AL: This is Aimee LaBree on April 12, 2011, at the New Ulm Historical Society, Brown County Historical Society in New Ulm, Minnesota, interviewing Elden Lawrence from Peever, South Dakota. Interviewer, Deborah Locke.

DL: Could you spell your name for me?

EL: E-L-D-E-N  L-A-W-R-E-N-C-E

DL: Do you have a nickname?

EL: No, not now.

DL: Did you have one when you were young?

EL: Well, I've had different names over the years. In the military service I had a couple names.

DL: What were they?

EL: They were kind of humorous names, like “Buck” and “R.A.”. “Buck” may have had something to do with my being Indian. The R.A. was for Regular Army which meant you volunteered for service rather than be drafted. It also meant that you were young and a little foolish. Since I went into the service on my seventeenth birthday, I looked like a foolish, young kid.

DL: How about your family, did they have a nickname for you; your parents or any relative give you a nickname?

EL: No. I didn’t have any other name except Elden. However, my two oldest brothers went by their Indian names which indicated their order of birth. The oldest boy was
called Chaska, and the second oldest one Hapan. So for most of my younger years I called them by their Indian names. I didn’t call them Virgil and Kenny until I was an adult. These were the only two who had different names.

DL: When and where were you born?

EL: I was born in 1936 in Sisseton, South Dakota, on the reservation.

DL: Who were your parents?

EL: Melvin Lawrence and Marie Iron Heart Lawrence. Iron Heart is her maiden name.

DL: Iron Heart, is that two words?

EL: It’s two words; spelled both ways; one word or two. But I think she spelled it as one word.

DL: Who are, or were your siblings?

EL: I was part of a large family. There were nine boys all total and a girl who died as an infant. I never got to know her. Virgil and Kenny were the two oldest, then the girl, Doris; then there was Sam, Vern, Gary, myself and the younger ones, Russell, Eldrick, and Donald.

DL: Who were your grandparents on both sides?

EL: My grandparents on my father’s side—I never knew him; he died before I was born. My grandfather’s name was Levi Lawrence; that was my father’s father. He died in 1905. My father was born in 1900, so he hardly knew his father (my grandfather). My grandmother’s name was Mary and she also died before my time, so I never knew my grandparents. Lorenzo Lawrence was my great-grandfather (Levi’s father) who was responsible for saving the lives of white captive women and children during the Dakota Conflict of 1862. Lorenzo’s mother was my great-great grandmother Catherine who was the first Dakota convert reported by the missionaries at Lac qui Parle.

On my mother’s side, I had a grandfather (my mother’s father), but I only remember seeing him once. Because of the way we were separated in those days, I was never really bonded with any of my relatives because our relationships were so shattered at that time. My grandmother (my mother’s mother) died tragically about two years after I was born. Some children, including her daughter, were sliding along the banks of the Minnesota River and onto the ice. Her daughter took a fast run and slid into an opening in the river. My grandmother went in to get her after being told about it. Before she went into the water she told those standing nearby to not try to help her and to stay out of the water. Both mother and child died bravely.

DL: Do you recall any of your family names on your mother’s side?

EL: My grandmother was married three times and had children by each marriage; so I have a lot of first cousins. Her father was a Frenchman by the name of DeCoteau and that was her last name (DeCoteau). Her first name was Alice and her first husband was
a Derby, then an Ironheart, then a Demarias. But those were the old days and the old culture where family roles and customs were very structured and closely followed. The male role was that of the provider and protector. The women’s role was to maintain the camp life and domestic chores.

This caused a lot of confusion for people who had little or no knowledge about native culture. The white government workers and settlers would see the men lying around doing nothing but eating and sleeping while the women would be busy working around the camp. They would tell the women to get their men up to help. They would tell them they had lazy men. The Indian women would simply laugh and ignore them. When the men would return to camp after a long hunt, they were sometimes so exhausted they needed time to rest, eat and regain their strength so they could go back out and resume their hunting. Some men never returned from a hunt; they died from exposure or other extreme environmental hazards or an enemy tribal warrior.

So as a kind of follow through on that, when a man or the provider died, the woman would marry again because she needed a provider. That could happen more than once in a lifetime. For the male, the life expectancy was about thirty-seven years. In their traditional roles, the men also needed the women to make a home life for the family. They taught the children until they were old enough to accompany their men under their mentorship. So if a woman lived a long time, she could be without a husband and if she was still young, it would be best for her to marry again. These marriages were primarily entered into for convenience rather than romantic reasons.

DL: Tell us where you are living now; where is your home?
EL: I live near Peever, South Dakota on my grandfather’s allotment.
DL: Is that on the reservation?
EL: Yes.
DL: What’s the name of the reservation?
EL: The Lake Traverse Reservation of the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate Nation.
DL: How long have you lived there? Did you live somewhere else?
EL: I lived in a lot of places during my life time, but I was born and raised near the Peever area. We attended a small township school where we walked to school every day. There was no welfare in those days. My father would work for the local farmers doing seasonal work and then he would go to Watertown about 50 miles away and work for the ice company putting up ice for those who had ice boxes; there were no refrigerators in those days. It was cold, hard work. When he was settled in, he would send for us to join him in Watertown for the winter months. In the meantime, we would start school at the township school and then have to enroll in one of the elementary schools in Watertown.
It was a very traumatic experience for a reservation Indian to leave a school where you knew every kid in school and enroll in one where there were more children in one grade than in the entire township school. What made it more difficult was getting adapted to the new system and just as you were getting adjusted, spring work on the farms would start up and my father would move back and eventually we had to move back also and rejoin the township school to finish the year. What I remember was that all things considered, I felt better about the Watertown School than I did about the township school.

That being said, I don’t think any of the Indian kids at that time, felt there was anything positive about education. Education wasn’t something you pursued as a career or a way to a better life; it was something you had to do. It was an obligation; you attended school until you completed the eighth grade or turned sixteen. We were haunted by the experiences our parents went through in government boarding schools where education was used as a weapon against our culture, language, and entire way of life. We never saw education as a solution to anything.

We never received the kind of encouragement to get an education that one normally gets. An Indian with an education was still just an Indian.

DL: Let’s get the names of the schools you attended first. The very first elementary school you were in was named what, and where was that?

EL: The first school I attended was the Lawrence Township School where I lived near Peever.

DL: It was a public school?

EL: Yes.

DL: How many grades?

EL: It was a first through eighth grade school and I suppose I went to the sixth grade combined with the Watertown School.

DL: So you would do one part of the school year in one place, and part of the school year at another place?

EL: Yes. And then switch back before the school year was over.

DL: Are you an enrolled member of the Sisseton Reservation?

EL: Yes.

DL: Do you have family members at other reservations now?

EL: Yes.

DL: Where?
EL: When the Sisseton and Wahpetons were exiled out of the State of Minnesota to Crow Creek, we were grouped together and mixed so that we lost contact with our relatives. We have Sissetons and Wahpetons on almost every reservation in South Dakota, North Dakota and into Canada.

DL: In school, what were your favorite subjects?

EL: If there was anything I liked, it was probably the stories. I learned to read and write to get by and reading was one way to escape the monotony of mathematical tables, spelling books, and geography. The teacher would read to us as a reward for doing other work. The old people would tell stories and that sort of reminded me of how I enjoyed stories. I’m a so-called writer now, and I particularly enjoy writing short stories, especially cultural stories.

DL: As a child, did you ever think of the future and what you wanted to be?

EL: No, I don’t think so. We didn’t really identify with anything in the present, much less the future. Mainstream America just wasn’t our world. In order for us to have a future, we would have to leave our world and most of us didn’t want to do that. We would have to make all the changes and become white men or this ideal American. I liked the freedom of walking around, hunting and fishing whenever and wherever I wanted to. I learned to work as a young kid, and it was a part of my life.

One of the things that made life change so difficult was because the dominant society applied two forces on us at the same time; they forced us out of our culture and way of life and at the same time, they kept us out of their way of life. If anyone talked about the future, it was more like wishing or day dreaming. The future wasn’t real to us. They had taught us that all our great leaders were nothing but uncivilized savages so we had no role models. My only heroes were the cowboys we would see in old cowboy movies. We wanted to be the Lone Ranger and not Tonto. We would run foot races to see who could be the Lone Ranger. The loser had to be Tonto.

The idea that we would go off to college and become successful businessmen or some other professional never entered our minds; that wasn’t our world. We had been programmed to believe that you were always an Indian and an Indian in a business suit was still an Indian. Most of us thought we had very little to look forward to; why study for something that wasn’t going to be there for you. Consequently, we just lived from day to day because that was all we had. Our life consisted of survival and trying to stay alive and among the underlying fears we grew up with was the threat of dying of starvation.

