive, entering their houses without knocking. Once inside, they would demand something to eat or help themselves to any food that was in view. They were also described as making threatening gestures. A typical report by an early resident of Shakopee summarized a variety of these beliefs: “The Indians enjoyed frightening the white women. They often found them alone in their homes. They were always hungry, would demand something to eat, and would take anything that pleased their fancy. My mother, Mrs. Sherrard, was very much afraid of the Indians. Once one of the braves shook his tomahawk at her through a window.”

A woman who lived as a child near Shakopee in the 1860s provided another version: “One day I was holding the baby in my arms when an Indian put his head through the window close to my face before I knew anyone was near. I was so frightened I ran to my mother. The Indians thought we were afraid so [they] started for the garden to destroy the melons, squash and pumpkins growing there. My mother put on father’s coat, took a big cane and went after them saying, ‘Get out, these are to feed papoose’ over and over. There were forty in the party but they went without further trouble.”

As these reminiscences show, whites believed that native people had no respect for ownership of food and other property. Their actions were certainly violations of etiquette—if not law—from a white point of view. To destroy someone else’s property was vandalism. To help yourself to another’s food was theft. To be insistent in asking for anything was begging. Many whites interpreted these actions, as well as the curiosity of native people and their lack of ceremony in entering white homes, either as a childish lack of manners, or as aggressive attempts to harass and intimidate.

The exact nature of the incidents behind these stories is not known and the motives of the individuals cannot be assumed, but the actions recorded can be interpreted in other ways. Far from detailing confrontations between helpless whites and savage Indians, these stories are the record of cultural encounters between people who have conflicting values and no common etiquette to smooth their interaction.

Cultural analysts Marshall McLuhan and Barrington Nevitt wrote that etiquette is “a ritualized way of avoiding violence by protecting identity.” It is a set of rules for dealing with interpersonal relations between strangers. If these rules are followed, each person will be protected until relations can be put on a firmer footing. An 1866 American book of etiquette stated that if these rules are not adhered to, “the well-being of society . . . would inevitably fall to pieces, and be destroyed.”

One drawback to rules of etiquette is that they are so often culturally specific. Completely normal behavior in one culture—such as the way one person greets another, or the distance at which they stand when conversing—can be interpreted by outsiders as a sad lapse, if not an outright obscenity. If people believe that their etiquette describes the only reasonable way to act, then they will draw unwarranted conclusions about people

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The Ojibways Meet Queen Victoria, George Catlin’s sketch of a cultural encounter that he arranged at Buckingham Palace, about 1843

who act in another way. Someone who does not act in the “right” way is uncultured, disorderly, or childish.¹⁵

In encounters between nationalism and ethnic groups, conflicting etiquette often gives rise to stereotypes. Such stereotypes flourish, especially in stories that majority groups tell about minority groups they consider to be inferior. The traditional stereotypes that whites have of black people are a case in point. In their supposed violation of social rules, groups perceived as inferior are often described as representing all things that the majority group claims to abhor. These stories may reveal more about the desires and fears of the narrators, however, than about those described.¹⁶


In this sense, the portrayals of native people in stories of Indian visits could be interpreted as reflecting a preoccupation of white settlers: their strong desire to establish an orderly existence in a country not their own, in which they felt insecure. Not all such stereotypes, however, are simply the reflection of the needs of the storytellers. Sometimes the negative stereotypes may be based on an exaggeration of real—though positive—characteristics. It is clear that some of the behavior described as rude entrances and sullenness was actually in accord with native rules of politeness. These rules were simply not understandable to most whites.

The missionary Joseph A. Gilfillan stated in 1897 that on approaching an Ojibway wigwam or bark house, “the custom is to raise the blanket which hangs over the doorway and go in without asking permission or knocking as with us. Everyone seems privileged to go in by day or night. If the inmates look on the newcomer with favor they say when he raises the blanket door and looks in, ‘Nind ubimin, nind ubimin (We are at home, we are at home),’ which is a welcome though nothing is thought on either side if silence is preserved.”¹⁷

Once inside, politeness did not dictate continual conversation, either on the part of the host or the guest. Gilfillan wrote that, in visiting a native or white home, an Ojibway woman “does not need, as a white woman, to be amused or entertained; she will sit for hours saying nothing, but perfectly satisfied, taking in everything, the appearance of the house, the manner of housekeeping, the people.” When spoken to, she might answer with monosyllables. Even if the visitor had
come for a special purpose, that purpose was not revealed immediately. After the visitor "has sat perhaps for hours, and not before, she will tell what she has come for, get it, and leave." Ojibway men often acted the same way. Whites clearly found this way of visiting unnerving, if not threatening, and language barriers must have aggravated the situation.

