

1862: Before & Beyond

The U.S.–Dakota War of 1862 Oral History Project, supported by Minnesota’s Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund (ACHF), was launched to gather information from Dakota and settler descendants on all aspects of life in Minnesota before, during, and after that tumultuous time. Since 2011, Minnesota Historical Society staff have conducted more than 50 interviews. For more information, visit www.usdakotawar.org.

In these excerpts, Carolyn Schommer, age 82, and Dean Blue, age 85, both from Granite Falls Upper Sioux Community, speak on Dakota life and language.



“We learned the traditional ways when I was growing up. The Dakota history that I learned was oral history shared with all the elders, the grandparents, and the aunties and uncles. The history that they shared was so different from what I read in the history books when I went to school. But I liked history. I used to get good grades in history. And I knew those stories weren’t true, not the way oral histories were.

“They [the elders] lived it; they lived that history that they were telling. What they were telling us was something for us to know and to remember about what happened to our people. They saw so many things. And when you heard it like that, you understood it; you almost lived it. I love to read—I can read different things and I really get into it. I have grandchildren that love to read, and I like that because you’re absorbing things more by reading than if somebody were reading it to you. With oral history, you almost live what that person is telling you.

“My auntie used to be the storyteller. When you listened to her, you were actually living everything that she was telling you. You were going through all of that. And so that made it that much more exciting because we knew it to be the truth and that it was part of us.”

—Carolynn Schommer

“I knew very little English when I went to school and I wasn’t the only one. For most of the kids my age at that time who went to school, the teachers all thought we were dumb. It’s not that we were—when you don’t have command of the English language and understand it, you’re going to have a very difficult time trying to understand math and history. And so we struggled. I’m surprised that I got as far as I did; I got up there in ninth grade, and that’s when I dropped out and went into the service.

“Our grandfather would never permit us to speak in the English language in his presence. And if we tried to address him in the wasichu [white man] language, he wouldn’t answer us. But he would say in Dakota, ‘If you want to speak to me, speak to me in my language, or your language.’ So I suppose to some large degree, my brothers and I happened to retain the language as we did because we had to grow up that way. As a result, we do have two languages.

“The English language—I’m not trying to belittle it, but it is very easy compared to the Dakota language. So we’re trying to revive that here. And I’m one of the people who fortunately was able to retain the language and I do some teaching.”

—Dean Blue

The U.S.–Dakota War of 1862 2012 marks the 150th anniversary of the U.S.–Dakota War of 1862, a tragic time in the history of Minnesota and the United States. Exploring the history of the war, its causes, and its aftermath are fundamental to understanding Minnesota today. Throughout 2012, the Minnesota Historical Society will introduce a wide range of initiatives and programs to encourage discussion and reflection. This feature, drawing alternately on historical artifacts and contemporary voices, will appear in each issue of *Minnesota History* during 2012.



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