AL = Aimee LaBree  
Minnesota Historical Society

DL = Deborah Locke  
Minnesota Historical Society

BW = Byron White

AL: This is Aimee LaBree on April 21, 2011 at the home of Byron White in Lake Elmo, Minnesota. Interviewer: Deborah Locke.

DL: Could you spell your name for me?


DL: Do you have a nickname?

BW: Yes.

DL: And what is it?

BW: It was “Jap”.

DL: Who gave that to you?

BW: My older brother.

DL: And that was because?
BW: He was in the Navy and was over in Japan. When he came back, he took one look at me and saw my slanted eyes and started calling me “Jap”.

DL: Do you think you have slanted eyes?

BW: I did when I was younger. Thanks to plastic surgery. No! I’m just kidding. [Laughter]

DL: When did you have that nickname?

BW: I’ve still got it.

DL: Still called “Jap” by the family or everybody?

BW: Everybody. I moved away from here for about 25 years and the first time I came back I went to a quarterly meeting of all the tribal members. While I was there they had some food so they were calling us to come and eat. A person I didn’t say hello to and hadn’t seen in 25 years said, “Come on Jappy let’s eat.” So it stuck.

DL: When and where were you born?

BW: I was born in Red Wing, Minnesota in 1940.

DL: What day?

BW: December 10th.

DL: Who were your parents?

BW: My dad was Martin White and my mother was Elsie May Johnson White.

DL: Who where your grandparents?

BW: Albert and Katherine Johnson on my mother’s side. On my father’s side, I can’t really think of their names right now. But my father was a Winnebago or a Ho Chunk from Black River Falls, Wisconsin. My mother was from Prairie Island.

DL: How many siblings do you have?
BW: I have six sisters and three brothers. So there were ten of us. Now there are only three sisters alive.

DL: How long have you lived in this community?

BW: All my life except for those 25 years in Missouri and Kansas.

DL: Why were you in Missouri and Kansas?

BW: At the time I was young and there wasn’t any work around here. I had an older brother who lived in Kansas City, Missouri who was on the police force. He invited me to come down for a visit. I went down and visited for 25 years and came back; wore my visit out.

DL: Are you an enrolled member of the Dakota Reservation or community?

BW: Yes, I’m a tribal member of the Prairie Island Indian Community.

DL: Do you have family members at other reservations or communities?

BW: No.

DL: Where did you go to school?

BW: I went to school in Red Wing until my sophomore year in high school. Then I went to Hastings where I graduated.

DL: What were your favorite subjects?

BW: English, Music.

DL: What kind of student were you?

BW: I was about average.

DL: Was it hard to be an Indian kid at Red Wing School?

BW: In Red Wing I noticed what you want to call a little racial tension. But when we moved to Hastings, there was none. It was altogether different.

DL: I wonder what would cause that.
BW: Prairie Island is in Goodhue County and so everybody goes to Red Wing. I think that’s where if we had any trouble, or problems, that’s where it all was; in Red Wing. I think that carried on into everything else.

DL: As a child, did you ever think of the future and what you would be as an adult?

BW: Not really. Well as a young child I guess mostly it was more interested in trying to stay alive. Back then we couldn’t have anything as far as material things. We always said we didn’t know we were poor until we went to town. {We were} just glad to get another meal, anytime. But then I got into high school and was pushed by some teachers, which I was thankful for. They talked with me about getting an education and going back and trying to help my people, which I think they told every Indian kid. So that was one of my goals then, to try to get an education.

DL: Do you remember which teachers in particular took an interest?

BW: One was a basketball coach or a football coach. Another was a social studies teacher and another was my music teacher. They all were pretty good as far as encouraging me to keep on going.

DL: You mentioned your childhood. It was a hard one with ten mouths to feed, ten children. How did your parents do that?

BW: My father was wounded. I think it was the Second World War, and he was receiving a pension, and our family made souvenirs. We made these tom toms. There was a company, I think {it was} in Minneapolis, Minnesota called the Bloom Brothers where we delivered them every week and then got paid for it. Also, I think another company in Rochester, Minnesota did the same thing. So we had two places where we could sell our tom toms and other little canoes and bead work. By doing this is, we got our income.

DL: As a child, what games do you remember playing or was it mostly work for you?

BW: There were sports. Baseball was a big deal on the reservation. In the summer time every time everybody got done eating their supper, everybody went to the ball diamond to play.

During the days as a young kid during the summer time, a bunch of us would get together and have spare tires that we used to push around. I guess that was our car at
that time. What we used as a car anyway. Most of it was just sitting around and visiting and doing what young kids do.

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

BW: The first news story I heard was that President Truman was going to give a talk about the upcoming conflict he thought we were going to have with Korea.

DL: Did your family have a TV or radio?

BW: We had a radio that was run by battery. One of those old time radios that you had to hook a battery up to. We had a car battery that we hooked it up to and listened to whatever programs came on.

DL: Do you suppose that’s how you heard about President Truman?

BW: Yes, because I remember we all had to sit down and be quiet so they could listen to President Truman give his speech.

DL: Which relatives had the most influence on you?