ALTHOUGH ETIQUETTE deals with all types of human interaction, a great deal of it has to do with what to eat and how to eat it. Expert Amy Vanderbilt expressed a common belief in her 1950s social bible: "A man or woman may take on a superficial patina of breeding, but it is very difficult to overcome slipshod table manners. And poor manners at table can be a real deterrent to social—or even business—progress." Many misunderstandings that arise in encounters between people from differing cultural or social backgrounds have to do with food. 18

For Ojibway and Dakota people in nineteenth-century Minnesota, sharing food with others was socially desirable, bringing honor to the person who shared. Native people used food to extend family ties beyond the family and create bonds with strangers. Those who did not share were exceptions and were considered uncivilized or unmannered. 19

Asking for food was institutionalized as a respected way of assuring the distribution of goods to those in need. Anthropologist Mary Black-Rogers suggested that among the Ojibway she studied in the 1960s the rule was not to offer food unless it was requested. People were expected to ask for food if they wanted it. Offering food unasked would put visitors in the uncomfortable position of turning it down if they were not hungry. These attitudes were clearly present among earlier Ojibway people. Elder Maude Kegg of Mille Lacs remembered that as a child she was taught to go from house to house begging for beads. Her grandmother told her, "Long ago . . . the Anishinaabeg [Ojibway] used to do that when they were short of anything. . . . They go around begging for what they are short of. . . . When anyone was hungry, he goes around . . . and begs, and so is given lots of food." 20

White settlers did not believe that begging was a socially sanctioned way of distributing goods in human society. Paradoxically, though, they did believe in sharing with each other for the sake of survival. Some of the reminiscences in Old Rail Fence Corners describe an ethic of mutual aid. One early Minneapolitan said, "The few neighbors were hospitable and kind." Others contrasted the selfishness of people in large cities to the helpfulness of people on the frontier. A settler near Faribault wrote, "It was plain living in those years of self-denial. Only necessities could be gotten, but soon all this changed. Neighbors began to settle near. All were willing to share, ever solicitous for the other, all were on a level, simplicity and cordiality prevailed." 21

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In the 1980s Vietnamese refugees in American cities were often the subject of wild rumors accusing them of eating animals, including their neighbors' pet dogs. See Florence E. Bae, "Give me . . . your huddled masses: Anti-Vietnamese Refugee Lore and the 'Image of Limited Good,'" Western Folklore 41 (Oct. 1981): 288.


Although both Indians and whites believed in sharing, there were significant differences in nature and degree. For native people, the sharing of food was a glue that helped bind tribal societies. Among white settlers, sharing might have been helpful, but it was not always crucial. Pioneer accounts reveal that there were limits to settlers’ helpfulness to each other. Certainly, individual settlers had much wider latitude in deciding whether to share.

Describing what he believed to be a formative influence on Americans, historian Frederick Jackson Turner wrote, “The frontier is productive of individualism... The tendency is anti-social.” The reminiscences in Old Rail Fence Corners seem to talk more often of self-sufficiency than of sharing. A man who survived some arduous winters in a cabin on the Iowa state line wrote of neighbors who had each survived the season on one particular food, such as buckwheat, cornmeal, or fish. Significantly, he made no mention of these neighbors sharing their staples so that they could vary their diets.²³

By native etiquette, whites were often cold and ungenerous. Much of what settlers described themselves as doing in stories of Indian visits must have seemed inexplicable. No accounts from the Minnesota region have been located to document a native point of view about white settlers. By native standards, however, whites were relatively prosperous people with goods and food stored up in log houses, who shared grudgingly if at all.²⁴

The perception of whites as selfish could help to explain possible native harassment of settlers. Many cultural groups permit certain antisocial actions, such as the destruction of property, if the owners have violated important rules of behavior. Among the Dakota, for example, buffalo hunting was an activity that demanded group cooperation. Anyone who did not act for the good of the group could be punished severely by those appointed to enforce the rules of the hunt. On his visit to the Minnesota region in 1680, Father Louis Hennepin noted that a group of Dakota people “pulled down the wigwam of our hosts, and took all the meat and bear’s grease they found.” Hennepin learned that because his hosts “had preceded the other Indians in hunting buffaloes, the others had the right to plunder them, because they made the buffaloes flee before all the hunters had arrived.” Beliefs like this, still in effect among Dakota people into the nineteenth century, could explain some destructive behavior recorded in white accounts of Indian visits.²⁵