There were very few professional Indian people to impact our thinking that one day I’m going to be a doctor, nurse, or teacher. If you went to the Indian Hospital and saw an Indian there, they were usually janitorial workers or aids if even that. An Indian-owned business was practically unheard of during my youth. That situation is just now beginning to change. I taught a class at our tribal college and asked the students what they wanted to be doing? One of them said, “I think I want to be a tribal policeman” So the visual world is limited for some of them.
The federal government is always about twenty or thirty years too late with programs. One problem is Washington hires the top graduates from these Ivy League universities who develop and write our Indian policies. Most of these elite individuals don’t have a clue who an Indian is and never met one in their young lives. They should be required to live on a reservation and survive for a couple of years. I would venture to say that the majority of them would stay out of the Indian business and find another line of work. I have been to Washington several times and have yet to find one bureaucrat who understands Indian thinking. Most of them view reservations as an Indian problem—not one of them regards it as a “white” problem.

From an early childhood we saw our situation as a day-to-day existence. It was a survival way of life. I look at these survival shows on TV and think, “What in hell do they know about survival?” Most of those survivors are of age. I don’t remember not working. We would pull weeds and pick rocks off the farmer’s fields and then shock grain as little kids. We never thought of this as any kind of torment or punishment. We never thought, “Gee, I went out and worked today.” It was just a thing you had to do. When I was a little older, I would start out in the early morning and walk from farm to farm looking for work. You don’t find kids now who feel the need to be doing something; they are content to sit at home and watch TV or play video games. Most of them sit somewhere with some kind of earplugs stuck in their ears and pay little attention to what’s going on around them. If you try to teach them a little work ethic, some liberal social worker will bring child abuse charges against you.

DL: How old were you when you were out doing these jobs?

EL: I was probably about five or six years old when I started working with my older brothers.

DL: Odd jobs at five or six?

EL: I started working with the family and when I was about fourteen years old I went to North Dakota and worked on a potato farm. I stayed there one summer. My parents never seemed to be concerned that I was away from home. I think they knew I was working and figured I would stay out of trouble. I came home at the end of summer to go back to school. My folks lived in Watertown at that time and I returned and decided to attend the Flandreau Indian School. I started making important decisions too early in life and in retrospect I think I should have continued my education at Watertown.

DL: Was there any time for play when you were little?

EL: Yes. Because we were a poor family we didn’t have a lot of toys and games; most of what we had, we made. We never hunted or fished for sport; it was for part of our food source. The one game that we played a lot with the neighbor kids was ball. We didn’t have store-bought balls, bats, or gloves. We made our own balls by wrapping a small marble or a round stone with rubber and then adding strips of cloth and sewing a cover for it. We would cut an ash or oak limb and whittle it down to a bat size. You had to hold the bat tightly because if you didn’t it would sting and make your hand go numb. When the ball came whizzing through the grass the best thing you could do was to
catch it because you didn’t want that thing to hit you. When there was no work, we played ball. I think we got to be good ball players because whenever we had a chance to play with real balls and bats, we were pretty good.

DL: What position did you play?

EL: I started playing outfield. Because I was little, they would put me in the right field where no one was likely to hit it. Then as I grew older and stronger I started playing shortstop and third base. I could throw hard and straight and the time came when I would be playing with kids my own age. After playing with my older brothers and neighborhood kids, I found it easier and more fun.

It was one summer that my father stayed in Watertown and worked for a construction company and we didn’t move back to the reservation. My uncle used to do lawn work for several people and he asked me if I wanted to take over his jobs since he was going to work full-time for another company. I accepted the lawn jobs and found them easy to do after my previous work experience. One of the lawns I had was the Mayor of Watertown. He never said much to me; I was a little afraid of him. He had a mustache and wore a cowboy hat. The best part was that it left my afternoons free to do other things. Some school friends came to see me and told me to come to the park where they were organizing a baseball league for kids.

There were a number of sponsors for each of the teams—Elks, Eagles, Cosmopolitans and others who furnished us with shirts and caps. We thought we were in the big leagues. That was the best and happiest time of my life; I was working and playing ball. Our coach was a pitcher for a big league farm team and he made me a pitcher. I had a hard fastball and little else, but he showed me how to throw at different speeds. My brother who came home on leave from the army was pitching for their team and he showed me how to throw a changeup. I was in my glory.

DL: What’s the first news story you remember from your childhood; national or statewide news or global news?

EL: The first national or world news that I was aware of was World War II. I had two brothers in that war; one in the army and the other in the navy. Both were fighting in the Pacific. The only means we had of knowing what was going on was by radio. We had an old battery pack radio and the battery was always going dead. There were local newspapers but we never had access to any of them. Also, the neighbors talked a lot about the two wars, Japan and Germany.

One thing I remember about those times was how the two wars brought the people together. One of the neighbors was a white person who was about the same age as my older brother who was in the army. He was deferred from military service because he was farming. They would write back and forth during the time my brother was in the Pacific. My mother’s letters were always censored and in shreds. But for some reason the neighbor always received his intact. Whenever he received a letter he would come over and share some of what my brother wrote with my mother. He was like an older

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brother to us and I think my mother sort of adopted him as a son during this time. He was very considerate of my mother.

This is what I call “commonality.” When you have something in common, you have something that sort of binds you together. After the war ended, he quit coming over and the relationship ended. I have since seen that happen, a number of times. Some tragedies separate people others seem to draw them together. I guess it’s just human nature. When you think of it, the white and Indian people probably have more in common than they have differences. I look for things I might have in common, that’s what brings people together.

DL: Which relatives had the most influence on you?

EL: When I consider all that has happened in my past, one person sticks out in my mind. It’s my father’s brother, my uncle. He never had any children of his own and even in the early years he seemed to take an interest in me. Had he not gave me more than a passing interest, many things might not have happened, including the best summer of my life. He got me my first real paying job or jobs when he let me take over his yard responsibilities. He showed me how to care for lawns and would check to see if I was doing them right; he was always there for me. The lawn mowers were all push type, cylinder mowers and a big lawn could get to be work.

The day came for parents to attend our baseball game. My father was working and my mother was not the baseball mother you now commonly see. We happened to be playing one of the best team in our league and were on the verge of getting beat. Because of several errors, I had very little confidence in my team. I kept thinking, “We’re going to lose this thing.” I was facing the best batter they had and because of a couple of errors, the bases were loaded. We had two outs and were leading by one run. The batter worked me up to a full count and stood at the plate like he owned me. Trying to regain my focus, I glanced toward the trees and there stood my uncle. I felt a surge of strength that kind of flooded my soul. Someone I cared about had come to see me play. He had a smile on his face—a kind of proud smile.

DL: Did you win the game?

EL: Yes. I struck out the most feared batter, the best that they had. When I went to talk to my uncle he was gone. The last I saw of him was when I threw the strike. We never talked about it. Sometimes that’s the way it is with Indians. It allows us to treasure those things in our hearts.

DL: How old were you then?

EL: I was close to thirteen.

DL: And what was your uncle’s name?

EL: His real name was Elmer, but we called him Lot.

DL: Lot Lawrence.
EL: Yes. And he was a great person in my life, and I didn’t realize it at the time.

DL: Who taught you the most about being Dakota?

EL: You know, that didn’t happen until later, after I was married and had two small children. Because my parents didn’t tell us much about our history, culture, and ancestors, I grew up with a great hereditary void. Also, I grew up with very few bonded relationships with my immediate and extended family. I think because of their boarding school experiences, my parents thought it best for us not to know about our disappearing Indian world. By not teaching us our native language, I think they thought they were sparing us from punishment. They spoke both Dakota and English fluently, but seldom spoke Dakota in our presence. But, their act of compassion actually worked against us.

I would think, “If they don’t want to talk about Indianness, then there must be something wrong with being Indian.” Then you add in how you were being treated by the non-Indians, it only added reinforcement to what you were thinking. We were living in a system of duel justice and discrimination as second-class citizens, if that. In this duel system of justice, if you were Indian, you were wrong. In fact, up until I was thirty-two years old, I thought I was born with a curse because I was born Indian. So I lived that way, a life of self-fulfilling prophecy, “You’re just an Indian, you’ll never amount to anything, and even if you do, you’re still an Indian.”

When you did try to do something, the Indians themselves would come at you, “What are you trying to do, who do you think you are?” Once my self-esteem was shattered, a pattern for my life unfolded. Even when I would accomplish things, I couldn’t accept the recognition. I entered the military service on my seventeenth birthday and for the first time in my life I experienced the proverbial “level playing field.” I had an equal chance and was treated like anyone else, no better or worse. I found out that not only could I compete and do better than most of the guys, but I could excel without a lot of extra effort. I didn’t have to overcome man-made barriers just to prove myself.

I was sent up for soldier of the month three times and non-commissioned officer of the month and made all of them. This should have boosted my ego. This meant that you were the best soldier on base and should have made me feel good. Instead, I felt guilty thinking, “Any one of the soldiers on base is better than I am.” At one point I felt like they were mocking me. About this time I discovered a way to deal with my mixed emotions and sentiments. I started to hang out with guys who drank a lot and it sort of provided a place where I could fit in. When I was drinking, I found I felt good about myself, about everybody else, and about my life situation. It made life make sense; to live a day at a time and put off whatever tomorrow might bring. This is the way I grew up.

