AL = Aimee LaBree  
Minnesota Historical Society

DL = Deborah Locke  
Minnesota Historical Society

RO = Raymond Owen

AL:  This is Aimee LaBree at the home of Raymond Owen, 2097 Frazier Street, Welch, Minnesota, on April 20, 2011.  Interviewer: Deborah Locke.

DL:  Could you spell your name for us please?


DL:  Do you have a nickname?

RO:  Not currently.  As a child, I think I was given the name, Gipp.  It was from George Gipp, the quarterback for Knute Rockne, the Notre Dame football...

DL:  How long were you known as Gipp?

RO:  Until my teenage years; 14, 15, or something like that.  Then I became a juvenile delinquent and they used Ray and Razor instead.  I would carry knives and smoked and [was] kind of a juvenile delinquent and it changed to Razor.

DL:  When and where were you born?
RO: Red Wing City Hospital; Red Wing, Minnesota, February 4, 1955.

DL: And the names of your parents?

RO: Amosapollus Owen and Ione Leola James Owen.

DL: Your grandparents on both sides?

RO: Arthur James and Mae Hoffman, and Amosapollus Owen, Sr., and Julia Williams.

DL: The names of your siblings?

RO: Brenda, Arthur, Linda, Michael, Clifford and Dwayne.

DL: How long have you lived in the community?

RO: Most of my life. I took off, probably from '82 to '85 in California, the Berkley Bay Area and went to school, Sociology, mostly to get my general credits.

DL: Are you an enrolled member of the community?

RO: Yes; the Prairie Island Dakota Community.

DL: Do you have family members on other reservations?

RO: No.

DL: Where did you go to school, starting with your earliest years?

RO: Here in Red Wing, Burnside Grade School, and then we went right to the Red Wing Central High School.

DL: Were there many Indian students at Red Wing?

RO: I think probably about 20 to 25. In the grades, I mean. I was held back in second grade and most of my [classmates] were a year ahead of me, so I was kind of the only one [the only Indian student] in one grade, so everyone was kind of staggered. But usually there was one or two in each grade.

DL: What kind of student were you?

RO: At first I was very open-minded and kind of wanting to learn. And then on July 10, 1964 I was electrocuted and paralyzed and [they] amputated a couple of my toes. I lost most of my memory, so I had to re-learn everything. Once I went back to grade school,
I had to start over, so I was kind of slow on the up-take; most of the things I had forgotten, or I didn’t make the connection.

DL: How did that occur?

RO: I was climbing a tree and there was a bare wire through it. It was an abandoned farm house, but the owner had taken the electricity off. They turned it back on without checking the wire. So [the wire was exposed] probably 20 years or something like that, and the tree grew right through the wire and I climbed the tree. My cousin and I were racing towards the tree and I automatically climbed up and reached for a branch and grabbed the bare wire. It pretty much zapped me.

DL: How old were you?

RO: Nine.

DL: It's a good thing you survived.

RO: Yes, I was electrocuted and then I was hung. It went through my shirt, the branch, and then it hung me through my neck. And then Fuller Flynn, the farmer that was on the land and was plowing the field, climbed up the tree and got me with a rake on the bottom of my jeans, and I fell three stories down to the ground. That must have resuscitated me.

DL: And your parents thought they lost a kid.

RO: My dad was there and the sheriff’s deputy -- I think it was Dale Grote. He was the sheriff later. As a teenager, he kind of kept an eye on me, especially when I was a delinquent. He did some of the [same] things in his youth, so he was more tolerant with me as a law enforcement [officer]. He kind of watched over me.

DL: So he watched over you...

RO: As a teenager, yes. He saw me out and fried. It [the electrical voltage] went in my right hand and came out my left arm in front, and then it arced back into my arm by my elbow, and came out my left knee, and then it came out my right foot.

DL: There has to be a special reason why you survived that.

RO: That’s what everybody says. Yes.

DL: What is one of your very earliest memories as a child; from the time you were really little?

RO: That’s it.
DL: Age nine?

RO: Yes. That’s where my memory started. I had to be re-told my history of who I was.

DL: As a little kid, or maybe after the age of nine, after that accident, did you think of the future and what you wanted to be?

RO: I think it was the 1964 Olympics. I remember my mom talking about Billy Mills, the Lakota from Pine Ridge. He had been pushed, and I guess he went down in the 10,000 meters or something like that, and he got up and came back and charged, and won the gold medal. He beat everybody in that 10,000 meter [race]. So Mom was always telling us about Billy Mills.

Then one year we went to Pine Ridge for a pow wow and he was there. I think he was with some United States Marines, and I think it was for the color guard or something like that. I met Billy Mills, and then I kind of understood what the Olympics were. [At that time,] they were still discussing what happened to Jim Thorpe, and the loss of his medals. So I played baseball and football and sports. Billy Mills was the first person I tried to emulate, I guess.

DL: You were interested in athletics at an early age.

RO: Yes. I could swim, run, hunt – everything.

DL: That leads to the next question: When you were a young child, what did you do after school? What did you do for fun?

RO: As a child, we made bows and arrows, mostly from ash. We’d cut the ash, let it season, split it, hone it and then try to bend it. You had to put it between trees and try to wet it and keep bending it. [For the bow string] we used to use turtle skins and roll it; so you keep wetting them and then roll and stretch it, and roll it and stretch it, and roll it and stretch it. So that would make the best bow strings.

DL: Turtle skins?

RO: Yes. You cut off the heads and arms. With the head you do real short cuts and circle all the way around the neck and then you can stretch it out. You get it wet and then you kind of stretch it and then let it dry, and then moisten it and keep stretching it. You get a pretty good size bow, for the ones we used as kids. And then the community here, to raise extra money, we used to make the hand drums – the coffee cans and you’d paste on a picture of an Indian on the can and then you’d put on the rubber top for drums. That’s what most of the people in the community did to raise funds. So I started collecting tires and inner tubes. Then I started making sling shots, so I didn’t need the bow and arrow anymore. So, hunting was part of that – to see how sharp you could get, following certain animals, recognizing tracks.
DL: Were you a good hunter?

RO: Oh yes.

DL: Still are?

RO: Oh yes. I gave it up to carry the sacred pipe, so it’s a pledge or commitment not to take life. So I had to give that up. But as a boy down here by the river -- my grandfather had a farm about 200, 300 yards from here. I used to run down there and get them water in their cream cans and help with chores. Then I’d run back over, past where the nuclear plant is now, and steal watermelons. They got a State Fair award for watermelons. I was kind of all over and athletic, running; then I got a bike and had to fix that all the time, changing the gears and chains and bearings. A lot of people throw away their bikes, and I used to fix them up and repack them with grease and the bikes were fine. So I was resourceful.

DL: What’s the first news story you remember from your childhood?

RO: I think it was Kennedy’s funeral. That was in ’63. That was one of the things I remember before I was electrocuted. But other than that, it’s pretty vague. During the funeral, my neighbor’s Labrador was beating up my beagle in the ditch and I went to break them up and the dog bit me. I was trying to get the lab off my arm while everybody in the house watched the Kennedy funeral. My neighbor, Jimmy Larson, beat the crap out of me for hitting his dog. [I thought] “This isn’t fair. The morning was tragic because of losing Kennedy so my getting bit by a dog didn’t count.”

