

A DAY IN THE LIFE

Of Maza Okiye Win

MAY 29, 1858. MAZA OKIYE WIN (Woman Who Talks to Iron) awoke to find her grandmother leaving the tipi. Like other girls of six, she wanted to emulate her grandmother's every move, so she quickly got up to follow her. Her grandmother was already down by the banks of the Minnesota River near the Upper Sioux Agency. Realizing that she was there to offer her morning prayer, Maza Okiye Win hid behind some trees so that she would not disturb the morning devotions. She watched with interest as her grandmother stood with arms outstretched and face lifted towards the heavens, giv-

ing thanks to Wakantanka, the Great Mystery. As Maza Okiye Win witnessed this, she hoped that, like herself, her grandmother would pray for the safe return of her father, Chief Mazomani. He had traveled to Washington, D.C., with a group of nine others from the Yellow Medicine Agency and 16 leaders from Redwood Agency to help negotiate a treaty with the United States government on behalf of the Eastern Dakota.¹

When her grandmother finished praying, she filled her bark container with water from the river and headed back to the tipi to begin preparing their morning meal of coffee and

soup left over from the previous evening. Before she joined her grandmother, Maza Okiye Win rushed down to the river and splashed some of the cold, clear water on her face. She then took a big drink, said a quick prayer, and ran back to the tipi.

Today they were to begin planting their Indian corn. The plum trees were blossoming, a sign that summer was coming and that it would be safe to plant without the fear of frost. Her grandmother had already taught her about the importance of the corn that had been a part of their family for an untold number of generations. She had been shown the previous year how to plant four kernels in each hill and how to pray for their growth. Maza Okiye Win didn't mind this kind of work; she actually looked forward to it. She enjoyed taking an active part in the cycle of life. Besides, her mother and grandmother often used this working time to teach her about the plant relatives that would help her and others throughout life. For a girl so young, she seemed to sense that any skills she could learn would be of benefit to her in the coming years.

On this day, however, there was so much activity that it was difficult to concentrate on the task at hand and even more difficult to engage in discussion. The sounds of construction were all around them. Superintendent Cullen and Indian Agent Brown were offering incentives such as money and goods to men who would engage in the activities of building houses and fences and who would take up the full-time cultivation of fields.² This, along with the additional pressure from missionaries and



Dakota woman's fringed hide dress 1850–60, decorated with beads, red wool trim, jingle cones, and deer-hide insets



traders, meant that there were people coming and going all around them, often stopping to relate the latest changes, transactions, and building progress. Maza Okiye Win and her female relatives were absorbed in all the excitement at Upper Sioux, but they also resented the intrusion of the Dakota men into what they had always considered women's work. The whites viewed farming as men's work, but to the Dakota, planting corn had always been the occupation of the women.

Maza Okiye Win was too little to remember the last days before her father's band had moved to the reservation and could no longer go through the seasonal gathering cycle. But her other female relatives clearly missed those days and talked about them with such fondness that Maza Okiye Win missed them, too. She was having difficulty understanding why the Dakota couldn't be left alone, why all the whites were telling them that Dakota ways were wrong.

She understood that all of these issues had been weighing heavily on her father's mind before he went to Washington and that he was making the decisions he thought best. Her father had been a leader of the Wakan Wacipi (Sacred Dance or Medicine Dance), but even this had to be done in secret so that some peace could be maintained with the whites.³ She didn't understand all the issues he faced, but she knew he was a good man and she trusted that in whatever decisions he made, he was thinking about her and her future children.

After spending all day in the fields and finishing their dinner, Maza Okiye Win and her grandmother went to check on a baby her grandmother had helped deliver the previous month. The baby, Inyangmani Hoksida (Running Walker Boy), the

son of the prominent Wahpetonwan chief Inyangmani and Tawapaha Tanka Win (Her Big Hat Woman), was healthy, but it was nonetheless the practice of a good midwife to check on the mother and child for the first few months of life. Maza Okiye Win enjoyed these check-ups because they allowed her the chance to see and play with the tiny new babies. She took her job as helper very seriously and would hold the babies protectively while the mother was being examined. Little did she know that in this particular instance she was cooing over the man she would marry 27 years later.

While there, she heard some discussion among the men about the delegation in Washington. Inyangmani, a signer of the 1851 treaty, ordinarily would have been with the delegation, but, with his wife so close to delivering their son, he had not wanted to leave. The men said that rumors were spreading about the difficulty the leaders were having negotiating a treaty and the possibility that the Dakota might be left with nothing. Clearly, their lengthy stay in Washington—it had been well over two months—indicated that things were not going smoothly. Overhearing this, Maza Okiye Win began to worry whether the Dakota would ever have a place where they would be left alone or if their lands would get smaller and smaller until there was nothing.

At the age of six she was learning to cope with a constant sense of loss and the tension that comes from living in turbulent times among a nation caught between two worlds. Maza Okiye Win fell asleep that night with thoughts of her father and the uncertain future of the Dakota people.⁴ 🌸

—*Angela Cavender Wilson*
(*Tawapaha Tanka Win*)



Mazomani, photographed in Washington, D.C., 1858

NOTES

¹ Gary Clayton Anderson, *Kinsmen of Another Kind: Dakota-White Relations in the Upper Mississippi Valley, 1650–1862* (1984; reprint, St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1997), 228.

² Gary Clayton Anderson, *Little Crow: Spokesman for the Sioux* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1986), 107–08. The superintendent was William J. Cullen, the agent, Joseph R. Brown.

³ Anderson, *Kinsmen*, 238.

⁴ Much of the information presented here is based on oral accounts relayed to the author by Maza Okiye Win's descendants, particularly Elsie Cavender, Maza Okiye Win's granddaughter.



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