By the grace of God, I found a new way of life. After six years of military service and years living on the fringes of society and on skid rows on the West Coast I finally turned over what was left of my life to my Creator.

DL: That’s what sobered you up?
EL: Yes. Not only that, but God led me to a perfect help-mate and with her support, I got going in the way God chose. I soon had a young family with a son and a daughter. Not many of our friends thought we had much of a chance to make it work. I found myself having to think about more than just myself. I had no skills and it wouldn’t be long before I would lose my physical edge to the younger men. I decided to take another look at education as a means to a better life. Because I had only a ninth grade government boarding school education, I knew it would be a long shot. The only thing I had going was a long history of work experience.

I learned about a career fair put on by the local high schools where many of the colleges and universities had representatives. When we walked into the place, I saw all these young high school kids and realized I was in the wrong place. I went to my wife and told her we might as well go this is no place for me. She said that I should at least talk to them. I went around and talked to the representatives and was only more convinced than ever that I didn’t belong there. One of the last booths I visited the guy said, “You know, you sound like a good candidate for the Tribal College.” He pointed the tribal college out and when I went over there, I saw an Indian man that I recognized. He was very friendly and spoke with confidence on my behalf. He said, “Come on, we’ll get you enrolled and started—you’ll do all right.”

When I went out to the college, one of the first persons I met was a member of the college’s board of trustees. She asked if I was going to take classes and I replied that I was going to try. “Good” she said, “You’ll be our first 4.0 graduate.” I had no idea what a 4.0 graduate was and I was just hoping I could stay with the students; some of them half my age. At the end of the second year, I overheard the president say, “You know, I think we have our first ‘no hitter’ going. I realized that since I had all “A’s”, that he might be talking about me. So the first of the new self-fulfilling prophecies came about because I was the first 4.0 graduate of the Tribal College. There was another self-fulfilling prophecy that happened regarding the tribal college. My advisor used to get a cup of coffee and sit down by me and once he said to me, “You should go on and get more education and come back and be the president. That happened, not once, but twice. People believing in me and encouraging me had a lot to do with my success. And like I fulfilled the “no good Indian” prophecy, I fulfilled the expectations of those who believed in me.

Getting off to a good start at the tribal college made me believe I could take it another step farther. I enrolled at Moorhead State for a bachelor’s degree in Human Services and went on to the University of South Dakota for a Masters in Public Administration. By now, I was in an education career field. Being in a professional career was something I never dreamed of as a young person. I attended a workshop at the South Dakota State University where I made the comment to a person I got acquainted with, that, “This looks like a good place to try for a doctorate.” I was just talking off the top of my head, but he said if I was serious, he would call someone to visit with me. I thought, “What the heck, it wouldn’t hurt to talk about it.”

The lady who was in charge of the Sociology Department came to the workshop to see me. She told me that classes were going to be starting on the following Monday and she could get me in if I signed up right away. I asked her if I could think about it overnight
and she said yes, but she would have to know the next day. This was more than I bit off before and I had no confidence that I could do doctorate work. Up to this point I was mostly self-taught. I would be lacking a lot of preparatory work and it would take everything I had and then some. I decided to pray and ask God for His guidance, “Lord, I’ve got to have a clear, straight answer, none of the beating around the bush.” I told Him that I could be making a big mistake and wasting a lot of time and effort. I had to have a clear answer in no uncertain terms.

At the workshop, they served a different ethnic food for each of the three lunches. The first was Mexican and then Greek. On this last day, they served Chinese. I looked at the clock and it read about 1:00 pm and she would be here about 1:30-- I still had no answer. There was a fortune cookie on my plate so I broke it open and the little slip fell out. I picked it up and read it, and it said, *Yes, go ahead with confidence.* Now I don’t believe God uses fortune cookies to send His messages but for a foolish man like me, He will use a foolish method.

DL: And did you move forward with confidence?

EL: No, not really. I don’t think confidence works that way. Confidence is a lot like faith it can come in large and small portions. Sometimes you might think that your faith is gone and yet we are told that faith is like a mustard seed that is the smallest of all seeds. Yet, it can grow into a large bush so that even the birds will nest in it. Confidence is like that. If you have even the smallest amount, and use your determination to pursue your goal, things will eventually happen. It’s a lot like the story of the Little Train That Could.

I used to do a lot of running for long distances as a way to improve my self-discipline. I did most of my running on our township roads where I had various distances marked out; the longest being a thirteen mile course. If the moon was out and the night was clear, I preferred to run at night. During these runs, particularly the ten and thirteen mile ones, I would hit several “walls” during a run. My body would say, “No more, this is all I can do!” Sometimes my mind would side with the body, “What’s the matter with you; you still got seven miles to go, give it up!” That’s when you call on the spirit to take over. Your spirit is the stronger source of power.

Part of my dissertation included a case study on a local sun dance group. More than once the individual dancers would tell about their experience while doing the sacred dance. They would dance for three days and sometimes more, depending on the group. They had no water or food and danced constantly in the hot sun. They would tell me that after the second day they would no longer be dancing under their own power. When I would share my experience in leaning on the walls until you made a breakthrough, they would say it was something similar. When I would complete a run, there was no greater feeling of satisfaction and euphoria.

Another incident I had with confidence had to do with a statistics class that I had to take. I had attempted to take it twice and I dropped it before I was given a grade. I was taking it for the third time and it was going to be my last. It’s difficult to take a college level class in stats when you never had algebra. This was a doctorate level class and the
odds that I could even pass the course were very low, if not impossible. I had no idea what the instructor was teaching and could not key in on anything he said.

I had become friends with a lady from Germany who was teaching while on a sabbatical. She was interested in Native American culture and we had some good visits together. I told her I was struggling with the stats class. I decided that I wasn’t going to make it this third time and was on my way to dropping the class when I happened to meet her on the way. We talked briefly and she asked how things were going. I told her not very well. I didn’t say I was intending to drop the class. Then she said something that changed my whole way of thinking. She said, “Sometimes it takes more fortitude than brains.” It made me think of the four original values of our woodland culture; knowledge, fortitude, wisdom, and bravery.

I thought about how fortitude was probably the one value I possessed. I decided to not drop the class and make one last try. That weekend, I asked my son if he had an elementary stats book and he said he did. I read it from cover to cover that weekend and things started to make sense. I could work out the problems by using all the basic symbols and numbers. The instructor would look over my papers and say, “You got all the answers but you did a lot of extra work.” I read my son’s next book and the numbers and signs, and symbols began to mean something. Most Indian children don’t process numbers as well as white kids. That’s because we’re “word” people, and white kids are mostly “numbers” people.

I got my grade for the course in the mail and didn’t open it until I was on my way home from work. I slowly pealed back the envelope lapel, like a gambler sweating out a full-house. If I didn’t pass it, I was done and my doctoral pursuit finished. When I saw the “B” I was overwhelmed. I threw the letter in the air and took my hands off the steering wheel and let out a happy yell! I told my car, “I don’t care; go in the ditch, hit that telephone pole!”

When I think about it, I believe what made that class something special was the fact that I did it all on my own. It’s taken me a long time, but I’m back to your original question, “Did you go ahead with confidence?” The realization of that confidence didn’t come to me until the end when I saw that grade. At that moment in time, I realized that I could do anything. So that’s the confidence you spoke of, it didn’t come until the end. But it’s a struggle to get to that point and the biggest enemy to faith and confidence is unbelief. The natural man says, “I’ll believe it when I see it,” while the spiritual man believes and then he sees.” I kept that fortune cookie message on my bookshelf and I said, “If I ever make it through this, that little message will be placed with my diploma. Today, when I lose confidence, I look at it and am encouraged.

DL: You brought up religion several times now. Were you raised with the traditional Dakota religion or the Christian religion? What is your background? What did you choose?

EL: During the time I was growing up, I don’t recall any traditional religious practices being carried on. Religious ceremonies and some cultural practices were outlawed. If the Indian Agent heard about any outlawed ceremonies being carried out, he took
immediate action and punished them. There were three main denominations among the Sisseton and Wahpeton bands: the Presbyterian, the Episcopal, and the Catholic. You were born into one of them. I was born into the Presbyterian church. But now, today, the organized church is not necessarily what I call the true church. The true church is the body of Christ and that’s where I belong.

The organized church is primarily a religious group, but the body of Christ is a relationship. There is a fundamental difference between the two. You can go to church all your life and call yourself a Christian, but if you’re going to be a child of God, that in itself, speaks of a relationship between you and God. And so for myself, I choose that way. Religion becomes in large part a matter of preference, while the relationship is a matter of principle based on the Holy Scriptures.

DL: Your parents, were they baptized Christian as well?

EL: Yes. I know my mother was, but I’m not sure if my father was.

DL: Back to Dakota history. What did you learn about Dakota history when you were growing up, and who taught you?

EL: Actually, no one taught me about our history, not my parents, the public schools, or even the government boarding school. I didn’t know who my ancestors were or where we came from. I had no past, and for that matter no future. In the military service I was on a survey team for a while and one of the ways you can identify your present location is to use a triangular process using a known location as a reference point. Once the present location is established, you can move on to your next location. It’s the same with history. If you don’t know your history, you don’t know where you’re at or where you’re headed. That’s the way I was for a good part of my life—until I leaned about our history.