DL: Your family must have had a TV set, then.

RO: Yes, we were one of the few families that had one. We didn’t get electricity down here until ’63, or something like that.

DL: Which relative or relatives had the most influence on you?

RO: I don’t think [of them] singularly. I think I took everybody for what they could share with me. Before I was electrocuted, what I’m told is that I was like a prince; I had like nine grandmas here.

My mom and dad and the others said that I was going to be special. Before my sister, Linda, was born my mom lost one in a stillbirth, between Arthur and Linda. They said that I was coming after Linda, but they didn’t even have Linda yet. So she was two years, probably three years old before I was born. The grandmas told my mom that I was not to be yelled at, or not to be spanked. So I was pretty much a brat – that’s kind of what I was told by my parents. I remember some of my grandmas after I was electrocuted. They were concerned about me. I had changed from being a spoiled rotten brat – getting my way, demanding it, and being really selfish. Then after I was
electrocuted they saw me change, in that I was more selfless. They wanted me to go out into the world and kick the world’s ass or something -- demand whatever I wanted. When I started coming out of it, I demonstrated more selfless [behavior]. I’d help Grandpa and Grandma with the chores, or fill the cream cans, or go do errands and go get milk or bread for somebody, ride my bike and stuff like that. So I became concerned for them and was no longer focused on myself and what my wants were. I became what everybody else was like.

So [I was most influenced by] a multitude of people, but mostly my mom. My mom had me up until age 14. I would reach 14 and then be taken away from her and my sisters and be given to my uncles and older cousins to be raised as a warrior to hunt and fish and cut wood and fix things. Pretty much up to that point, most of the females or women in my family were kind of distant, so I had to go to most of my male relatives to ask for advice, counsel. If my feelings got hurt they told me to shut up, deal with it, life’s hard; they were like, “Oh, okay, so boo hoo.” They pretty much molded me to not take things so serious and not to over-emotionalize some things and to move on.

DL: Did your family celebrate holidays?


DL: So you had trees and Easter baskets and flags and…

RO: Oh yes, absolutely. God Bless America and the whole “Father Knows Best,” and “Leave It to Beaver” family thing.

DL: Who taught you the most about being Dakota?

RO: I think that would be my community. Most of my grandfathers were pretty much gone and most of my grandmothers were aged and had health concerns. So it was pretty much a few of my aunts and a few of my uncles that enforced, or discussed with me roles, parameters, behavior, conduct. So I would stay within [the boundaries of] what’s expected as a Dakota warrior and what’s not acceptable. It was pretty much reinforced at the end of the day with my dad. He would sometimes yell at us to go to bed, not a peep out of you, and then we peeped and he’d crack up.

He had a strange sense of humor, but he was too in transition. He was recognized as the spiritual leader. He was trying to maintain the “Father Knows Best” media expectations of a family. And Dakota-wise it wasn’t [genuine] He was transitioning to bring out more of our culture and traditions and spirituality and stuff. So it was: pray at night, “Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep.” But he taught us in Dakota to not lay your head down and to not be apologetic for something, or to cross something that you couldn’t fix through restitution and reconciliation, so that if you wrong somebody today, you can right it tomorrow. So unless you’ve taken a human life with that anger, revenge, wrath, hate and stuff like that, that’s something that you can’t
fix. And that’s something that you lay your head down at night and go to sleep. So he was my dad, my Pops, or whatever; he had that side of him. But he was also kind of a tough guy too, so it was kind of scary. He was a 6th Division boxing champion in the Army, and after he got wounded and out of the service, he went through that post traumatic stress. They called it shell shock, so we kind of knew when to leave Dad alone, because he’d probably throw you up against the wall or something. By the time I reached 14 and went to my uncles and my older cousins, they said to leave him be; [former service men] have to work it out. So I got to watch him stress out and I wanted to be there for him because he was there for me as a kid, when I was exhausted and tired and reminded us about taking baths, brushing our teeth, washing, and all that stuff. But sometimes life doesn’t work that way.

DL: Your dad was respected, not only here in this community, but state-wide. He was known as a man of wisdom and brilliance, and someone with a really good heart.

RO: Yes.

DL: Did you realize that while you were growing up, that you were the son of someone who was quite special?

RO: Yes. He made the cannunpa, or Hollywood Peace Pipe. He explained that in Hollywood movies, they didn’t mention that a cannunpa comes from the White Buffalo Calf Woman and it’s the same as their Jesus the Messiah. Our [religious tradition is based on] 18 generations of keepers of that original pipe. Cannunpa is part of that sacred stone from where the White Buffalo Calf Woman had told us to receive the stone in Pipestone [Minnesota]. And that’s what they call the land around Pipestone -- sacred land. You have to be neutral there and you have to go to the three maidens and ask them (before you approach the sacred stone) -- you must ask for permission to come in to the three big boulders out in the middle of the prairie. And you feed them, and then the next day you can quarry, you can get stone. So Ojibwa and Arikaras [Hidatsa] and the other warring tribes [all know] that’s a neutral zone where you can’t spill blood, you can’t feel anger [when you] touch that stone.

DL: Who did your father teach the lessons of the Cannunpa to? Who asked about it and how did you bring it up?

RO: That’s what he was transitioning to an artist. He started making those [pipes] because he had the hands of a boxer and laborer and stuff -- he had such strength in his hands and he used to carve that pipe. The symmetry and the lines in the pipes that he made were almost perfect. I mean, from every angle, the way he drilled it; everything.

He cut it and filing it and sanded it, it was just like you can’t see any variations. He said there’s always a flaw in it because it’s done by man, and it’s the Creator's; the pipes belong to the White Buffalo Calf Woman. So if you pray with this pipe, then whatever you ask for will come true. So at the beginning, probably in the late ’60s, early ’70s, like
I said, he had done interviews and translations for the anthropology and archeology departments at the University of Minnesota and Hamline University and some of the others. He was asked about the pipe and Hollywood had already kind of gone off on it. So he sold – you’re not supposed to sell them – but he sold them. But that was before people knew what it was.

He was trying to bridge, or he was trying to show the people what the cannunpa is. So he had to start off on that end, where most of the people in our tribe wouldn’t go near that. The canli—or the tobacco that we used—the tobacco used was kind of private. So that’s what he said about the tobacco ceremony, the cannunpa, and that you have to do that and stand up for it. He was transitioning then and he started selling pipes, and once he started selling pipes, then they can see what he was talking about, that spirituality, that you have to atone for yourself. So anything that you do unto others, it does come back to you – restitution, recycling or whatever they call it. But he believed “you have to make it right.” So it was tough to watch him transition from tough guy into a kind of vulnerability; [witnessing this] not just as his son, but as a human being.

But he changed and he didn’t belong to us anymore. He started going away from us and started doing lectures. Most of his culture and traditions and things – he was leaving us. All we could do was wish him well and help support him.

