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GRANDMOTHER TO GRANDDAUGHTER: GENERATIONS OF ORAL HISTORY IN A DAKOTA FAMILY

BY ANGELA CAVENDER WILSON

The intimate hours I spent with my grandmother listening to her stories are reflections of more than a simple educational process. The stories handed down from grandmother to granddaughter are rooted in a deep sense of kinship responsibility, a responsibility that relays a culture, an identity, and a sense of belonging essential to my life. It is through the stories of my grandmother, my grandmother's grandmother, and my grandmother's grandmother's grandmother and their lives that I learned what it means to be a Dakota woman, and the responsibility, pain, and pride associated with such a role. These stories in our oral tradition, then, must be appreciated by historians not simply for the illumination they bring to the broader historical picture but also as an essential component in the survival of culture.

Maza Okiye Win (Woman Who Talks To Iron) was ten years old at the time of the United States-Dakota Conflict of 1862. She saw her father, Chief Mazomani (Walking Iron), die from wounds suffered in the Battle of Wood Lake. White soldiers wounded him while he was carrying a white flag of truce. She also witnessed the fatal stabbing of her grandmother by a soldier during the forced march to Fort Snelling in the first phase of the Dakota removal to Crow Creek, South Dakota. For three years Maza Okiye Win stayed in Crow Creek before she moved to Sisseton, South Dakota. Finally, after more than twenty-five years of banishment from Minnesota, she returned with her second husband, Inyangmani Hoksida (Running Walker Boy) to the ancient Dakota homeland of Mni-Sota Makoce, or Land Where the Waters Reflect the Heavens.¹ By this time both she and her husband had become Christians, and were known in English as John and Isabel Roberts. There they raised their children and three of their grandchildren.

Elsie Two Bear Cavender was born in Pezihuta zizi village in 1906 to Anna Roberts and Joseph Two Bear. She was raised by her grandparents, John and Isabel Roberts. Her Dakota name was Wiko (Beautiful), given to her by one of her great aunts when she was just a girl. Grandma always seemed embarrassed by that name—as though she didn't believe she was beautiful enough to possess it and certainly too modest to introduce herself that way. But now that she is gone, I can use what I perceive to be a fitting name without

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embarrassing her. To me, she was always *Kunsi*, or Grandma. She had eight children, four of whom she buried in her lifetime. She was well-known for her generosity, her wonderful pies and rolls, and her stories.

Grandma grew up in a rich oral tradition. Not only was she well-acquainted with many of the myths and legends of our people, she also possessed an amazing comprehension of our history, and many of her stories revolved around the events of the United States-Dakota Conflict of 1862. Her grandmother, in particular, had carried vivid, painful memories of those traumatic times. Over time, those painful memories of my great-great-grandmother became the memories of my grandmother and, then, they became my memories.

Early on, when I first began thinking about these stories in an academic context, I realized my understandings of oral tradition and oral history were incompatible with those I was finding in other texts. This incompatibility was largely because of terminology. David Henige, in his book *Oral Historiography*, differentiates between oral history and oral tradition, conveying an understanding that seems to be representative of most scholars in the field, when he says, "As normally used nowadays, 'oral history' refers to the study of the recent past by means of life histories or personal recollections, where informants speak about their own experiences . . . oral tradition should be widely practiced or understood in a society and it must be handed down for at least a few generations."² These definitions are applicable to Native American oral history and oral tradition only in a very limited way. Native peoples' life histories, for example, often incorporate the experiences of both human and non-human beings. In addition, this definition would not allow for the incorporation of new materials because it would then be outside the "tradition."

From a Native perspective, I would suggest instead that oral history is contained within oral tradition. For the Dakota, "oral tradition" refers to the way in which information is passed on rather than the length of time something has been told. Personal experiences, pieces of information, events, incidents, etc., can become a part of the oral tradition at the moment it happens or the moment it is told, as long as the person adopting the memory is part of an oral tradition.

Who belongs to an oral tradition? Charles Eastman, a Wahpetonwan Dakota, reveals in his autobiography *Indian Boyhood* the distinct way in which the oral tradition was developed:

Very early, the Indian boy assumed the task of preserving and transmitting the legends of his ancestors and his race. Almost every evening a myth, or a true story of some deed done in the past, was narrated by one of the parents or grandparents, while the boy listened with parted lips and glistening eyes. On the following evening, he was usually required to repeat it. If he was

not an apt scholar, he struggled long with his task; but as a rule, the Indian boy is a good listener and has a good memory, so that his stories are tolerably well mastered. The household became his audience, by which he was alternately criticized and applauded.³

This excerpt highlights the rigorous and extensive training required of young Dakota people. The Dakota oral tradition is based on the assumption that the ability to remember is an acquired skill—one that may be acutely developed or neglected. Eastman also describes the differentiation between myths and true stories, necessitating an understanding of history as being encompassed in oral tradition. However, few scholars working in oral history make any distinction between oral information collected from those belonging to a written culture and those belonging to an oral tradition. This is an area that is yet to be explored.