Most of what I learned was from my own research after I was in higher education. The big thing I learned about our history is that we were once a woodland tribe in Minnesota. We didn’t become part of the buffalo culture until about 1868 when we were relocated in the northeastern corner of what is now South Dakota. We were exiled out of the State of Minnesota in 1863 following the Dakota Conflict of 1862. That changed everything; we were removed from our homeland and sent to an area where no one wanted to live, in Crow Creek, South Dakota. Most of the changes to our culture and way of life occurred after we were removed from Minnesota.

I always say that our history is best studied and learned in at least two parts; our history in Minnesota and our history in South Dakota. Most writers of Dakota history write about the Minnesota history like Dakota history ended with the Dakota Conflict. After 1862, Dakota history ceased to exist. These writers are writing with very little insight and their writings are full of bias and half-truths. Sometimes it’s hard to tell if they’re writing about the same history. I have since learned to take everything they write with the proverbial “grain of salt.”

One thing in particular that I don’t like about current writers is how they portray the Christian Indians during that time. I recalled my mother saying one time that we had a
famous ancestor, but she never said who he was or what he did. All I ever read about the Dakota Christians from writers was that they were all a bunch of traitors and enemies of the traditional Dakotas. I learned that they were a very unique group of individuals and that the person my mother referred to was actually one of them. His name was Lorenzo Lawrence and he was my great-grandfather.

DL: Tell us about him. What happened? Who was he?

EL: Lorenzo Lawrence was born in 1824, probably in Wisconsin. He lived with an aunt; his mother’s sister in the early years of his life. In those days, the Dakotas still lived with large extended families. His mother was living near where current St. Paul is now located, probably in the village of Kaposia. In reading some rough notes from an unknown interviewer, I learned that he stayed with his aunt until he was about 11 years old. Apparently he wanted to be with his mother and the notes say he cried for her. He was taken to his mother where he lived for about three or four years. The missionaries Gideon and Samuel Pond had a mission station at the Lakes Calhoun and Harriet areas and his mother was drawn to their teaching and messages.

Lorenzo’s mother was a rather prestigious woman, a medicine woman and member of the Sacred Dance Society. This would have been a coveted position for any man and was an unusual position for a Dakota woman to have. However, when she became convinced that the Christian beliefs and faith were right for her she gave up all that she had and had her medicine bundle burned as a public testimony to her new faith. This happened at Lac qui Parle where the missionaries Thomas Williamson and Stephen R. Riggs were establishing a new mission. The act of faith by Catherine outraged the traditional Dakotas and she went through various trials and persecutions because of it.

Lorenzo remained at what is now the Twin Cities area until he was about thirteen or fourteen years old. The documents say he stayed with his brothers at the Shakopee village, but it’s difficult to know for sure what that meant. A man could have more than one wife and in an extended family half-brothers and first cousins were recognized as brothers and sisters. When I wrote the book Peace Seekers, I wrote that the man Left Hand was his father but I learned that Lorenzo’s biological father died when Lorenzo was an infant. Lorenzo’s mother was actually Left Hand’s second wife. When Lorenzo’s mother, Catherine learned that a polygamous relationship was not in keeping with Christian principles, she chose to leave the relationship.

Lorenzo joined his mother at Lac qui Parle when he was a young man. As I mentioned before, Indians didn’t have the so-called “teen years.” They went from being an adolescent to a mentorship where they were “groomed” for adulthood. During his years with his brothers in Shakopee, Lorenzo probably went through his mentorship. Being the oldest of his mother’s children, he probably went to be with her as the family provider and protector. He was known as a very proficient hunter. One writer wrote that, “When Lorenzo’s gun spoke, something fell dead.” To excel in a hunting and gathering society, you had to be good at what you did.

When Lorenzo joined his mother at Lac qui Parle, he had a good opportunity to learn about the traditional religion and the Christian religion. I’m sure his mother shared with
him her views on both religions and why she chose the Christian way. He also had a
chance to witness first-hand how she kept her faith during some difficult trials and
persecutions. This was all in preparation for when Lorenzo would be called on to make
his own decision and to stand by it.

When the Outbreak took place, the Christian Indians were caught in between two
opposing forces. Some of the church members left their churches and joined the
traditional forces and others simply fled from the hostilities. Their churches were burned
along with their houses and personal belongings. They had formed a Christian, farmer
society at the Upper Sioux Agency where they lived independently and were in large
part, self-sufficient. This angered the traditional Indians who advocated that they return
to their old hunting and gathering way of life. The “progressive Indians”, as they were
referred to, provided evidence that Indians could farm and provide for themselves in
new ways. The Hazelwood Republic, as it was called was the target of the war faction
and was destroyed. An Indian casino now sets on the Hazelwood site. If you wanted the
Indians to become civilized, you can’t become whiter, than that.

The warrior faction had done most of its killing and destruction during the early stages of
the Outbreak while they had the element of surprise and the soldiers were not
organized to defend themselves and their settlers. In the meantime, several hundred
deaths occurred among the white settlers and many were taken as captives to use as a
deterrent against retaliation by the soldiers. Many of these deaths were women and
young children. What remained of the mission church was a handful of women and
children and a few Christian men. They decided to save as many of the innocent victims
as they could and stay neutral and not join either side. In addition, they decided to do
what they could to bring the Conflict to an end.

Lorenzo thought to take his family to the North Woods where they could survive; and
wait there until it was over. But as fate would have it, things would take a different turn.
He had been discussing what to do with his friend Simon into the late morning hours
and when he returned to his house he learned that one of the white captives had
escaped from the hostile forces and was brought to his mother’s house where she was
hiding her in their root cellar. Catherine told Lorenzo that he was going to have to take
her to Fort Ridgely where she would maybe be safe. She told him that their camp was
going to move north to get away from the warrior faction that had moved in close to their
camp. The plan was to not only use the captives for protection, but also to merge into
the friendly camp in the event of an attack by the soldiers. If the soldiers attacked the
village they might kill some of the friendly Indians and that would anger them enough to
join forces with them.

After talking and praying with his mother, he told the women to prepare as much food as
they could and in the early morning he would take the woman and her three children
down by the river and hide them while the others broke camp and moved out. Early in
the morning, he took the woman and her children and hid them in the rushes; placing
the children on a muskrat house while they waited for the camp to break up and move.
After they left, the hostile faction immediately burned down all the buildings, including
the churches. When things quieted down, he climbed the steep embankment to view the
damages. He saw the church and his house in smoldering ashes. He said in his
recounting of the events that his only comfort was that he had hired someone to help take down the church bell and they buried it along with some Dakota Bibles and Dakota hymnals.

That night they started on the first of five nights down the Minnesota River. They could only travel at night for fear of being seen by either the hostile forces or the soldiers. Lorenzo took his own family along and he stated that his wife was even more afraid of the soldiers than she was the warriors. After the first morning of their journey, they came upon another woman and her five children. Lorenzo went back up the river and found two more canoes and brought them back, whereupon, he took her and her children with them. Lorenzo was the only adult man with thirteen women and children. He spent most of his time in the water helping them maneuver and navigate the rough, unpredictable flow of the river.

The reason I know about the river is that I repeated Lorenzo’s journey as a way to have a greater awareness of what he may have gone through. It took us two ten hour days to repeat his trip. All I can say is that it was no pleasant, canoeing weekend. The most rewarding part of the journey came at the end, when we set foot on shore by Fort Ridgely. My canoe partner said, “Lorenzo would have been proud of you.” I needed that.

DL: We were talking about Lorenzo and how he took the women captives and the children down to Fort Ridgely, which was believed to be the only safe place at the time, and they weren’t sure of that either, because they thought the Little Crow warriors may have taken that also. But they didn’t have much choice before they could go. Lorenzo was Dakota, leading some non-Dakota people to safety. What would have happened to him if they had been discovered?

EL: After Lorenzo was discovered missing with the captives, the warriors came to his tipi and shot it full of holes and left a message that this was what they were going to do to him when they found him. In addition, the soldier’s lodge had stated that all whites were to be killed along with any half-breeds and friendly Indians. On the other hand, the Indians were afraid the soldiers would take vengeance on all Indians and they would be killed on site. There were several reasons that I believe he would have been killed on site and probably all those with him; first, he was a Christian, he was independent and successful as a farmer, he had taken a woman and her children who were captives and was escaping to safety. While they individually feared him as a warrior in his own right, they probably as a group would have killed him.

DL: What did you admire most about your great-grandfather?

EL: I liked the way he stood for what he believed in. He was faced with overwhelming opposition and many times he had to stand alone. From my personal experience, I know what that takes. He believed that God was with him and that he was in His will. Once his decision was made, he never altered from that. I believe he got that from his mother. He was a brave man who feared nothing from man. I admire that also. I said I would like to be and live like him; but I know what it takes to stand in the hand of God. I’m getting to that point, but I’m not sure I could do it like he did. But, he will always be a
beacon of light for me and someone I can see as a role model. He makes up for all the role models I didn’t have in my youth.