So my mom and my siblings went off to Ireland and Hungary and different countries [with my dad] and people got to enjoy his wisdom. He could explain about being Dakota to the U.N. General Assembly and what it meant to have an ally. Dakota means ally. Dakota means somebody’s got your back, and that’s what he wanted to see – to be at the General Assembly and the opening for the United Nations. He was offered that, to come and say a prayer, he said, but we as Native people don’t have a seat at the United Nations. And when the United Nations recognizes what’s happened in our history and the treaty violations of all people, not just the Dakota, all tribes – once this building or this place recognizes and does the tribunals and gives that equality and fairness to all the people, then that will be a day that you can stand up at the podium. I’ve been offered [that opportunity] a couple of times. I did a prayer for the Minnesota State Legislature, and rather than pray, I just kind of gave a general prayer, but I wanted to sing a song, so I said, “God have pity on us.” And to the Speaker of the House I said, “Remember who you serve.” And that’s what my dad wants to do, or dreamed of for the United Nations.

DL: Just to be clear, cannunpa, that means…

RO: The sacred pipe.

DL: Did you learn about Dakota history while you were growing up?

RO: They spoke in Dakota, the Grandmas, and my aunts and uncles, and like I said, I lost my memory at nine. I mostly remember when the Grandmas spoke, they spoke female, so it’s mostly “ye” at the end of most of the expressions and stuff. So I was kind
of remembering some of the stuff the Grandmas would say. The Grandmas used to say “ye hechusni” [which means] “you can’t do that.” You’re supposed to say “do”, or the “o” at the end of it. As a male, you say the “o” at the end of it.

DL: [For females it’s] just “ay?”

RO: “Ye.” So for most of the females, you’d hear a lot of “ye, ye” -- all the Grandmas talking. That’s why I remembered some of the stuff. Grandma told me “hechusni” or “don’t even talk it.” I was asked not to speak Dakota. Mom and Dad at times would talk about some of the history and things like geography, and what Chief Wabasha and Chief Red Wing and most of the old elders did 100, 200, 300 years ago.

They called it Prairie Island because there were no trees here. It was a sand bar before they put a lock and dam here. They flooded it and kind of kept control of the river. But naturally nothing grew here, and in the spring it would flood and make all these little lakes with big sand bar. So nothing really grew down here until after 1930.

They [the elders] said that human beings weren’t allowed down here because this is a doorway and the people who come here will always come back. [The land] has to be washed off, the “magazu,” the rains, have to wash it off. That means we get some real powerful thunderstorms. Because we’re people of the water, that lightening will come and sometimes it will come after somebody and take a life. So that [island] has to be washed down; you do a water ceremony. And if you toss water in the air, within half an hour you’re going to get rained on, and you better run, because the lightening is coming for the one that threw the water in the air. As kids we were playing, with ice cubes and playing with the pump and washing our hair and goofing around, or swimming, and they would tell us not to throw water in the air. We started seeing that they’re not superstitions; things like that really do happen. They said back in the 1800’s that this is a place where God is raining on the warriors. Chief Wabasha’s war council was here. One of my nephews and I were talking about that -- I think Gideon Pond was describing that island north of Red Wing where the war council met, [and that was] right here at Prairie Island.

So the grandmas were talking in Dakota what my mom and dad [repeated] in broken English, explaining to us that we lived in a place that was the doorway to where people would come. So we always knew that there were people coming here, all tribes, all nations. It was kind of cool. We didn’t see [any new people], except they built a nuclear plant. They told us it was going to be a coal-burning plant until about a year into construction.

They said “Oh yeah, it’s going to be a nuclear plant.” “What’s a nuclear plant?”

So my father read the Encyclopedia Britannica and explained different kinds of radiation. He was genius, whatever his I.Q. was; he could do the math, explaining calculus and physics. I was like, “How do you know that?” He was like, “Well, math is just general circles and circles within circles. It’s all round. So eventually you have to
come back to the sum, or you can go backwards.” He said, “Well, that’s the only thing that’s international. That’s the only thing that anybody, women, men, any race – you can take somebody out and teach them math and they will see that [truth] unfold for themselves.”

He said, “All the other subjects -- they can corrupt and use and abuse knowledge, and when they control that knowledge you’ll be handicapped. So you have to be careful in who you listen to.”

DL: Were you raised with Dakota spirituality or religion, or whatever it’s called; or were you raised with Christianity?

RO: We were raised Episcopalian. My mom’s side of the family, I think my mom’s dad, Arthur James, was adopted in Santee, Nebraska and my grandmother on my mom’s side was part of the Episcopal Church here. So my mom was raised, not straight Episcopal, but my dad had worked with a lot of the church [staff] and was a deacon preacher. He filled in some, translating from Dakota to English. He was kind of the Dakota preacher and then the English [preacher]. We grew up with Christmas and Easter and all the holidays. [We were] baptized. We didn’t really know [traditional Dakota spirituality] until probably the late ’60s or early ’70s. What the grandmas had passed onto them, they passed onto us. Coming into the 70s and coming into my teens, I had started recognizing the transition back to the old ways. Generally everybody was going back to the old ways and what worked in community, family, health and spirituality was part of that. It’s everywhere. You don’t have to be in a church to pray. Especially down here, and in Vietnam; I think we had like ten or 15 community members in Vietnam. So I’m watching Walter Cronkite [on the news] and the death toll, “Today in Vietnam....” Everybody was just freaked out watching the 5:30 p.m. [news broadcast] and you’d watch the parents and all the aunts and all the relatives sitting in front of the T.V., waiting to see if one of ours got killed, one of ours got his legs blown off. [Maybe] the guy in front of [one of ours] got killed, but he got his legs shredded below the knees and they had to take his legs at the knees. And he was never the same.

DL: Would it be fair to say then, that the old ways, as you describe it, the old spirituality, the old Dakota ways could blend with the newer ways? You learned about the Christian faith, you were Episcopalian; your mom brought you up that way. So the two of them somehow can...

RO: They started melding, yes. Jesus wasn’t around – I mean, he probably was, and not to offend Christians, but we didn’t see him. Or, he wasn’t making a stop here. And we were watching the life expectancy and the pain, sickness, death and stuff like that. The Grandmas were dying one right after another. I think we lost like seven in one year. In 1969 I think we lost 20 of them; there was a funeral every week. And a few of them just went ugly. Where’s Jesus, you know? They had such a hard life and they fought and then at the end they just died. That’s not right. Then they wanted to do the traditional wake and they wanted viewing. My dad, with the elders, after everybody left,
did songs. I remember some of them; they were chanting and stuff like that. We were in a transition, kind of going back to the old way and just empowering ourselves to deal with death, loss, mourning, grief, whatever – that was part of that. They were the ones, the elders were the ones that were saying we had to go back the other way because we couldn’t live like we were living, we couldn’t survive like that; we had to go back. In order to go forward, we had to go back to our old ways.

DL: So, going back to the old ways, did it make a difference then?

RO: Oh yes, I mean – I’m sorry, where were you from?

DL: Fond du Lac [Reservation].

RO: Fond du Lac. Most of the Ojibwa tribes got all the funding for housing, water, The BIA divided us. They said, “You have to keep up the Chippewa wars. If you guys want funding, you guys have to get mad at the Chippewa, not us.”

We said “You’re the BIA, this is the funding, this belongs to everybody.”

And they were like, “You have to take it up with them.”