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More indirect methods might be used with people who were simply ungenerous. One method of encouraging sharing was the begging dance, in which a group of people would dance in each home in the community for the purpose of obtaining food or other things. Ethnomusicologist Thomas Vennum, Jr., wrote that Ojibway “participants in the begging dance were never refused provisions... and so in this way the tribe’s poor were fed. Still, the custom also provided a form of amusement, particularly by forcing stingy members to give or by embarrassing those who were caught short.”²⁶
From some accounts of Indian visits, it seems that native people sought to use the begging dance to socialize antisocial whites. An example from Clitherall (Otter Tail County) describes Ojibway gatherings:

Indian dances were held around their camp-fires and also in the settlers’ yards or even in their houses. A group of Indians, squaws, and children would appear suddenly, carrying tomahawks, clubs, and tin kettle-drums. Some of the squaws would seat themselves together on the ground and the rest of the party would form a circle around them. Then with the brandishing of hatchets, the clanging of unmusical drums, and shrieks of everybody the wild dance would begin. “Hi-ah, hi-ah, hi-i-i-ah, Hi-ah, hi-ah, hi-i-i-ah,” repeated over and over again in varying tones still remembered by the pioneers and sung yet to their children’s children who never tire of hearing “Indian stories.” The party danced madly around and around the ring wearing a circular path in the yard.

When it was over, someone would come to the door of the settlers’ house and ask for bread or flour, butter, beans, potatoes, or sugar. “They usually got what they wanted promptly from the frightened housewife who was anxious to speed them on their way from her own door.” In the 1850s a young girl who settled with her family near Mankato witnessed a similar begging dance, performed by Dakota people.

The authors of these accounts show a rudimentary understanding of the nature of the custom. In other cases, settlers may not have gotten the message. Some may have thought that native people were performing “war dances,” giving rise to rumors about impending battles. Still other writers appear to have found the whole thing humorous. The St. Paul newspaperman Thomas Newsom apparently witnessed visits by native people to trade with storekeepers. He described the dancers as “shaking like so many porpoises.”

FEW SETTLERS showed real appreciation for begging, either as a cultural institution or an acceptable form of behavior. The more typical attitude to this perceived lack of politeness was expressed in humorous stories in which native people helped themselves to unfamiliar foods or to things that looked like food but were not. The results were unfortunate, though in the settler’s eyes a kind of just retribution for this lack of etiquette. In many ways these are the ugliest of the anecdotes of Indian visits. As the sociologist John H. Burma suggests about white peoples’ jokes about blacks, the intended humor in these stories rests upon stereotypes. Unless one accepts the stereotypes, the jokes are not funny.

Thomas Newsom, for example, told of a St. Paul woman who remembered a visit by “several Indians who pushed into her kitchen” while she was scrubbing the floor. Seeing a “large dish of chicken and pig feed (the latter composed somewhat of dishwater,) and supposing it was for them, seized it, sat down upon the wet floor, and before the good woman could make any protestation, had swallowed the whole.” The next day they came again and drank a huge pot of lukewarm dishwater that she had left out, after which one of them was said to have exclaimed, “Me heap sick.” Newsom concluded his story with the statement: “They ‘threw up’ this kind of a job and never visited the family again.” At Clitherall, a native visitor consumed a red pepper. “It was not long until her face was a sight to behold while tears rolled down her cheeks. The other Indians watched her wonderingly and soberly but no one attempted to steal another one.”

Thea Peterson of Douglas County told a similar story to her grandchildren:

When father and mother came to Ida Township the land was covered with trees and brush. Occasionally, as we children played, Indians would steal quietly out of the brush. We would run quickly into the house to Mother! We had heard her refer to the Indians speaking in Norwegian to Father as “those ugly Indians.” But she had great respect for them, and was very careful not to antagonize or frighten them.

One day, as Mother was cooking soup, some Indians came into the house. Hungry, they motioned to Mother that they wanted something to eat from the kettle. Not daring to refuse, Mother gave them a taste. But, on this occasion, Mother’s good cooking was not appreciated!

Concerned that the Indians be educated and saved, Mother willed her last cow to Indian Missions.