One thing that I found in common with my great-grandfather was his compassion for innocent and helpless victims of circumstances. During my six years of military service, I served in two war-torn countries; post-war Germany and Korea. We were an occupation force in Germany and there was very little rebuilding, at least where I was. I would see the bewilderment and confusion on the little children’s faces. The fear was clearly visible. They must have had haunting memories and nightmares of bombs falling and exploding, wondering if the next one would find them. The children didn’t know if you were friendly or the enemy. I felt a compassion for the children and a great anger for those who make wars.

In Korea it was the same way, only a little more threatening. We were in a cease-fire and the shooting could start up anytime. We were mobile with no permanent camps and the civilians had no choice but to stay near us. As hard-hearted as I got to be in those years, the look on the children’s faces would cause me to walk away. It didn’t seem to bother most of the guys. As a young man, I hadn’t developed the ability to have a state of mind where those things didn’t get to you. I did learn to dump all the justification on my superiors. That way, you don’t let it get to you—that’s the best way. Lorenzo was asked why he did what he did, and his response was very simple, “I saw the children and pitied them, and wanted them to live.”

DL: The perspectives from that time are quite fascinating because I’m sure you know that there were Dakotas who attacked New Ulm and took no prisoners, and children and women were not spared. So at that period would they easily have viewed Mr. Lawrence as a turncoat or a traitor, or just simply wrong, especially if he was a scout at one point.

EL: The warrior faction looked at the Christian Indians as traitors; I guess you could say it that way. However, it was more than just crossing over and taking up a new way of life. The Dakota farmers and Christians never regarded what they were doing as a complete cultural renewal. They were only finding a different way to provide for their physiological needs. I think they were thinking, “What are we doing that is so different? What has changed? All we are doing is trying to find a way to feed our families and farming is one of those ways.” For the Christians, all that changed was their religious beliefs; none of their cultural beliefs had changed that much. Even in current times, Christian Indians attend church and maintain their cultural practices as they so choose. As a matter of fact, I didn’t really care about traditional culture until I became a Christian. Christianity didn’t make a white man out of me; instead it made an Indian out of me.

Lorenzo didn’t become a scout until after he delivered the captives to Fort Ridgely. His first assignment was to lead the soldiers to where he found the body of Captain Marsh who drowned while trying to escape the Redwood Ferry attack at the beginning of the conflict. His body had drifted down river about two miles and was washed up on the shore. Lorenzo buried him and reported it to the soldiers at Fort Ridgely. After that, he was with the soldiers at the Battle of Wood Lake where he was wounded. Those who say that he and the others were traitors should ask themselves what they would have
done if their homes, church, school buildings, livestock, and crops were all destroyed by a militant warrior faction. I’m still upset by one well-known historian who called them traitors. What does he know? He couldn’t stand in Lorenzo’s or any of their shadows!

DL: What is your opinion of that war?

EL: I think it’s not too different than most wars. When two opposing sides reach a point of impasse and there is no more negotiating, then war is pending. The thinking is, “We are done negotiating, we are done talking; they won’t listen to us, we don’t like what they’re saying, and we don’t have any other choice.” War is the result of people being reduced to their most basic instincts. When that happens, there is nothing to prevent you from taking action. All deterents are gone. All reasoning and logic is gone. When Andrew Myrick, the fur trader made his remark to the Indian Agent who was trying to pass his responsibilities onto the fur traders in getting them to issue credits while they waited for their gold treaty payment, Myrick’s statement brought an end to it all. He said of the Indians, “If they’re hungry, let them eat grass.”

I don’t know if I necessarily disagree with the decisions of the Little Crow war faction; given all the evidence of how they were treated and marginalized, I guess I would have thought a retaliation would at least get some serious attention. What I disagree with is the way in which they went about it. Not all the warriors thought as the loud activists; that attacking the innocent and helpless and killing the women and children was the right way to wage retaliation. Big Eagle, whom I regard as one of the most noble of the warriors, refused to allow his men to go on raids of the settlements. He said he would fight with the soldiers and despised the killing of innocent women and children. He was a principle leader against the soldiers at the Battle of Birch Coulee where they inflicted many casualties on Sibley’s burial detachment.

There is one other thing about American Indian warriors and I think it’s true in most cases today. I asked a close friend and a traditional elder why it was that in times of war, we out volunteer any other racial or ethnic group, per capita? He said that it had a lot to do with an inherited warrior instinct. Then he explained it this way. Life is to live and prosper and try to be happy. Life is to live for other people as well and try to do some good and make their life a little bit better. You try to live well and die well. At the end of your life, you look at how things turned out and if you accomplished anything worthwhile or if everything was in vain. If everything is dismal and everything you hoped to accomplish is gone, then the most you can hope for is to die with some honor. The way to do that is to die for an honorable cause, die for your people, or make the ultimate sacrifice where some good will come of it. In that way, you leave a part of your life for which you will be remembered. When 9-11 occurred, I was in a meeting where we were screening applicants for the casino. The person in charge came in a reported that a plane had crashed into one of the World Trade Center buildings. Thinking it some small plane we didn’t give it too much attention. A little while later, a second plane hit the towers and it was said that we were under attack. Our meeting was cancelled and I went out to my car and listened to the radio for details. Not long after, the Pentagon was hit. I remember thinking as I listened, “I wish I was a young man again.”
There was a man who used to come to Peever and wait around and try to come up with enough money to get a bottle of wine. When he would approach me he always held out his hand and looked the other way. He avoided eye contact and never said a word because it was the last shred of honor he had left. I heard that he died in a trailer fire and read his obituary. I learned he was a Korean veteran and among his medals was the Silver Star. They buried him with full honors and a twelve gun salute. Nobody will remember him as a drunk passed out on the street; they’ll remember him as a soldier who served honorably. Even though the country never honored him in life, they honored him in death.

The Dakota warriors never received honor because people didn’t understand the real causes and the underlying sentiments of the Dakota people. Big Eagle said there were some things that the Dakotas did that were wrong, but that there was no excuse for the way they were treated as human beings. The 38 warriors that were executed at Mankato paid the price for all the others. In all, 303 warriors were condemned to be executed but President Lincoln made a political decision in order to appease the angry and vengeful Minnesota citizens. The event that took place on December 26, 1862 put Mankato on the map as the town with the largest mass execution in the history of the United States. The citizens of Minnesota received a delayed Christmas present, but were denied the pleasure of seeing the warriors plead for their lives. The 38 warriors went up the steps of the gallows and died like men. It hasn’t been until lately that they are honored.

DL: Have you been to Mankato to that site?

EL: I’ve been to Mankato, but I’m not sure of the exact site of the execution. Some say the Downtown Holiday sits on the site where the gallows was built. I took some students and stayed there overnight. I pointed out the swimming pool area and said it was where some say the gallows were built. I told them if any of them had bad dreams that might be why. None of them said they had any, but I did. I couldn’t sleep and when I walked out onto the foyer I could see the other end of the swimming pool. I could see the water depth on a sign and it read 38 (I couldn’t see the 3’ 8” from my distance).

DL: What was the dream about?

EL: It was about a bloody killing. They say a dream is a reflection, a deep fear, or something that you saw happen. I’ve never seen anything like that. I couldn’t have imagined that. I couldn’t have conjured that up in my mind. I couldn’t have drawn a picture of that. But it was there, maybe I could now. I don’t know; I’ve had a lot of such dreams, I guess that’s how it is.

DL: Have you been to Birch Coulee?

EL: Yes. I’ve been there.

DL: What was your impression of that?

EL: Well, I’ve never thought much about the battle itself. I have thought about the tactics or lack of tactics deployed before and during the battle. The soldiers have only
themselves to blame for their loss of lives. They took the word of those who thought they knew more about the Indians than they did. They said there were no Indians in the area; that they were all north of them. When they set out their outposts, they didn’t establish a perimeter large enough. The warriors, Big Eagle, Hu Sha Sha (Red Legs), Mankato, and Gray Bird had their men sneak up on them during the night for a surprise attack the following morning. The small perimeter allowed the warriors to get into close firing range of the soldiers who many had slept in the open, thinking they had no need for caution.

As soon as it got light enough the warriors opened fire on the sleeping soldiers. They were surrounded and cut off from the creek where they would get water. The battle lasted from one morning to the next mid-morning. When reinforcements finally reached them, the soldiers were totally exhausted and dehydrated from lack of water and lack of food. Big Eagle reported that there were only two warriors that were killed, that he knew of. I look at war in a kind of different way. Soldiers have very little to say about what goes on, they only know they are put there to fight and death is accepted as one of the consequences. You go out to fight and make some sense out of something that is created by someone else that doesn’t make sense—you just do it.

DL: How about the Lower Sioux Agency, have you been there? The food storage houses?

Yes.

DL: What are your impressions of that?