Then my dad just crossed the [metaphorical] bridge and went to Roger Jourdain [Red Lake Nation, northern Minnesota] and the guys up there and was told, “Oh no, these guys, they’re playing divide and conquer and they’re pitting us against each other.” So dad and Roger Jourdain and the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe backed the BIA into a corner and made them accountable. That’s when we got most of the housing and stuff like that. Most of the funding [hinged on] sit up and beg, roll over. And then [Dad and others] said, “No more, we’re not doing that no more.” That’s when the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe and the Minnesota Sioux tribe met at the Mille Lacs Reservation and in Duluth, had morning prayers and a tobacco ceremony and [asked others to] join us. And some responded by saying, “You guys are worshiping Satan.” And we were like, “No, no we’re not.” You can’t change your mind if you’re that narrow-minded. We were empowering ourselves.

DL: The Ojibwa said you were worshiping Satan?

RO: No. The BIA, you know, the guys that wanted to keep us separate. We said: "No, we’re not separate, we’re the same. We’re relatives." [Later] they were all at one of the bars up there, all arm-in-arm, an Ojibwa, a Dakota, Ojibwa, Dakota, Ojibwa. And they were asking “Hey, why is the BIA guy running like that down the street. He doesn’t want anything to do with us.”

DL: Do you have a Dakota name, and can you tell us who gave it to you and what it means?
RO: My name is Many Stars. My daughter said “Mini Stars,” she thought it was “Mini” for years. I said, no, Many – Many Stars. But my dad named me when I picked up the cannunpa when I left California, and he said, “Are you ready to pick up the pipe?”

And I said, “Yes.” I left alcohol, drugs, all that stuff. And he said, “They’ve had this name for you since you were born.” And the ceremony we went through, it’s like it just happened five minutes ago. A presence came [up] to my face and it was kind of like the hair standing on end and you get the goose bumps. [I noticed] one of those grandparents kind of – that smell, or that musk – the way old folks smell, Ben Gay stuff. [The presence] stood in front of me and told me, "I’d been waiting for you to do this." So it was his name and he gave it to me. Thomas Williams was my grandmother, Julia’s dad. He came to give me the name. He said, “When you use this, make sure you put Hoksila, or Boy at the end of it, in case the Creator mixes us up.” So for the Dakota language speakers, the spelling is the same as Graves, and because I had buried so many of my relatives, I identify more with Wicahapiota (Many Graves). So I don’t feel like I’m qualified to carry the name, Many Stars, but only after I pass will I know for sure.

When I was electrocuted I entered a tunnel and saw the other side, that peace, that warmth, that joy, and I felt goose bumps. There’s love over there. It’s easy to quit and go watch my grandmas, and now I’m having to do Last Rites and funerals for people, and that’s beautiful. I know what’s over there. And I ask them sometimes to come and stand with me, or show themselves to the family, or give them condolences and make sure that they know that you’re safe. The birds and things just happen. So that’s why I kind of identify more with Many Graves than Many Stars.

DL: Did you ever hear of the 1862 US-Dakota War during your growing up years?

RO: Oh yes, before I was electrocuted, I remember bits and pieces. Governor Al Quie came down in July of ’62, and my dad and some of the elders – Noah White and some Winnebago singers and dancers, and I think a few others, brought down a cover unit. I think they were going to re-enact the 1862 [War]. We had pow-wow grounds and they had horses and all that, off the ball field. I remember some bits and pieces. One of the [white] boys about my age, seven, eight years old, watched for the horses. We were the same age and everything, but he had that racial superiority, so I used my two cousins to distract him, and I went into the corral and slapped his horses.

And I said, “Let’s go over to the community center.” So as they were walking by and stuff, they were kind of [friendly and said] “Hi.” They were waving; a boy jumped off the gate and started to follow my cousins. So I walked around the back and kind of went in there and slapped the horses. I think I opened the gate. I don’t know if I dreamt that, or I don’t know how that came about. But I remember horses, especially in South Dakota; you just jump on, bare-back, just jump and go. But he was supposed to watch the horses. We were the same age and everything, but he had that racial superiority, so I used my two cousins to distract him, and I went into the corral and slapped his horses.
In the Dakota way, it’s called uhku, or I stole your horses and there’s nothing you can do about it. My dad was upset and proud of me at the same time. He said “You could have been hurt.” And Mom was, “Oh my God.” Dad and my uncles were kind of like, “That’s the way, now you can wear the feathers.” I think there were like 20 to 25 horses in there. Maybe I’m exaggerating, but I remember a lot of horses and what they had brought [to the reenactment]. Governor Al Quie and everybody were like: “Oh, ah, remember the frontier days.” And I said, “Well, they weren’t very frontier for us.” Like I said, that [happened] two years before I was electrocuted. There were little blips [of memory] here and there, but I remember being in the corral, slapping those horses, going, “Hyah!”

DL: Do you have family members who lived through that time, the 1860’s?

RO: My grandmas when I was growing up, but that’s like I said, up until ’64, I don’t remember too much of what they said.

DL: Are you related to any of the chiefs or other important people from that time, or the 38 that were hung?

RO: I think we had a couple of relatives that were hung. On Dad’s side were the Williams, Grandma Julia and Thomas Williams. I think they were Chief Wabasha’s siblings. So the Indian Agent at the time, that’s how they took on the Williams’ [name], -- one of the people that was exploring and were trying to develop a language, him and Riggs and a couple of others, but that’s how they just took the name Williams; just for easy sake.

DL: Instead of Wabasha [as a name]

RO: Yes. It was just kind of one name – your Indian name, or your status as a chief is [determined] by how much you serve the people. And Wabasha is the only one that is hereditary. Everybody else, you have to put up your own; you can’t walk in the shadow of your father or your uncle, or anybody else. You have to earn it yourself; there’s no free pass. Chief Wabasha had the hereditary chieftainship; he’s the one that pretty much validated or nullified any of your work or any of your status. He could either approve it or disapprove it.

DL: That would make Chief Wabasha your great-great-great uncle.

RO: Something like that, on my dad’s side. And then like I said, my mom’s side was pretty much the ones on the Santee side, the ones that were deposed or ejected. The mass execution in Mankato pretty much sent everybody wandering into the desert for forty years.

RO: Most of [my mother’s family] were from Lower Brule and Santee, up through Sisseton. One of our grandmas, my “unci tanka” [great grandmother] used to come back. She came back here and homesteaded in the 1880’s, so she pretty much got
verbally abused and called names and stuff like that, but she didn’t care, [saying] “It’s not the names you call me; it’s what I answer to.” They came back here kind of boshdata – like a standing rock, saying I’m here, that’s it, and if you don’t like it, too bad.

DL: So they were driven out and they came back.

RO: Yes.

DL: The resistance was from whom, other Dakota, or from non-Indians?

RO: Yes, non-Indians [who called the Dakota], “You savages. You are evil-doers, weapons of mass destruction.” Making it up that we stole their land [laughter].

DL: Can you tell us anything about the aftermath of the war and the scattering of the Dakota people; I think you just did. That your mother’s side of the family was pretty well scattered, but came back.

RO: Yes.

DL: Did the war have a direct impact on you and your family? Well, maybe you just answered that one too.