Settlers who were annoyed at native insistence on being given food sometimes attempted to play tricks. One version is from Clitherall:

One day a squaw stopped at Lewis Whiting’s... and seeing a large ruta-baga at the door asked for it.

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Aunt Nett inquired what she had to trade for it. She shook her head; was carrying only her papoose. Aunt Nett suggested she leave her papoose in exchange for the baga. She grunted indignant refusals for a time but finally handed over her baby, picked up the baga and trudged off. The children were delighted with the new addition to the family and looked on with enjoyment while their mother washed the little red-skinned baby and dressed her in some of baby May's clothes. She was fed and put to sleep in the big rocking chair.

About dark back came the Indian mother, the baga already doubtless having added flavor to her evening meal. She sat down on the floor and said nothing, but while her hostess was gone for a pail of water the children saw the squaw go softly to the big rocker, stealthily gather up her baby and disappear into the woods.

Other accounts of Indian visits describe more direct punishments. Many stories seem to imply that the visits offered white settlers the same tests of fortitude and courage provided by encounters with wild animals. White people should stand firm when their material goods were threatened. Native people would respect them more. Physical action, if it came from women and was directed against men, was also thought to be helpful. A man who lived at Minnetonka Mills recalled:

One cold winter day four Indians were in the kitchen. Mother was preparing beans for dinner. Like all good housewives she first parboiled them with pork before baking. She stepped into the pantry for something, when one of the braves slipped his hand into the kettle and stole the pork. He was just tucking it under his blanket when she, suspecting something, whirled around, caught up the tea-kettie of boiling water and poured some on the Indian's hands. He roared with pain and mortification, but the other braves thought it very amusing. One of them slipped up, and patting her on the back said, “Tonka squaw! Tonka squaw!” Tonka meaning big or brave. . . . That Indian never came into the house again . . . The Indians would come in from hunting and sit around on our floor. Mother would give them a good kick if they got in the way. This made her more popular than ever. They considered her a very fine lady because she was not afraid of them, but cudgelled them about.

A similar story with the punchline tonka squaw appears in an account describing an incident said to have taken place in St. Anthony in 1847. Although the word tonka may have been a Dakota word, squaw was a European term, probably derived from the words for woman found in a variety of eastern Algonquian languages. If Dakota men called white women squaws, they probably thought they were speaking English.

Accounts like this, complete with punchline, often appear to have been embellished or exaggerated. Even if this was not intentional, the stories may have evolved as they were repeated. Two versions of one story provide a good example of this process in family folklore. Brothers that lived near Mankato as children in the 1850s later retold a story of how their mother punched a Dakota man in the nose because he tried to take food from their house. Lucius Mills, who was about seven

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years old at the time, remembered that the man had attempted to pilfer a number of butternuts from a barrel. Edward Mills, who was not yet born but heard the story many times from his mother, said that the man tried to take the remainder of a loaf of bread from which he had been given a few slices. The two versions differ in many other details as well. Both agree, however, that the man was very angry but left and never bothered them again, a common refrain in many such stories."

These apparently humorous accounts may fit what the folklorist Richard M. Dorson called “comic Indian anecdotes,” deriving “from a double source, the play of Yankee humor on racial mingling, and the Indian’s own sense of wit and shrewdness.” In one of the first scholarly discussions of American folklore involving native people, Dorson, in 1946, stressed the positive aspects of some of the many anecdotes that he found throughout the country. In contrast to wooden portrayals of the Noble Savage or the Vanishing American, he described stories that provided images of native people not as “sombre and humorless nomads” but giving a “human impression of Indians as people with whom white settlers had personal relations.”

Unfortunately, stories of Indian visits from the Minnesota region provide few positive images of Indian people. The narratives treat them as stock characters, not as individuals. They were always the butt of humor. They were the intruders, the outsiders—not the heroes. These anecdotes did little to contribute to a realization that native people were simply people with different customs and beliefs. Yet a few anecdotes suggest that mutual understanding was possible. These stories show that the means of reconciliation could come through the very subject of common misunderstanding: food.

THE POWER OF FOOD as a symbol in both Native American and European cultures made reconciliation possible once mutual fear was overcome and questions of etiquette were settled, set aside, or ignored. Carrie Stratton remembered her family’s first encounter with native people in the 1850s: “My father’s previous residence in Minnesota had taught him to understand and speak the Indian language and so the Indians were frequent visitors at our house on one errand or another, generally, however, to get something to eat.” The first time they came, her father was gone. Her mother was frightened, never having seen a native person before.

