

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, Sandee Geshick of Morton (Lower Sioux Community), and Dallas Ross of Granite Falls (Upper Sioux Community), speak on resilience, Fort Snelling, and the aftermath of the war.



“We’re still here. They never got rid of us. It was their master plan, to annihilate us. They tried in how many different ways: starvation, diseases, the 1862 conflict, taking our land, doing whatever they can, but we’re still here.

“What would people have without the land?”

“We gave. We were generous, but they basically took and tried to wipe us out. We’re still here. . . . People always demand my respect, but it works both ways—you have to know about me and respect me. That way, if we had all that, there would be peace. Look at what’s happening over in the [Middle] East, all that fighting. And basically it’s kind of the same thing; they’re trying to change their ways. You can’t take a people’s culture away from them. Learn about their culture and then understand them. Why try to change a people? We don’t all want to be the same; that’s what makes life interesting.”

—Sandee Geshick

“The white people wanted something. That’s why we didn’t become humans for so long [in their eyes]. . . . As long as we stayed savages, then it would be okay to do the things that were happening. And so the things like Fort Snelling were less about humanity [and more about] managing something savage. So that hurt them as well as us Dakota.

“This goes back into Dakota life. Every time a treaty was signed, the Dakota would do it through their sacred pipe. The Dakota believed that when you used the sacred pipe, everything was going to be as it was said because that’s what is required by the Creator. . . . Unfortunately, the other people didn’t believe in the pipe, so they could easily break their word. All the way from the battles to Fort Snelling, part of the Dakota were still trying to keep their word because of that pipe. So the atrocity is not so much singly the suffering. It so much shook the basis of Dakota prayer that they would say, ‘But we did this in a manner that was good. Why is this happening to us?’ They felt abandoned by something.

“So what happened at Fort Snelling? . . . [T]he land talks to you. The memories of all the old people are still present in the land, so you get a lot of information. There’s no way one person, a group of people, a diverse group of people could say exactly what happened at Fort Snelling. It’s something that should have never happened.”

—Dallas Ross

Fort Snelling prison camp, 1862–63

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.



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