RO: Well, yes. Whitney White, as a little girl, was part of the community and her dad was kind of absent, so I stepped in as her uncle, her dad/uncle. But when she got old enough to finish high school and go to college, we encouraged her, and her other uncles and her other aunts asked her to start picking up this history and what it means to our community here. Who was Red Wing and Barn Bluff? Where was “Hebinica” the Dakota village? Memorial Park was over there, yes, you can see it forever, so that’s where they [the Dakota] sent smoke signals; you used the pine pitch to make black smoke, and you used the okra – different things for red, then yellow, different plants for green. So it was like a flag on top of Barn’s Bluff. That was where Chief Wabasha and Chief Red Wing had the place for people to come, and so the first people that came here were Father Louis Hennepin and Le Sueur, the French explorers and there’s supposed to be a French fort here. Every summer the anthropologists and archeologists run around the island trying to find it. It’s in the water, dudes, because the water came up in 1933, so it’s IN the water. You’re not going to find it on the land because it’s in the water by the marina, and by now, most of it’s washed away because they flooded it.

So when Whitney decided to do this, she asked me to interview. So I was impacted by my relatives to talk, even if it offended people, even if it caused bad feelings. But I hope there are others that can maybe not edit everything I say into a sing-song verse, but more of a: history full of trial and tribulations. And my history is [trials and tribulations]. I’ve been taken out of context a lot of times by TV interviews. A lot of people have asked me to talk, whereas the question and answer period comes up and they try to tell me my history and I just would pretty much rather punch them in the face.
RO: I grew up as a juvenile delinquent; I wasn’t accepted, and the racism that I experienced was – I’d rather die on my feet than live life on my knees. So all the poets, Che Guevara and people like that, people that I admire [had an influence]. I started growing my hair long, thinking you can beat me, but you ain’t going to beat me. I don’t care because these stories, these things, we the people here, we’re about five left, and if I’m gone and if the other four are gone, that’s it – we cease to exist. If nobody knows the history or talks, no oral traditions, nothing, then it’s gone. Whitney asked me to do this [interview with the Minnesota Historical Society] and I said yes because she’s my niece and I’ll honor her. She asked, “Uncle, can you do this interview?” “I will. I’ll try to be nice.”

DL: Aimee and I appreciate this very much.

RO: Yes.

DL: You mentioned the racism, and I didn’t ask this earlier, but when did you first meet with that? Were you at school?

RO: Probably after I was electrocuted. I went back to school in September and David Golden became one of my friends. He was from Oklahoma and he grew up with “you” people. I said, “What?”

“Well, I grew up with you people. I’ve seen you people.”
I said, “What? What do you mean, you people?”
He started calling us the “N-word,” he started calling me “nigger.”
And I said, “Are you kidding me? I don’t even know black [people] – what are you talking about?”
“You darkies; you’re all the same.”
He’s from Oklahoma. And I said, “Let’s go to it.”
We started to fight and rolled around on the playground; we went at it probably once or twice a week, and there were people on his side and there were people on my side. And they were people I grew up with and had been a part of their life, but they agreed with him. He was an idiot, and people that were on his side came over to my side. And just seeing that racism go back and forth. Then the teachers would pull us apart. The principal of Burnside School was John Quist – anyway, he was at Sunnyside and different schools. He had separated us and said, “What’d you do now, Ray?”

And then they’d always play the victim, “He hit me and I was just standing there.” The verbal assaults that I took... I was the bad guy. I was the one for reacting and John gave me detention, and said “You’re right Ray, but that’s wrong. That’s the wrong way of doing it. You can’t fight that with violence.” That’s when the civil rights movement started, you know, Martin Luther King. My dad was talking about what Martin Luther King and the civil rights workers were doing. And nonviolence was what Mahatma Gandhi had done in Africa and India. So a lot of the people that he was talking to were combating racism. He preached silent protest and that nonviolence. And as a grade-
schooler I had seen people in stores who were told “people don’t want your kind in here – go somewhere else.” Like the fountain or bathroom, you can’t use. Colored Only or Whites Only. And you go to the doctor and some of the nurses wouldn’t take your temperature if you were sick, because you were Indian. Then Mom was like, “You just have to get through it.” I was, “I’m NOT going to get through it. I’m not.”

So by the time I got to high school and had become a juvenile delinquent, that’s when [sounds like] Pete Patrick would say, “What’d you do now, Ray?” And I think it was Gideon Pond, or one of the books that said the Dakotas were heathen, savage, dirty, stealing, rotten, stinking – and I’m supposed to write a book report on that. And I said, “No!” And my civics teacher said, “You have to write a page on what it said in the book.” And it’s like, “No way!” About the third time I threw it, so he kicked me out of class. I went to the principal’s office.

“What’d you do now?”
I said, “Here, read this.”
He said, “Yeah, so?”
I said, “That’s me and my grandmothers, my family and our culture. It doesn’t say anything – this is only from one white man’s view, and you turn around and you discredit and you erase everybody else; me too. You’re not erasing me.”
And so he said, “Well, you have to go back to the class.”
I said, “I’m not going back to the class. You’re going to have to flunk me or something.”
He said, “No, you have to do this.”
And then the principal about lost his mind. And Pete Patrick was the vice principal and the basketball coach and kind of the vo-tech guy, woodshop, and he’d hit you on the head with a board.

He was pretty tough, but he was like, “Ray, you’re one crazy dude. You’re one crazy guy. You’re not afraid to die, you’re not afraid to get beat up. You’re not afraid?”
I said, “No.”
He said, “Are you going in the military?”
“Yeah, I’m going to go in the Army as soon as I can.”
He’s like, “to kill those foreigners?”
I said, “No, because I get to kill people. I get a government issue to go kill people and get my ounce of blood… to go get some kills in me.”
He said, “That’s not the way the path works sometimes.”

And it didn’t, man. I went to sign up for the army and they don’t take amputees. Marines came down twice to recruit me; I’m an expert marksman and sniper and was told “Nope, you can’t. You’ll hold up the platoon if you get any kind of infections and stuff.” So I [tried to join] the Coast Guard and they didn’t want me either. So I was signing up for the Merchant Marines and Mom and Dad didn’t want me sailing around the earth because I wouldn’t come back. So with the racism, I wanted to get the hell out of here.

DL: You ended up at Berkeley.
RO: Once I finished my four years [of high school] I did Berkeley. The girl I was dating at the time, she was going to med school and she was from New York – her mom was from New York and her dad was from Fort Totten [ND]. So she needed some of the Indian scholarship money, she wanted to find out who she was, and her history and stuff. And then when she found out, she was looking at Stanford or Berkeley for her pre-meds. So I was filling out paperwork too, for Pell Grants and stuff. I saw that at the Boalt Law School in Berkley, you didn’t need a diploma or anything, as long as you could do the work. So I was researching the Boalt Law School, then she said she was going to Berkley and I said, “Let’s go.”

So I got out there and was trying to get some of my paperwork [done]. She had her paperwork already turned in, but I still hadn’t applied yet. And then once we got there, she got out of her car and got her pamphlet and all her classes and all her stuff and her housing and everything else, she goes, “I know where I’m staying; I don’t know where you’re staying.”

And I went, “What?” It was like: too bad for you. I walked across the street and walked down Telegraph Avenue and was just ready to turn the corner and this guy was running up behind me and goes, “Hey Owens.”

I said, “What’s up?”
“Need a job?”
I said, “What you got?”
“Demolition.”
“Is it union?”
He said, “No, man, it’s off the book, man; cash daily.”
I said, “Where are you working?”
He said, “We’re ripping out this book store. Do you know how to swing a hammer?”
I said, “Come on.”
He said, “Come on, let’s go meet the boss.”
We walked into [the bookstore] and they were tearing it up with those hammers, sledge hammers, knocking down that plaster.
So I went back there and he said, “Yeah, if you can swing a hammer.”
So I said, “Okay, I’ll report tomorrow morning.”