EL: The initial attacks began at the Lower Sioux Agency on August 16, 1862. The annuity portion of the annual treaty payment had arrived but not the gold payment. The newly appointed Agent Galbraith refused to issue the annuities until the payment arrived. The Indian Agent had a lot of authority and could have used his own judgment and issued the food. The Indians were suffering from a difficult winter, and crop failure due to drought and grasshopper infestation. Their children were starving and their food was in the warehouse.

Little Crow warned the agent that when the people were hungry enough they would take matters into their own hands. The agent was more concerned about the Civil War and was preparing to send men to help the North. He didn’t realize he had a war brewing in his own backyard. In fact, he was on his way to Fort Snelling with some recruits to send them south when the war broke out. The gold payment was at least two months late because of political squabbles over the payment itself and another month on whether to make the payment in gold or currency. No one expected the Dakotas to take to the battlefield. The settlers, government workers, and the missionaries knew there was some dissatisfaction on the Indian’s part, but that there would certainly be no outbreak. Some thought that if something did develop, the so-called friendly Indians would not allow it to happen. Well—it doesn’t work that way, even in our American society. There are millions of American people, and yet we allow one man to get us into a war(s) without our approval. Even our elected officials couldn’t prevent it.
DL: you mentioned taking the route that Lorenzo took at night on the river. Have you been to Fort Ridgely then? What were your thoughts the first time you saw it, once you knew the history of your family?

EL: When I first saw it, I was somewhat surprised that it sat out in the open with no natural barriers around it. I thought about how it would have been difficult to defend in an all out attack. When I read about it I learned that no one at that time expected a war or an outbreak and the place was more of a military depot than a fort. It was designed to accept supplies and provisions for the settlers and military that would come in from Fort Snelling. It was open on at least three sides when ideally it should be closed on three sides and open for one passage way out. If they had built a stockade wall around it, then it would have been easier to defend and provide protection.

DL: How could you build a fort in a place that was protected on a least three sides? What would it be circled by? A body of water, or….

EL: A body of water might be one thing, but I think you would want it up on a higher level and dig deep trenches around it so the enemy would have to climb to reach the wall and then have to climb that. To begin with, you would need to find a location where there were some natural environmental barriers. Like the hills in Korea for instance; just climbing up those hills was a task. Then if you have people shooting down at you, that’s another thing.

Once you fortify your position, then you post your guards and outposts outside the fort to warn of intruders and alert the fort. That’s the way to build a fort. At Camp Lincoln near Mankato where they took and held the Dakota prisoners, I went and looked at the site which I was told was in a valley near Sibley Park. I don’t think that’s the right spot; it’s wide open on all sides. Unless they didn’t learn anything from Birch Coulee, I don’t think they would have located their camp there. Not far from there is a high, steep hill with only one long approach to the top. I think that’s where the camp was located. They probably said it was located in the river valley because it made a good location for a park and is a good tourist attraction.

DL: have you ever been to the Upper Sioux Agency?

EL: Yes.

DL: What’s your thoughts there?

EL: The upper Sioux Agency was established to serve the Sisseton and Wahpeton Bands. It should have been located farther north, maybe near Big Stone Lake or even Lake Traverse. Joseph Brown, a fur trader, convinced the government that if they located the two agencies closer together, he could serve both as the Indian Agent. So the Upper Sioux Agency was located near present day Granite Falls, Minnesota. The Sisseton band lived mostly around the Sisseton and Lake Traverse area and the Wahpeton Band had families living near Lac qui Parle. The Upper Sioux location at Granite Falls made for a long strenuous journey when annuity distribution time came in early June.
When a fire destroyed the missionary Stephen Riggs’s home at Lac qui Parle, the mission society decided to move his mission to the Upper Sioux Agency rather than rebuild on the Lac qui Parle site. As a result, many of the Wahpeton families moved to the Upper Sioux Agency to be near their church and the government agency. They formed the Hazelwood Republic and were successful at farming without help from the government. I think that probably Agent Brown was a little envious of the Hazelwood Christian farmers and tried to imitate what they were doing with the Lower Sioux Indians.

What Agent Brown did was to use bribery and favors to make the Lower Sioux Indians farmers by issuing them livestock and equipment and helping them break up land for anyone who wanted to be farmers. Of course, when he made this offer, many took it up though they didn’t have any real intention of becoming farmers. The government workers ended up doing most of the farming for them. This favoritism angered those who didn’t want to farm as well as the Hazelwood farmers who had made the sacrifices and made it without government help. When the resisters complained about favoritism, they were right, only they shouldn’t have included the Hazelwood Indians.

DL: What about Fort Snelling; have you ever been there?

EL: Yes.

DL: What was your feeling there?

EL: Well, I didn’t have a lot of knowledge of the Dakota history when I was first there. I knew that it was sort of an induction or enlistment center during WWII because my brother went there to enlist. Later, I learned that it was a frontier post in the early years. Also, the Mississippi River was at the edge of the frontier. The fort was located at the confluence of the Minnesota, Saint Croix, and Mississippi Rivers and was an ideal junction for trading from all locations. I believe the fort was built, not for protection of the settlements, but for the protection of the trading enterprise. John Jacob Astor who headed the powerful American Fur Company is said to have bought more senators than any other man in history. Some things never change.

In retrospect, I think if the Indians would have united in a common effort, the Sioux, the Chippewa, and the Winnebago’s, they might have changed the outcome. The North was believed to be losing the war with the South and more men were being recruited and sent south. Little Crow had warned the warriors that even though they were fighting each other, if the Indians made war, they would unite and come after the Indians. However, that possibility might not have been as likely as they supposed. The South was being threatened much like the Dakotas. A whole way of life hung in the balance. The South wasn’t interested in advancing their culture and would have been content just to be left alone to their own way of life. It was the same way for the Dakotas and other Indian tribes. The main reason for the Civil War was that the North wanted to expand their trade and businesses into the South.

Because of the underlying circumstances, I don’t think the South would have supported the North without some major concessions. The Dakotas had the right idea but went
about it the wrong way. Instead of attacking the soldiers and making a concentrated plan of attack on Fort Ridgely, the young men who manipulated Little Crow into leading them, refused to follow his directions and went on a random attack on the white settlements. Now these were the real traitors. Most of them fled at the end of the Dakota War and were never punished. Big Eagle said that if they had taken the fort, they could have had control over the transportation route. The military would have been confined to Fort Snelling father north. They could not have been able to move men or equipment down the river. It would have taken a large mass of soldiers to move across the mainland and they didn’t have that with the war going on in the south.

The Dakotas could have let the settlers and government officials know that because they were in violation of their treaty rights, they were therefore taking back their land. After giving them enough notice to make corrections, then, issue a demand that they vacate their places within a thirty-day period. Make the offer to assist them in any way to move out. They could have moved them all to Fort Snelling until they could send them all back East. They might have had them stay in the same place they kept the Indians before they exiled them from their homeland. This could have been possible if the Dakotas, the Chippewa, and Winnebago tribes would have planned and decided together on their specific plan of action. They might have saved a large piece of their land and if the tribes to the west would have united with us, everything west of the Mississippi River might still be Indian Country.

DL: Could the settlers have actually left with a 30 day notice?

EL: At that time farmsteads were very small and most of them had little more than the clothes on their backs. The work was hard and the future outlook very dismal. It wouldn’t have taken much for them to decide to try another place or another way of making a living. It wasn’t like they had a whole lot to defend. They didn’t regard the land in the same way as the Indians. We believe we were created from the earth and we will someday return to the earth. That’s why we call her, Mother Earth; because our ancestors have returned to her bosom. That’s why we never defaced the land or plowed her surface. It’s also the main reason, and one that never gets mentioned, why the traditional Indians didn’t want to become farmers.

The white settlers and Americans in general, never had this same relationship with the land and so there wouldn’t have been that extra incentive to remain. The land was just a way to make a living. They had left their ancestors across the oceans to seek prosperity in America. It was the same way for the Southerners. They were living off the land and had an extra bonding to the land. Because their land was being farmed and maintained by slaves the men were free to fight and that’s one reason they were winning. Lincoln saw all that was happening and had other reasons for freeing the slaves.

DL: You said that Lincoln freed the slaves for a reason other than that of just freeing them. What would that be?

EL: The reason he freed the slaves was so that the support system behind the Southern Army was no longer there. With the slaves gone, there was nobody to run their farms and plantations and produce crops. That was the same tactic they used on the Plains
Indians when the government sanctioned the killing of millions of buffalo. The U.S. Army was, by their own admission, no match for the plains warriors. A handful of warriors would outfight an entire army unit of several hundred soldiers. They were better horsemen, and were better shots, and most of all, they knew how to blend in and use the natural environment. They could fight without a leader once they knew what the plan of attack was. Long before the modern army began using Special Forces to develop and use guerilla tactics, the Indians were already using them.

The government knew the Indians could subsist on buffalo meat alone and there were plenty of them. They could see that the animals would be a lasting source of food and that would be an end to their manifest destiny. The government decided to kill off the buffalo first and starve out the Indians and what was left they would put on reserves like other wild animals. The rule would be simple, stay on the reservation and you’ll be safe—we’ll feed you. If you leave the reservation, you’ll be fair game. That’s why all Indians are under the Department of the Interior where all game refuges are placed. We are safely tucked inside a large cocoon of bureaucracy.