My grandmother, Elsie Cavender, received this type of training. She had much to tell about some of our more popular characters, stories starring our mythical trickster figure, Unktomi, as well as stories about Dakota men and women—mostly belonging to my lineage—who lived and died long before I was born.

In my own family, the importance of specific stories as interpreted by my grandmother was expressed by the frequency with which those were told. As a girl I was acquainted with an assortment of stories from these categories, and I remember having to request specifically those which were not in the historical realm. But I didn't have to request the stories we classify as "history." Those she offered freely and frequently. Especially in the last years of her life, on every visit she would tell stories about the Conflict of 1862, as if to reassure herself that she had fulfilled her obligations and that these stories would not be forgotten.

One of these stories has become particularly important to me since my grandmother's death because it deals with grandmothers and granddaughters, of which I am the seventh generation. Aspects of this story have helped shape my perception of what my responsibility is, as a mother and eventual grandmother, and as a Dakota. This particular story is an excerpt taken from an oral history project I began with my grandmother in 1990. This is an edited version with much of the repetition cut for the sake of clarity and conciseness in this presentation. However, under usual storytelling circumstances, the repetition is part of the storytelling procedure, often added for emphasis. Grandmother titled this portion of the United States-Dakota Conflict "Death March," consciously drawing on the similarities between the removal of Dakota from the Lower Sioux Agency, first to Fort Snelling and then on to Crow Creek, South Dakota, with the Bataan Death March in World War II. After one of our Dakota relatives who had participated in that march related to her his experiences she saw many parallels with 1862 and thought "Death March" a fitting title. This passage is in my grandmother's voice:

Right after the 1862 Conflict, most of the Sioux people were driven out of Minnesota. A lot of our people left to other states. This must have been heartbreaking for them, as this valley had always been their home.

My grandmother, Isabel Roberts (Maza-Okiye-Win is her Indian name) and her family were taken as captives down to Fort Snelling. On the way most of them [the people] walked, but some of the older ones and the children rode on a cart. In Indian the cart was called *canpahmihma-kawitkotkoka*. That means crazy cart in Indian. The reason they called the cart that is because it had one big wheel that didn't have any spokes. It was just one big round board. When they went they didn't grease it just right so it squeaked. You could just hear that noise about a mile away. The poor men, women, old people, and children who had to listen to it got sick from it. They would get headaches real bad. It carried the old people and the children so they wouldn't have to walk.

They passed through a lot of towns and they went through some where the people were real hostile to them. They would throw rocks, cans, sticks, and everything they could think of: potatoes, even rotten tomatoes and eggs. New Ulm was one of the worst towns they had to go through.

When they came through there they threw cans, potatoes, and sticks. They went on through the town anyway. The old people were in the cart. They were coming to the end of the town and they thought they were out of trouble. Then there was a big building at the end of the street. The windows were open. Someone threw hot, scalding water on them. The children were all burned and the old people too. As soon as they started to rub their arms the skin just peeled off. Their faces were like that, too. The children were all crying, even the old ladies started to cry, too. It was so hard it really hurt them but they went on.

They would camp someplace at night. They would feed them, giving them meat, potatoes, or bread. But they brought the bread in on big lumber wagons with no wrapping on them. They had to eat food like that. So, they would just brush off the dust and eat it that way. The meat was the same way. They had to wash it and eat it. A lot of them got sick. They would get dysentery and diarrhea and some had cases of whooping cough and small pox. This went on for several days. A lot of them were complaining that they drank the water and got sick. It was just like a nightmare going on this trip.

It was on this trip that my maternal grandmother's grandmother was killed by white soldiers. My grandmother, Maza

Okiye Win, was ten years old at the time and she remembers everything that happened on this journey. The killing took place when they came to a bridge that had no guard rails. The horses or stock were getting restless and were very thirsty. So, when they saw water they wanted to get down to the water right away, and they couldn't hold them still. So, the women and children all got out, including my grandmother, her mother, and her grandmother.

When all this commotion started the soldiers came running to the scene and demanded to know what was wrong. But most of them [the Dakota] couldn't speak English and so couldn't talk. This irritated them and right away they wanted to get rough and tried to push my grandmother's mother and her grandmother off the bridge, but they only succeeded in pushing the older one off and she fell in the water. Her daughter ran down and got her out and she was all wet, so she took her shawl off and put it around her. After this they both got back up on the bridge with the help of the others who were waiting there, including the small daughter, Maza Okiye Win.

She was going to put her mother in the wagon, but it was gone. They stood there not knowing what to do. She wanted to put her mother someplace where she could be warm, but before they could get away, the soldier came again and stabbed her mother with a saber. She screamed and hollered in pain, so she [her daughter] stooped down to help her. But, her mother said, "Please daughter, go. Don't mind me. Take your daughter and go before they do the same thing to you. I'm done for anyway. If they kill you the children will have no one." Though she was in pain and dying she was still concerned about her daughter and little granddaughter who was standing there and witnessed all this. The daughter left her mother there at the mercy of the soldiers, as she knew she had a responsibility as a mother to take care of her small daughter.