So I went there the next day and I started getting handfuls of cash. And then she went, “Want to be friends again?” I said, “nah.”

One day I came home from work and was just covered with dirt and plaster, and I was gonna try to go up to the dorm where she was, and wash some of my clothes, and this Ojibwa kid from Michigan walked by.
He said, “Where are you from?”
I said, “Minneapolis.”
He said, “You’re living in your car?”
I said, “I’m just living, but check me next week and I’ll probably be up in a suite somewhere.
And he said, “Come on in and we’ll drink some coffee.”
Here he was going to the Boalt Law School. He had graduated early from high school and then he graduated early from Dartmouth and he was one of those advanced kids, but he didn’t know his culture. So I was kind of like his big brother, schooling him on some of the ghetto stuff, how the res works. He introduced me to some of the Boalt Native law students and he showed me some of the curriculum, and he said, “Man, you can do this.” I threw down that yellow legal tablet and was writing down the chapter that and he said, “I can’t read this.”

I said, “What?”

He said, “It’s like dyslexia or something; I can’t read it.”

And I read it back to him and he was like, “Yeah, but your i’s and your e’s are turned around.”

And I looked at it and I said, “But this is Dakota. The “I” and the “e” sounds are turned around.”

And he said, “It’s dyslexia; I can’t read this.”

So I said, “I have to take a class in English to get it turned around again.”

So that’s when I said, “Well, maybe law school’s not for me.”

That’s when I went to Contra Costa Community College and met Lee Brightman, one of the first Native activists that took over Mount Rushmore and Alcatraz. He was my professor. So I was: uh-oh, this isn’t good. He validated everything I was saying, and everything he was saying was just like, everything was connected. And it’s like, this is more than all my relations, man; this is all the wheels and cogs locking up. Even though I’m up against it, or poor, or alone, that’s not it, and for the sake of our history and culture and language, spirituality, all these wheels are going to align. We’re going to put them back together.

DL: Is that what happened?

RO: Yes.

RO: That’s when my dad asked me if I would pick up the pipe and start helping the people. My girlfriend at the time was dating somebody else and I didn’t know it until he [the other man] called. So I confronted her on it and she accused me of being insecure and jealous. So I said okay. And she said, “Go on back to that reservation. All you’re going to be is a poor reservation Indian.” And I said, “Yeah, but I’m going to be wealthier than you’ll ever know.”

DL: And you gave up drinking and drugs.

RO: Yes. I left a six-pack of Miller High Life on the kitchen table in Berkeley.

DL: And that was it.

RO: That’s it. Got on the airplane and my sister bumped up my ticket to first class. The flight attendant walked up and said, “Would you like some champagne?” I said, “No thank you.” And she said, “It’s free.” I said, “I don’t drink.” And that was at 35,000
feet in the air, I was flying that high and I said, "Nope, I'm never going to get that high again."

DL: You quit cold turkey. Not many can do that.

RO: Yes. That was just it.

DL: Have you ever been to Mankato to the execution site?

RO: Oh yes. Back in '72 with my dad, mom and Uncle Wally, Aunt Gertrude, Blanche [sounds like] White, I think Cecilia Childs, I think, let's see, '72...

DL: What was it, a family reunion?

RO: No, a kind of a mini pow-wow. At Mankato State they had some kind of gathering and a lot of the Twin City Natives were going down there, and it was a protest. I just seen the protesting students coming from the campus. They were going downtown and surrounded [the area] where the library is now -- they had, down on Front Street -- they had that little plaque: "On this site Indians were killed or hung." And then a bunch of [people were] chanting and yelling and screaming and stuff like that.

DL: Who was protesting what?

RO: The students, that it was the hanging site.

DL: The students were protesting the site?

RO: Something like that. I didn't care, there were girls. What did I care? [Laughter] College girls, at that.

DL: Ray, did you even know where you were...

RO: Yes. I had to drive Mom and Dad. I got my permit, so I had to drive for Mom and Dad, so I started on the road to Minneapolis, downtown, BIA and all the meetings for Dad. Dad couldn't see; he got like that white line fever, like five miles and he'd start nodding off so I had to drive him back and forth to South Dakota a lot.

DL: I would guess that your parents would understand the significance of this place.

RO: Yes.

DL: Did they talk about their reaction to it? I mean, you're busy looking for girlfriends; what were they there for?

RO: Yes, like I said, they were kind of vague about it, but they gave us a general review that they were looking at changing the history of Mankato and what happened there.
They were talking atrocities, and I really didn’t care, but I kind of understood what they were doing. And Dad was meeting with the Mankato Chamber of Commerce and a few people in the Kiwanis Club – they were thinking about doing a pow-wow down there in September. So this must have been April or May, or something like that. And that’s when we went to the Key City Ballpark in Mankato for the first pow-wow on Friday night. And my dad and Harvey Davenport and Noah White, the Winnebago, and a couple of the Ojibwa and some of the Dakotas were asked to be there, so a few of them were at the ballpark on Friday night, and there were probably about ten of them: Mom and Dad, Uncle Wally, Aunt Gertrude, Blanche and Noah, Norm and Nita Crooks from Shakopee, Ernest and Vernell Wabasha from the Twin Cities. So there were probably about ten of them and they were kind of like, "Where is everybody?" On Friday night the pow-wow was about ready to get started and there was nobody showing up except a couple of tents in the outfield. So, oh boy, this is going to be bad. At about midnight, I had my brothers; they were two years younger than me, so …

DL: And you were 16.

RO: Yes, 16, 17. And they were like 15, 14. So my Uncle Wally was on security, and he had done security and army stuff, MP stuff, so he was kind of telling me, just watch it and then report, don’t confront anyone, especially down here because things could go real bad, real quick. And then from midnight on we were kind of standing up and kind of looking over the city of Mankato going, "What are we doing here?" And then it must have been around closing time, 1:00 or something like that, there were a couple of cars that went through the back of the ball field there, and they came back and were in-between the ball field and the mall, that Key City Mall. They started that "woo, woo, woo," whooping and hollering and saying, "Let’s hang some Indians." [I thought] oh crap, here we go, and all I had was my little brother and one of my cousins.

And so we went down by the gate and they were kind of parked over there drinking and talking trash. [I decided] if they’re going to hang a 39th, it might as well be me. So I said, "If they kill me, or if they take me, you tell Mom and Dad and you tell the people," just to make sure that they didn’t get anybody else. So that’s why I went down by the gate and my brothers and all them were standing there with sticks. I said, “You guys just run for it,” and I went out the gate and those two cars had college kids and they were just goofing off, just talking trash, but I walked out there to meet them, “Kill me first.”

They said, “Naw, get out of here.”

And they jumped in the car and left. But my heart was up in my throat. I thought, I’m going to die, if I gotta die, so be it. Then I kind of understood what Mankato was about.

DL: Have you ever been to Fort Ridgely?

RO: A couple of ceremonies, a couple of pow-wows, retreats; historical stuff. Used to drive Dad there and he used to do invocations and stuff, welcoming and greeting. I went a few times as a singer and a dancer.
DL: How about Birch Coulee?