Not only that, Thomas Jefferson developed a permanent welfare state out of the Indian nations; not by weapons, but with an “engine of commerce” as he called it. He built a system of government trading houses known as the “factory system” in order to wean the Indian trade away from the French and British. By issuing liberal credits for furs, the Indians would bring in their furs and trade with the Americans for a better profit. The government never intended to make a profit from their trading, but the idea was to build up a system of dependency on the government. That plan worked so well, it’s still in existence today. We are dependent on the government and we have as much sovereignty as the government is willing to give us.

The Indians would support those whom they trusted the most and that left the Americans last. They liked the French the most and that’s why there are so many Indian/French today. The French considered the Indians as their equal and intermarried with the Dakota with the full intent of becoming a real family. They were willing to live like the Indians and suffer the hardships of a sometimes unforgiving winter. The Indians were impressed with them and willing to have them as family members. I, myself have one-eighth French blood from my mother’s side. In a way, I’m kind of glad about that; at least I know what I am. It’s better than having one-eighth of me up for grabs.

DL: Hundreds of Dakota people were interred at Fort Snelling in 1862-1863, kept there against their will, and then moved down river and then back up into the Dakotas. And today, there are some Dakota who say: Burn down Fort Snelling, it’s a terrible place, horrible things happened to our people, and it’s just a bad reminder." Do you think that’s an option?

EL: No, I don’t see it that way. I think if anything, it should be preserved. But along with that the whole story should be told beginning with the government’s manipulated treaties to their violations and broken promises of treaty rights, to coercing the Indians into a war, to travesties of justice and the mockery of military tribunal trials of sometimes innocent warriors, and the execution of 38 warriors, (at least one who was executed by mistake), and then the exile of an entire nation of Dakotas from their homeland. I think
that Fort Snelling should be preserved as a tribute or memorial to the innocent Dakotas who spent a devastating winter there before finally leaving their beloved homeland forever. If you burned it down and bulldozed it under, they would just build some business over it and the history would be underground.

Today, there are some who are trying to convince the people that the German Holocaust never happened. But the death camps are still there to prove it and a Holocaust Museum is located in Washington, DC to tell the story. Thousands of visitors from throughout the world visit the museum every year and learn what really happened. The Jewish people don’t want people to forget what happened to their ancestors. I was sharing some information with my son about our Dakota people and Indians in general and the many wars we fought to keep our land. He asked me, “Dad, don’t we ever win one?” I told him, “Yes son, we are going to win one—we are going to win the last one.” Maybe what the 38 warriors did was to make a down payment.

DL: It was sanctioned by the U.S. government; that was the difference; for these thirty-eight, Lincoln could have pardoned everyone, as some people argue, and so that is seen as a failing on his behalf. Would you agree with that? He could have pardoned them.

EL: Yes. I think for the most part. Lincoln made a political decision because he was told if he didn’t execute every one of them he could forget about being president, because the people of Minnesota would never vote for him in the re-election. The military tribunal had tried over four hundred warriors in an average time of ten minutes each and sentenced 303 of them to be executed. Because the president of the United States is the ex-officio over all Indian tribes, they sent him the names along with their assigned numbers for final approval. Lincoln had two of his secretaries go over the list and find those who were guilty of committing murder; whereupon, only two names were given. They knew that two names would not appease the angry citizens of Minnesota who were now ready to carry out the executions themselves, with or without the president’s approval. He had them go over the list again and this time to find anyone who committed a crime against civilians. This brought the total up to 39 warriors. One warrior was taken off the list to be hanged when it was proven he was ten miles away when the crime was committed. All those who were not executed were sent as prisoners to Davenport. Of those prisoners, between 30 and 60 had no charges against them.

There was a situation that occurred after the 1890 Wounded Knee Massacre where hundreds of Indian men, women, and children were slaughtered by the U.S. soldiers. In retaliation, a young Indian man shot and killed an army officer and was tried for murder. The warrior wanted to die for his people and to be remembered as a warrior. However, he was acquitted when the court ruled that a state of war existed at the time. The catch was that if a state of war did not exist, then all those Indians killed at Wounded Knee were actually murdered. That’s one of the reasons the Dakota War was said to be a conflict and not a war. We still call it a conflict. Since the Sisseton and Wahpeton bands were not involved in the war, they should not have been removed and exiled from their homeland. Not only were they removed, but as many of the Winnebago’s as they could round up were sent to Crow Creek in Dakota Territory as well. The Dakota bands had to
share their meager and putrid rations with the Winnebago at Crow Creek. The situation at Crow Creek is as horrific and unbelievable as you can imagine, yet all of it is true.

Over three hundred more Indians died at Crow Creek in about a three-year period from starvation and exposure. These were people who had essentially nothing to do with the war. This is how the Dakotas who stayed neutral and even saved white lives and sought ways to end the war were rewarded by the U.S. government. I hear comments ever now and then, like, “When are you people going to get over it and get on with life, we lost people too.” The difference is that the loss of innocent white lives gave them a world conglomerate in the grain industry with some of the richest and most fertile farm land in the nation.

The Indians will never forget because the wounds will never heal until the U.S. government makes a full apology and restoration of at least part of the land that they took. It’s like a wound I received as a result of foolishness whereby I lost partial use of my right arm and hand. The wound was deep, and they never repaired it, but only closed the flesh and skin on the outer surface. The loss of the arm’s total use prevented me from doing a lot of things and from playing my favorite sport of baseball; even though I taught myself to throw left-handed. The point is, I will never have the full use of the arm and I’m always aware that I’m not ever going to be what I wished I could be. Also, when I do certain things, I can still feel pain in my arm.

I think that’s the way it is with the Indian people. We have been deeply wounded, not only did we suffer physical harm, but everything we held dear and sacred, our land, language, way of life, and our heritage has been desecrated. We have an inherited inner grieving that some claim is the result of white intrusion. One white speculator once said to an Indian elder, “We have given you a better life, provided for your needs, and you’re still not satisfied; what else can be done?” To that the Indian replied, “You’re still here.” Others have said that, “We made treaties for the land, of which you agreed to.”

DL: What do you think about the treaties?

EL: Government treaties were nothing more than a way for the government to “legally steal” Indian land. They were written by people who used legal jargon that even an educated person would have a difficulty understanding. Add to that the fact that most Indians couldn’t even read or speak English and even if the government intended to keep their end of the bargain, it was difficult to know what that was. What was agreed on in negotiations was seldom the same as what was written on paper. The Pike’s Treaty, for instance, that resulted in the loss of the land base that Minneapolis and Saint Paul now sets on was originally supposed to be $200,000, but when it came time to close the deal, the price went down to $2,000, a few trinkets, and a lot of rum to celebrate.

Many of the Dakotas believed they had no obligation to conform to any treaty because in their traditional form of government decisions were made in councils by the people. The leaders had no authority to act apart from what was decided in their village councils. The United States’ government officials denied them their government rights.
and accepted the decisions of their spokesmen who normally had no authority to act on their own.

DL: Is it a good idea to commemorate the events of the mid 1800’s today?

EL: If it’s done right. But that’s a big if. To commemorate means to honor or celebrate an event. I don’t think there’s any way to celebrate a war whether in victory or in loss. It is said that a war creates three other armies; an army of cripples, an army of mourners, and an army of thieves. How can you commemorate anything like that? The best thing you can probably do is just to say “thank you” and let it go. The thank you is as much for you as for them. When you see a veteran with his legs missing, how can you express anything that would undo that? Soldiers don’t serve for celebrations and honors; they just do what they have to. For the most part, we serve an ungrateful country that makes judgments on matters they know nothing about. If there is anything in which earth, more than any other, resembles hell, it is its wars; so says Albert Barnes. War divides and separates the people, even biological brothers who willingly kill each other. That separation is solidified, but I guess there is a way.

DL: What is that way?

EL: It goes back to what I said about commonality. If we had more in common to share and believe in, there would be less to disagree with and separate us. This country is far too diversified over trivialities. For instance, a person goes to buy a car and his personal preference will be the color of the car. It could be red, black, white, yellow, or something in between. Under the hood, it’s the same engine and will perform equally well regardless of its outside color. Why is one better than the other? Or you could say, “I believe this way; but you believe another way, and my way is the right way, therefore you’re not quite where you should be.” As long as people are free to think, they will make up their own mind about what they want to believe. You can deceive them, brainwash them, degrade them, and marginalize them, but they will hold to their own beliefs if only to themselves.

One thing I learned about my Dakota elders is that if you asked for their advice, they will tell you what they believe. If you accept their advice then it’s over. If you don’t accept their advice, or disagree with it, it’s still over; they won’t go to any great lengths to prove their point. That’s because their point of view is based on a life-long experience. I was sitting with a young student having coffee while she was talking about a future marriage and concerned that it be a good, long-lasting union. Another elder came and set down with us and she asked him how she could have a good marriage. He just said simply, “I can’t tell you how to have a successful marriage, but I can tell you how to mess one up.” He had been married twice.