Not being able to understand what they wanted, she imagined with a mother’s solicitude, that they wanted the baby; and being actually too terrified to stand any longer, she took the baby and went into her room and laid down upon the bed. After a while, either from intuition, or from the motions the Indians made, it occurred to her to give them something to eat, which was what they wanted and they then went peaceably away. The rest of the children, like myself, did not appear to be at all frightened, but instead, were very much entertained by the novel sight of the Indians in their gay blankets and feathered head dress. After that they were frequent visitors but always peaceable ones, never committing any misdemeanor."

In other cases, native people themselves used food as a medium for making friends with settlers. A history of Clay County tells of native men who “would try to secure the children’s friendship by offering lumps of brown sugar.” And in Pennington County, settled by whites later in the nineteenth century, Ojibway people from the reservation at Red Lake welcomed newcomers, introducing them to native customs of generosity by inviting them to dances and feasts."

Despite what many settlers believed, the concept of reciprocity was firmly ingrained in native cultures. A few stories tell of native people rewarding the settlers in various ways for food they were given or favors they were done. A Shakopee family’s friendship with the local native population in the 1850s saved them from harm during the Dakota War. Outnumbered by the accounts of Indian atrocities, this story is one of several about white settlers who were warned or saved by individual Dakota with whom they had developed personal bonds, often through the exchange of food."

A history of Long Prairie noted that the home of William MacCarahan and his family was a popular place for local Indian people. The MacCarahans followed native practice in their sharing. They were so hospitable and generous that they never acquired much wealth . . . . On one occasion, the chief, Bad Boy, happened in at meal time and in the course of his stay, he noted that one of the little girls had no shoes and was running about barefoot. He said nothing but a short.

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3Dorson, “Comic Indian Anecdotes,” 113.
3Morris, ed., Old Rail Fence Corners, 183. Tobacco could function in the same way as food; see Dorothy D. Olson and Lenora I. Johnson, eds., In the Heart of the Red River Valley: A History of the People of Norman County (Dallas: Taylor Publishing Co., 1976), 456.
White settlers and other visitors attending a dance at a celebration on White Earth Reservation, June 1910, a harmonious meeting of the two cultures.

Time afterward, an Indian stopped at the house and left a pair of beaded moccasins for the little girl."

In an affecting story, a settler who said she was the first white woman in Eden Prairie, arriving in 1854, remembered how she overcame prejudice and created a lasting bond of friendship with a local native man. The bond was cemented in part by an exchange of food:

I had never seen Indians near to, and so was very much afraid of them. One day a big hideously painted brave marched in, seated himself and looked stolidly around without making a sound. His long knife was sticking in his belt. I was overpowered with fright and for a few moments could do nothing. My children, one two years old, and the other a baby, were asleep behind the curtain. Realizing that I could do nothing for them and that his anger might be aroused if he saw me run away with them, I fled precipitately in the direction where my husband was working. I had run about a quarter of a mile when my mother heart told me I might not be in time if I waited for my husband, so I turned and fled back towards the cabin. Entering, I saw my little two year old boy standing by the Indian's side playing with the things in his belt while the Indian carefully held the baby in his arms. In his belt were a tobacco pouch and pipe, two rabbits with their heads drawn through, two prairie chickens hanging from it by their necks, a knife and a tomahawk. His expression remained unchanged. I gave him bread and milk to eat and ever after he was our friend, oftentimes coming and bringing the children playthings and moccasins. When he left, he gave me the rabbits and prairie chickens and afterwards often brought me game."

Despite some settlers' acknowledgments that native people could be helpful and friendly, prejudices often...
won out. Even stories with a positive message often use terms like “dusky warriors” and “hideously painted braves.” And even when native people attempted to make concessions to white etiquette they could become the butt of humor simply because they were not fulfilling white people’s stereotypes.

A Houston County man told of a neighbor’s experience: “Arnold Stone and his good wife lived up there on the hill. One day in the early 60’s an Indian appeared in Mrs. Stone’s kitchen and asked for something to eat. They were just sitting down to dinner and he was invited to join the family. The butter was passed to him, and he said, ‘Me no butter knife.’ ‘I told Arnold,’ said Mrs. Stone, ‘that when it gets so the Injuns ask for butter knives it’s high time we had one.’” A woman from the Minneapolis area who had many encounters with native people said: “Our Indians when they came to see mother wanted to do as she did. They would sit up to the table and she would give them a plate and knife and fork. This pleased them much. They would start with the food on their plates but soon would have it all in their laps.”