RO: Yes, went there as a singer, dancer. I used to do the sweats in the morning, or a ground blessing.

DL: Lower Sioux Agency?

RO: Yes; same thing.

DL: Upper Sioux?

RO: Yes.

DL: Traverse de Sioux?

RO: Yes.

DL: How about the Sibley House in Saint Paul?

RO: I'm not sure; I don't think so.

DL: It's down by Mendota.

RO: I don't think…

DL: Fort Snelling?

RO: Yes.

DL: Any thoughts on Fort Snelling?

RO: Kind of like Nazi Germany's oven house, Auschwitz. It wasn't a place of brotherhood and unity and sharing. Not our idea of Dakota. They had a bent sense of purpose, colonization and forced religion, racism. I did the plaque down in the park down below.

DL: We've seen that.

RO: My brother, Clifford, shaped it; he and I did the inscription.

DL: That's beautiful; we've seen it.

RO: Dad asked us to do that for the Dakota people. It's a piece of stone, so it's a sacred piece of stone. And that's one of the places where people will get a different understanding of history.
DL: Right there on that spot.

DL: Overlooking the camp.

RO: Yes. [Governor] Rudy Perpich signed the declaration and proclamation and said, so be it.

DL: Have you been to Camp Release?

RO: No.

DL: Wood Lake, where the battle was held?

RO: No.

DL: New Ulm?

RO: I drove through there; I had a couple of girlfriends out there.

DL: Camp Cold Water?

RO: No.

DL: What is your opinion of the war?

RO: 1862? I think it was just divide and conquer. The general war plan was to create a verbal enemy; kind of what we're doing with weapons of mass destruction in Afghanistan and Pakistan, searching for Osama Bin Laden and stuff. You have to create a monster, you have to create a villain so the simpletons can chase a rationalized excuse and discover new forms of minerals in the Bora-Bora Mountains -- you have to send troops in. And you wonder why we have stations in Uzbekistan and Karzeghistan; do you think we're over there because some guy is hiding in a cave? This is the same thing they said when they tried to sell 1862. There's the game plan and they [the Dakota] are not following it.

DL: What's your understanding of that war? What started it, or what different things started it?

RO: It was a misunderstanding. I mean, most of the racism that existed at the time was [due to] intolerance. Most of the people who came to this country were searching for that freedom, liberty, equality, justice, but there were also people like the carpetbaggers that exploited the South afterward – profiteers. They don't care about humanity. They're zombies, they're the walking dead. Their profit margin – same as today – Wall Street and the oil prices, they're jacking it up, speculation, and then they tell us we can't have a casino. Hey, you guys got Wall Street, man. Bernie Madoff [made off] with your money and the 20% return on your money. Did you not think he was going to take your
money? That’s what we tell people; it’s entertainment, take your chances. But we’re the bad guys? Are you going to have a state-run casino? That’s the worst thing you could possibly do in a civilization. The state of Minnesota didn’t help us out economically, they didn’t recognize our treaty and our agreements as living in balance and equality, and they distorted [the truth] – the profiteers want to gouge, it’s just greed; flat out greed.

DL: Did anybody really win that war?

RO: No. They’re still not winning it today. I mean, the interview here greatly helps, but I don’t know if anybody’s going to listen to me. Most of my nephews sometimes tell me that I gotta write a book, or I gotta talk more. I said I got time off to raise a family. I pledged when I was 15 and the archeologists came down to dig up my grandmother to see what she was buried with; [I said to them] you’ve gotta go through me first. I took a baseball bat to their anthropologist: “Get the hell out of here.” They were offended that I was defending the dead. Most of the people, the old guys that had that white superiority and righteous and "We’re the gods," and stuff like that; they’re all dead now. And people that are more cultured, more educated, more understanding, those are the ones that are taking over anthropology and archeology. They understand that there’s more to it than just a simple, academic, lineal education. You have to be secular. Your experience has to meet with your environment. That’s what Dad was teaching.

DL: What do you think about the treaties?

RO: I think originally the treaty council was like today, it was those that are experienced, or have that right or permission from the tribal members to discuss and to talk about the situation or circumstances, and not to make any agreements, or not to make any contracts with those that want to deal wrongly with our tribe, with our community, or the environment. And I just met with the Tribal Council here last week, and they’re discussing the ceremonies in Sundance, and they thought we were asking them for permission. They are [employed] on a two-year election [basis]; it’s like [they think that they are] the people and they’re doing this for you. Obviously they don’t understand. They come to the ceremony. We’re not going to force ceremony on anybody, but it’s not up to them [to decide on Sundance ceremonies]. This earth belongs to us. What we’re doing is honoring and praying and making this contract with the earth. Your relatives already signed it; your people already signed it. Your people spilled blood for it. The people that came before you are in the ground; that’s why we’re doing this, to make it right.

Yushutape. Fix it. Straighten it out. Fix it. But don’t sit there and hide behind your desk and make plans and contracts for me. You don’t speak for me. I am tunweya; I am the guardian down here. My grandmas told me, my aunts and uncles, my cousins, and now my nieces and nephews. They’re the ones that say it. That’s why I wear that black beret. It’s like that’s the buffalo tail. I am generous and compassionate, I am understanding, I’m all the virtues and values and principles, but if you step outside of the boundary, I’ll tell you where to get back in the circle. Otherwise, you don’t decide for
me, and you don’t write no treaties, you don’t write no paper for me. If I’m doing my job, you do your job. But if the people ask you to negotiate this, ask for permission and be resourceful. Now you can use an iPod, now you can use a laptop, you can find out anything you want from the Historical Society and the archives at D.C. So my nephews, I asked them to research Ruth Dinsmore’s recordings of Dakota songs, and I asked our Dakota language speakers to translate them. These are the old songs; it’s not a lineal, academic song. It’s a secular song. This tune must be sung with the trees, with the earth, with the water. It cannot be sung eeny, meeny, miny, moe; it can’t be sung any other way but how you feel where you are.

DL: Any thoughts on the early treaties; 1851, 1858?

RO: Dad was talking about the 1805. He was always talking about the 1805 treaty and Zebulon Pike and some of the earlier treaties. [He said] that the people that decided, or negotiated, or signed the treaties weren’t qualified. They were given whiskey and shiny beads and told to sign here. And so they were distorted and they did it for selfish reasons, not selfless. That’s what Dad was talking about with most of the 1805 treaty, and even with the British, further back. That’s why he said they were never supposed to come across the Mississippi. Those that did are on our land – that’s what he felt.

Even today, you live in the United States of Dakota – North Dakota, South Dakota, this is East Dakota. Montana and Wyoming are West Dakota, and Canada and Manitoba and Saskatchewan is Northern, Northern Dakota. Nebraska and down in Colorado was Southern, Southern Dakota. So all of this is Dakota Territory. And we gave up the Wisconsin, Michigan area so we could stay on this side of the Mississippi. So we still kind of honor that; I do, anyway. But that’s what Dad told me, to recognize the early treaty – not the later ones. They were corrupt.

DL: Do you think it’s a good idea to commemorate the events of the mid 1800’s?