"Up to today we don't even know where my grandmother's body is. If only they had given the body back to us we could have given her a decent funeral," Grandma said. They didn't though. So, at night, Grandma's mother had gone back to the bridge where her mother had fallen. She went there but there was no body. There was blood all over the bridge but the body was gone. She went down to the bank. She walked up and down the bank. She even waded across to see if she could see anything on the other side, but no body, nothing. So she came back up. She went on from there not knowing what happened to her or what they did with the body. So she really felt bad about it. When we were small Grandma used to talk about it. She used to cry. We

used to cry with her.

Things happened like this but they always say the Indians are ruthless killers and that they massacred white people. The white people are just as bad, even worse. You never hear about the things that happened to our people because it was never written in the history books. They say it is always the Indians who are at fault.⁴

An excerpt such as this challenges the emphasis of the *status quo*. This account does not contradict the many written texts on the subject, but contributes details not seen elsewhere, details that shift the focus from the “Indian atrocities,” which are provided in rich detail in histories written by non-Indians, to “white atrocities” and Indian courage. It exemplifies the nature of the oral tradition in Dakota culture, as it is the story of one family, one lineage, reflecting the ancient village structure and the community that united those with a collective identity and memory. This account by itself will not change the course of American history, or create a theory for or framework from which the rest of the Plains wars may be interpreted. It is not even representative of the “Dakota perspective.” Instead, it is one family’s perspective that in combination with other families’ stories might help to create an understanding of Dakota views on this event and time period. Certainly these stories shed light on the behavior and actions of members of my family that have led up to the present moment.

As I listened to my grandmother telling the last words spoken by her great-great-grandmother, and my grandmother’s interpretation, “Though she was in pain and dying, she was still concerned about her daughter and little granddaughter who was standing there and witnessed all this,” I understood that our most important role as women is making sure our young ones are taken care of so that our future as Dakota people is assured. I learned that sometimes that means self-sacrifice and putting the interests of others above your own. It also was clear through this story and others that although these were and continue to be hard memories to deal with, always there is pride and dignity in the actions of our women.

In addition, my connection to land and place is solidified with each telling of the story. As a Dakota I understand that not only is Mni-sota a homeland worth defending, but through the stories I learn where the blood of my ancestors was spilt for the sake of the future generations, for me, my children, and grandchildren.

Because these stories are typically not told in the history texts, we also must recognize we are responsible for their repetition. The written archival records will not produce this information. These stories are not told by people who have been “conquered,” but by people who have a great desire to survive as a nation, as Dakota people. Consequently, these are not merely interesting stories or even the simple dissemination of historical facts. They are, more

importantly, transmissions of culture upon which our survival as a people depends. When our stories die, so will we.

In my last real visit with my grandmother, several months before she was hospitalized in her final days, she recited this story again. I was moving to New York to begin my graduate education, and it was as if she were reminding me where I come from. In the same way, these stories served to validate my identity in a positive way when, as a girl, I was confronted with contrasting negative images of the “Sioux” in school texts. These stories have stabilized me through graduate school and reminded me why I am involved in this sometimes painful process. One of the last video clips we have of my grandmother is of her telling one of our Unktomi stories to my daughter in Dakota. When I watch that scene it becomes apparent to me that the learning of these stories is a lifelong process and, likewise, the rewards of that process last a lifetime.

The contributions of stories such as this should be recognized as celebrations of culture, as declarations of the amazing resiliency and tenacity of a people who have survived horrible circumstances and destructive forces. Some of the greatest stories are those told by Native people and serve as challenges to the rest of the world to be so strong. Native people have an unbreakable belief in the beauty and the significance of our cultures, and this is reflected in our stories. They are testimony to the richness, variety, detail, and complexity of the interpretations of history. Our role as historians should be to examine as many perspectives of the past as possible—not to become the validators or verifiers of stories, but instead to put forth as many perspectives as possible. But, the greatest lessons of these stories are to the young people, the children, and grandchildren of the elders and storytellers, who will gain an understanding of where they came from, who they are, and what is expected of them as a Dine, as an Apache, as a Laguna, as a Choctaw, and as a Dakota.

NOTES

1. Chris C. Cavender, “The Dakota People of Minnesota,” in *Hennepin County History* (Summer 1988, Volume 47, Number 3), p. 11.

2. David Henige, *Oral Historiography* (London: Longman, Inc., 1982), p. 2.

3. Charles Eastman, *Indian Boyhood* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1971, originally published by McClure, Phillips & Company, 1902), p. 43.

4. Elsie Cavender, Oral History Project with Angela Cavender Wilson, Fall, 1990.