When it came to native gifts of food, many whites simply did not appreciate what they were offered. Some considered native food, including wild rice and game, to be unclean or unappetizing. George Hammer of Clitherall expressed his opinions in a story of his own drop-in visit to a native home—a story that complements the ones told about native people visiting whites. Hammer’s saga, published in about 1919, contains some nuances of the spoken language, suggesting that it was a tale he polished and embellished throughout the many years after the incident:

It was forty-five years ago and deer-hunting time in Leaf Mountains [hills in Otter Tail County].

"Turner and Semling, eds., Clay and Norman Counties, 1:279; Morris, ed., Old Rail Fence Corners, 35–36, 94.
I had followed an old buck all day and when night came I was twenty miles from home, hungry and tired—tired all over.

Reaching an Indian camp I said good-by to the deer and gave up the chase. I entered the wigwam and made the inmates understand that I was hungry and wanted to stay all night. They seemed more than willing, so I removed my mocassins and lay down with my feet to the fire.

The young squaw began preparing the evening meal. I watched her closely. She took about two quarts of flour in a pan, poured water on it, stirred it up and placed it on the coals to bake. I thought, "Unleavened bread, but good so far."

Her next move was to take a pail of cranberries, fill it with water and hang it over the fire to boil. "Good again. Unleavened bread and unsweetened cranberries." I began to get ready to eat for I was exceedingly hungry.

The young cook moved again. This time she got a string of half a dozen pickerel. Again I murmured "Good," but immediately repented, for, without scaling the fish or removing the heads and insides, she dropped them into the pail of cranberries and began stirring them with a stick.

My appetite took a fearful tumble, and it seemed as though my toe-nails were drawn up clear through me.

I knew where a Norwegian lived on the edge of Nidaros prairie about five miles distant, so I took my gun and started, arriving there about ten o'clock, P.M. I told my story and was given a warm welcome and comfortable bed, but I declined eating any supper at all. 4

Even though Hammer was clearly familiar with some aspects of native life, he repaid native hospitality with ridicule. By white standards, his departure from the native home was a breach of etiquette. It was impolite to ask for food if you were hungry, but also impolite to refuse it, even if you were not. Native people might have excused him more readily. But few who told of their encounters with Indian people were interested in recording native viewpoints.

THE MANY ACCOUNTS of Indian visits preserved in Minnesota’s historical records range from brief, straightforward descriptions designed to inform to more detailed accounts designed to entertain. They tell of curious people who helped themselves to food or begged for it. They tell of people who got pleasure out of intimidating whites and used white fears to get what they wanted. They tell of white settlers who found ways to punish native people for taking food or native people who were punished simply by being too free to eat anything that looked like food. In a few cases they tell of people who were able to overcome cultural differences and become firm friends. But even these stories are marred by prejudiced terms. One way or another, the anecdotes bear the cultural imprint of those telling the stories, largely ignoring the beliefs of those about whom the stories are told.

Despite obvious biases, these accounts continue to have a life of their own. From pioneer anecdotes, stories of Indian visits entered the mainstream of American literature, providing fodder for movies, novels, and children’s books. Laura Ingalls Wilder’s 1935 book, Little House on the Prairie, for example, includes a chapter entitled “Indians in the House.” While Pa Ingalls was away, “two naked wild men” who smelled bad visited the prairie home. Wilder graphically told of the family’s revulsion and their attempts to be polite. Ma served the silent pair food, and they went on their way. Pa later told Ma that she did the right thing: “We don’t want to make enemies of any Indians.” 5

As the anecdotes from the Minnesota region indicate, these were common attitudes. To do justice to native people and their part in a common culture and history of the state, readers should remember that these accounts represent only one cultural viewpoint, one that is rooted in nineteenth-century attitudes. It is important to go beyond these anecdotes to explore the full complexity of the ways in which native people and white settlers interacted. Otherwise, Minnesotans will pass on a legacy of bias that substitutes stereotypes for reality and impedes mutual understanding.

All illustrations are from the MHS collections. The sketch on p. 103 is from Harold McCracken, George Catlin and the Old Frontier. The photo on p. 104 is by Carl Gustaf Linde; the one on p. 110 is by T. W. Ingersoll.

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