RO: Um. Yes, I think so. I mean, I was contemplating yes or no. In sociology you have to examine the field study or the circumstances and try to find something common or similar to today and try to match them up. But the history that happened here, and what our gangster youth is going through, that detachment, they understand that, and that dehumanization, it’s not just racism anymore. It’s economics, it’s abandonment, single parents, diet – it’s everything. So that’s even more important that they understand the history. The leadership has to look at everything. I mean, the ones that want a chicken in every pot, and no new taxes, and kiss babies, the politicians, they’re corrupt. You should recognize it when they hold their hand up; they’re corrupt. They’re doing it for themselves. And the leadership, the language, the historians and the people, Whitney and the people that are doing this, have to recognize the 1800’s because that’s in fragment. We can renew it, it’s not gone, it’s not academic lineal gone. I’m living proof, I’m talking to you, I’m sitting in my house, my teepee. My Catholic priest friend, he designed this as a square teepee here, elongated. But if you drive in, there’s three arrows pointing up, of the bdewaketo, kioksaka, and hamanichube. That’s what my teepees recognize, three arrows pointing up. I will give you coffee and I will talk with
you, but you don’t have to take my word for it. You can talk to anybody else to see if
what I say makes sense or actually has any kind of validation.

DL: What’s the best way to commemorate those events from that time?

RO: It’s getting – no, because it’s pretty hard for the youth today to understand it. I
mean, back then – I don’t know if it’s cyber, or just their access to computer information,
that they take it for granted that they don’t have to research like we did. They don’t
have to wait for somebody to mail them something; waiting for mail for information to
come from D.C., or from any of the organizations. I think that my nieces and nephews, I
asked them probably five years ago to develop websites to have educational and
historical dates, things like that, for those questioning. And most of them that question
their heritage, they’re not from here, they weren’t born here, they don’t live here. And
the ones that are from here are down here; they could care less. I mean, how do you
connect them, and then the ones that you don’t, you don’t want them connected to it.
And they’re not going to look up the site. They don’t even look on Facebook, even
when I put stuff on there. Maybe two or three of my nieces will, but my nephews and
stuff, they’re just as blind as the rest of society.

DL: How many children do you have?

RO: Four.

DL: Any grandchildren?

RO: No, I didn’t have any kids. I was told not to have kids, so I pledged not to have
children, so I was practicing safe sex, condoms. When the AIDS epidemic hit, a few of
our people had gotten AIDS and stuff, so we had to do ceremonies for them, to try to
keep them alive, a few of them are left.

DL: What is your wife’s name?

RO: Lisa.

DL: Who are your heroes?

RO: Che Guevara, Mahatma Gandhi. I was a, who was it that said that, a child of two
fathers – one was Malcolm X and one was Martin Luther King. And understanding that
nationalism, we have to be accountable and we have to fix ourselves first. And asking
the white man for permission is wrong, asking him to treat us fairly and equally – it’s not
going to happen. We have to empower ourselves from within. We have to find the
greatness in ourselves and to remember the things that survived. So my dad, Crazy
Horse, Sitting Bull – I love a lot of Sitting Bull’s quotes: If you rely on the white man’s
things you’ll become dependent and then they’ll take them away and you’ll starve.
That’s why they told them not to touch Custer’s things on the battlefield. And the people
that took their hats and their jackets and clothing and stuff like that, they said that’s what
cursed us. You’re supposed to stand up for your people, but you’re not supposed to be an animal about it. You’re not supposed to have that vengeance or the seven deadly sins. That wrath is coming from someplace that discovered you.

DL: Often that vengeance is turned on the family. There’s a lot of domestic violence in the Indian country.

RO: Yes. Abuse, molestation, incest, yes, I’ve seen a few down here where they [sounds like] spell beers and they do some atrocious things. That’s why I said, at 15 I pledged not to allow that stuff, and so some of my relatives don’t like me because I tell them not to do that, and [I tell them about] safe sex, and to be resourceful. And so I got cursed by a lot of my family for standing up for the right thing. Malcolm X, Crazy Horse, Che Guevara and Bruce Lee; Dad told me that and Mom told me that. "Find five people that you admire that stand up for principles and values, and don’t believe in nepotism." Just because they’re your blood, that doesn’t mean that they’ve always done the right thing. And to blindly be loyal, to blindly follow that will lead you into their demons, or that corruption that they had to face and overcome.

DL: What contributions have the Dakota people made to Minnesota and the Country?

RO: Casinos. [Laughter] My father and a lot of his associates; like I said, Roger Jourdain, a lot of people criticize them, but man, that’s back in the day, back then we were all fighting the Bureau of Indian Affairs, we were all trying to fight the Indian Health Service, we were all trying to fight equal housing and healthcare.

But the state of Minnesota doesn’t recognize that. We weren’t allowed to have a business; we weren’t allowed to have anything unless it went through the greased hands, the corrupt people standing there with their hands out. So when people gave us donations of blankets and clothes and shoes and stuff like that, it’s crossed somebody’s hands three or four times. So by the time you got a box of Cheerios – I think Channel 5, Hubbard, he used to come down for Christmas and hand out used toys. You’d get a bike with a patched-up tire, it’s stuff that’s ripped up and got sewed up. "I don’t want your charity. Thank you very much, but screw you, I don’t want your charity. If you can’t give it to me with what you have, then I don’t want it." Because this is what I would do for you if you needed my help, I would come and I would give you the best that I had. I wouldn’t give you something second class, or already chewed, or already something I would have thrown away. And I wouldn’t expect you to say thank you for it. So that’s what Dakota means: I got your back, you got mine.

DL: If you had a magic wand, what would you wish for, for the Dakota people?

RO: Wake up. Dakota means not just my Indian people; I mean human beings too, open up your eyes. You got eyeballs in your head; you can’t see. This is the stuff that’s played out throughout history. Corruption and evil is all around you at all times. You have to wake up and you have to smell and taste and hear all the things that you’re supposed to [see to make] your choices. And if you want to make a deal with the devil,
or with God, whoever – there’s always a trickster standing by, waiting to make a deal with you.

DL: Does that trickster ever tell you to turn back; go back to violence?

RO: No.

DL: It never does?

RO: My trickster? No.

DL: There’s no trickster around?

RO: He’s there, but I acknowledge him, I don’t validate him, I don’t play with him.

DL: No violence, no drugs, no alcohol, none of that anymore.

RO: No, he has his existence, but I see how he tempts and teases others. That’s what his job is supposed to be. But I’ve gone without food or water, hunting, fishing, lying, stealing, drugs, everything else. I gave up ten things to carry a cannunpa. So he has his place; I have mine. I don’t play with him, I don’t tempt him, I don’t question him. But he knows I don’t chase girls and stuff like that and see some of the things in our society. That’s why my opinion kind of matters. Just watching my nieces and nephews continue doing and associating with people that interview and document and create these places of knowledge and awareness and experience, and just listen. Just listen; you’ll hear it.

DL: Tell us a couple of the big turning points in your life. Or maybe there were just one or two. What would you say?

RO: Being electrocuted. Probably the Mankato protest and the college girls [laughter]. Probably Berkeley, and then probably my first year up on the hill, fasting. About the third or fourth day without food or water I forgot my name and it didn’t really matter anymore. It really didn’t matter. Now I understood what my father was talking about in the matokawas. Now I understood what the mountain and the wind and the sun—I understood what they were all talking about. I could hear their language. Then I had to come back to this reality, or back to this place to be able to pull stuff and help where I could.

DL: Thank you.