There are two situations where you can find a way to bring people together; one is to find some common ground, and the other is to establish a middle ground. A common ground is usually temporary and the middle ground more permanent. The common ground is usually created by a natural disaster or some strong binding common interest. A couple winters ago, we had a typical South Dakota winter storm that produced a power outage that lasted about nine days. The people pulled together and helped each
other and forgot their differences for at least the duration of the disaster. I heard a comment by one neighbor, “Why do we have to wait for a terrible disaster to treat each other this way?”

The other situation is the middle ground. It could be long-lasting or even permanent. The place where that could happen is in the churches and in the schools. Within these settings is an underlying common goal and purpose. If you could leave all your personal preferences and sentiments outside the school grounds and the church grounds, a good relationship could be formed. However, diversity is the focus of education and personal preference in religious beliefs keeps churches separate. So instead of a ground for reconciliation and mutual acceptance, it becomes more of a battleground for differences and less chance for any kind of unity.

Churches especially should form a permanent middle ground. Supposedly, we are all sinners by nature and in need of redemption; and in the Christian belief, according to the Bible, there is only one way to be reconciled to God and that is through His Son Jesus Christ. If that isn’t commonality, I don’t know what is. It took me 32 years to come to that point, but when I did, all things became new. I no longer feel like I was born with a curse because I was born Indian. If God chose to create me as an Indian, then it’s all right to be an Indian. If people can’t accept me as an Indian, then they have set their standards higher than God, Who created me and Indian.

DL: Thank you. (This ends the first interview with Dr. Elden Lawrence)
AL: This is Aimee LaBree with Elden Lawrence at the State of Minnesota Monument to the men, women, and children killed in Milford Township in 1862. Interviewer; Deborah Locke.

DL: We’re at the monument and I’m going to read for the record what the monument says. This was erected by the state in; we can check the date later, but I think it’s about 1930. And it shows a young woman standing in front of a cross that’s probably about, I’m guessing about fifteen feet tall. And it reads this: “Erected by the State of Minnesota in memory of the men, women and children of Milford who were massacred by the Indians, August 18, 1862.” And at the foot of the monument it reads: “Greater love hath no man than a man lay down his life for his friends.” We’re here with Dr. Elden Lawrence. Doctor, what is your impression of the language from this monument?

EL: I don’t find anything particularly offensive, but typically the language of the time. That is just my opinion, others might see it differently. I think the Scripture is a little out of context no one really laid down their life for anyone else. In fact, some of the men ran away and left their families to be killed or taken captive.

DL: Is the word “massacre” all right, or could that have been softened in any way, or is that what happened?

EL: Words like massacre, savage, and uprising are some of the standard terms use to describe Indians; even in our present day. It is discriminating and prejudicial; but is
generally accepted by both Indian and non-Indian. During the Wounded Knee occupation, those words were used constantly. But you never saw them used in recent school shootings and riots. They use words like mass killings or multiple murders, but never massacre.

DL: So that was the language of the era, and for a long time after.

EL: Yes, and it continues on in a sort of legendary context.

DL: Is this the sort of thing that you could—would you rewrite this if you had the opportunity, or let it stand?

EL: I always believe that history should be allowed to tell its own story. What's being revealed should represent the sentiments and mindset of that point in time. We do some injustice and misinterpretation of the events when we try to reason and contemplate historical events in our modern perspectives, especially when we allow our sentiments to control our thinking. We can’t change history by changing words and terms, however, there are always two-sides to every story. It’s like two people looking at a building from one side and not seeing it from the other side. Worse yet, the two people who see only their side of the building argue with each other about the size of the building and refuse to listen to the other person. All they need to do is to take a few steps to one side or the other and see both sides at once. But pride and arrogance prevent them from doing it. And so, ignorance continues.

DL: So you would not suggest that the state put up another explanation somewhere that says: this is the language of that period, take it at face value.

EL: I think some explanation is warranted, but rather than changing the wording I would leave it as it is because it expresses the mindset of the time and is a part of the history.

DL: So leave that alone and, but perhaps put something on the side here that says this—or just leave it all alone?

EL: If I was going to do anything, I would put up a plaque that tells the Dakotas side of the story. I would include the fact that this settlement, the Milford Township was situated on Indian land. The settlers encroached onto the reservation land and the federal government allowed them to stay and just re-drew the boundary lines without the Indian’s permission or even knowing about it. They were greatly angered about this and that was one reason the warriors targeted the settlement at the beginning of the war. That part of the history has not been told, but the Indians know about it.

DL: Because you’re right, this plaque doesn’t give us very much information.

EL: No. It doesn’t.

DL: What about this down here that I read into the tape recorder, “Greater love….” What do you think of that?

EL: I don’t know how well that fits in with the events here; most of what I read was about the killings that took place. That Scripture, which is John 15:13 describes the highest
form of love which is the love that was demonstrated by Christ when He died on the cross on our behalf. When I first read that, I thought not about the settlers, but about my great-grandfather and the handful of Christians who placed the lives of the innocent women and children before their own.

I thought about when Lorenzo stood between a group of warriors and his wagon in which he had the missionary and his family covered and was taking them to safety. By his act of bravery, they let him alone, not knowing what he had in the wagon. That is laying down his life for his friends. At one time there was a militant group, mostly from the urban areas that came to our reservation and tried to mobilize the Indians into something similar to the Wounded Knee situation. The white rednecks got together and there was a lot of name calling and “saber rattling” but nothing else. I have lived among white neighbors that have always treated us good. I asked my wife, “If anything happens I wonder what I would do?” She said, “I believe you would do just what your great-grandfather did.” I felt good about that.

DL: What is your impression of this site? How do you feel here? Any sensations here? Compare that it with the swimming pool at Mankato.

EL: I taught at Mankato State for two years and drove by this site many times without giving it much thought. Then I read about it in my research and stopped by for a closer look. It was then that the sensation came, that something very significant happened here on this site. I look at war in a different way. Soldiers expect to die—that’s what you go in for, that’s what you serve for, and you expect that. But when innocent lives are lost, just victims, there’s a greater sense of tragedy. Someone or ones, made some decisions or didn’t make some, and innocent women and children lost their lives.

DL: Many of the people, who were here, were lured to Minnesota because of advertising in Europe that told them there was free land and good opportunity. So they came without knowing an awful lot. Some Dakota would say they should have never been here in the first place. So on one hand you could call that a massacre; on the other hand, you could say, “Why were they here? They helped to increase genocide; they are the reason our way of life was depleted and eventually destroyed. They were in the land illegally.” Would you say that is an answer to what you said about innocence? Were they really innocent?

EL: I think they were innocent in the sense that they were told they could come here. They were not told about the indigenous people who lived here and that their way of life was totally the opposite from theirs. The Europeans were not here illegally so much as the land they were told to occupy was mostly illegally taken by the government and that most of the Indian people still believed the land was theirs. Just like the Milford Township that was illegally encroached on; if the government had went in and told the settlers they were on Indian land and that they had to move there might not have been a mass killing of the settlers. But, they were told to stay and that the line would be redrawn. If they had been told to move and decided to stay anyway, then they brought the consequences upon themselves; they would no longer be innocent. It was interesting that the warriors were told not to attack the immigrant settlements such as the Norwegian and Swedish colonies.
They respected the Dakota people and had good relations with them. One Swedish man said that if you were good to the Indians and showed them respect, they would be your friends forever. He went on to say that if you treated them right, they would remember that; and if you treated them wrong, they would remember that also. The warriors sent word to them to stay within their communities and they would be safe. If they tried to leave or join the Americans, they would be killed. The warriors even posted guards along their roads to assure that none of their warriors entered their home areas.

There were those whose innocence could be questioned. It was mostly the Americans who were taking advantage of the government’s ill-intended tactics and manipulations. Most of the Americans knew the Indians were being mistreated and unjustly dealt with; but did nothing to stop it or complain to the agent and government. It was white people that were doing it and it would take white people to put a stop to it. Indian people have been demonstrating and protesting since the 1960’s and it hasn’t done any good yet. All that does is unite the white people and divide the Indians. What changed Indian history was not the Indians, but the influential rich philanthropists on the East Coast who went to the leaders in Washington and demanded an investigation into the Indian situation that was taking place in the west. The Washington leaders didn’t respond because they had any compassion for the Indians, but because they wanted the support of people with money and influence so they could be re-elected.

DL: What you’ve just described are tremendous misunderstandings on both sides.

El: Yes. At the conclusion of one of my talks about Dakota history, I asked for any questions and an Indian lady responded in tears, “When do we get our revenge?” I said that I thought it was already happening. They ignored our consensus, decision-making government and now they can’t come together on anything; they tried and condemned over three hundred of our warriors in less than ten minutes each and now they can’t bring justice to a known, confessed killer in ten years. They took God out of the government and schools and now schools are one of most dangerous places for kids and it’s sickening to know about government corruption and immorality; and it’s just starting.

DL: Thank You