BW: There was one relative, his name was Lawrence Taylor. He was a relative that was older than I who didn’t get out of the sixth grade. I remember as a young man, I was playing in a rock and roll band. I just got out of high school. I quit [the band]. We got in an argument and I quit. So when I seen him, he really got all over me.

He said, “You know, you’re just like the rest of us Indians. When things get tough, you quit.” That was something that stuck with me. When I left Minnesota and went to Kansas, got different jobs. I worked for a music company. I worked for the Commerce Bank. When things started getting rough, there were times that I wanted to say, “Forget it, I’m going home.” But what he said would always stick with me: “Hey, you’re just like the rest of us, you quit.” So that really kind of kept me going. He doesn’t really know {that}. He died and I never got to thank him or tell him how much that meant.

There was one other gentleman. I think he was our first Community president. I think he was a Chippewa but yet he was the president of our tribal council which is strange. He used to come when we went to this country school house and build the fire every day so we could have school. I often wondered why he did that. You could always depend on him to be there. In the winter time you could go there and you always knew it was going to be warm because he was there every morning making sure the furnace
was on and everything was ready to go. That kind of impressed me. He farmed at that
time but he would take time out in the mornings to start a fire and do the things that
needed to be done. I thought “Wow!” Of course, I didn’t realize that until later on. This
guy was consistent day in and day out.

DL: Lawrence Taylor, was he an uncle?

BW: No, he was a first cousin.

DL: Did your family ever celebrate holidays?

BW: Yes, every holiday. Christmas, New Years, Thanksgiving, Easter, all the families
would get together at our community center. We would all gather and eat and play
games to celebrate that holiday.

DL: Who taught you the most about being Dakota?

BW: Probably my mother.

DL: Do you remember some of the things she taught you?

BW: Well, one of the things that kind of stuck with me was, she would talk about her
younger days and how they would live along the river and how they traveled in boats
and how they all worked together. How they all stuck together no matter what. She
said, “You know, if you’re Dakota and you’re Indian these are some of the things that
you do. You watch out not only for yourself but for other people. If other people ever
come to your house, make sure they’ve got something to eat or drink if you’ve got it. If
anybody asks you to do anything, do it because if they think that much of you to ask
you, you ought to do it.” So that’s something I’ve always tried to follow. If someone’s
ever asked me to do something, if it’s lawful, I usually try to do it.

DL: Did you learn of Dakota spirituality as a child or as an adult? Or perhaps were you
raised Christian?

BW: I was raised Episcopalian. We had an Episcopal church down there and that’s
where we all went to Sunday school.

DL: Did you learn any traditional ways?
BW: Not really. If it was traditional, we probably lived it and probably thought nothing of it. That’s just the way we lived.

DL: What did you learn about Dakota history while you were growing up and who told you about it?

BW: I didn’t really learn much about Dakota history when I was growing up because back then when we were in school it almost made you ashamed. The lessons that they told almost made you ashamed to be Indian because you were viewed as the savage. You were the one that attacked the white people. This kind of put a damper on being Indian, really. It kind of made you think. You didn’t really want to know history sometimes– because it seemed like it was all bad.

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

BW: In a way yes, but they never came out and said, “Well, this is the war of 1862 or the Dakota wars.” It was just, “They had to fight for what they believed in. They had to fight to keep themselves alive, to keep themselves together.” Some of our parents I think probably tried to shield us from some of that because they might have known that we were going through this “savage” and “wild Indian” stuff while we were in school. So I think sometimes they probably tried to keep some of that stuff away from us. So it wasn’t until later on that I learned about the 1862 War.

DL: Do you have family members who lived through that time or were involved in any way?

BW: Researching and looking back, I found that we belonged with Chief Wabasha who was down in Wabasha. At that time when the war of 1862 broke out, I think {our family had ties} with Little Crow’s tribe and some of the tribes that were farther west. Wabasha was more like the eastern tribe. So from what I could understand and what I could look up -- I don’t know how we were really involved in that.

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

BW: No, like I said, the only thing I could say was that we were at one time with Chief Wabasha.

DL: Are you a descendent? Hard to say?
BW: It’s hard to say, yes. I mean there was also Chief Red Wing. There were four of them. They were camped in Red Wing, Minnesota. So who knows if we were part of that too? It’s kind of hard after everyone was shipped out to South Dakota and whoever came back. It was a mixed up deal because some of them went up to Canada, some stayed here. It seems that everything at that time got mixed up so everybody has their own family history now of what happened.

DL: Did that war have a direct impact on your family?

BW: Not that I know of.

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

BW: Yes.

DL: Did you experience any particular emotion? What was it?

BW: Yes, in a way it kind of touched you knowing that here were 38 people that died all at once. It was really something. All I could think of when we were standing there was that Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves and hung us. [Laughter] I don’t know why that popped into my mind but that was just something. I thought; “Wow!”

DL: Have you ever been to any of these places and what are your thoughts about them – Fort Ridgley?

BW: No, never been there.

DL: Birch Coulee?

BW: Yes.

DL: What do you think about that spot?

BW: They had a powwow and I went there. You think at one time it could have been your ancestors here. There’s that connection. That’s what I felt when I was there. My ancestors maybe were here.

DL: Lower Sioux Agency.

BW: Yes, I’ve been there.
DL: What did you think about that place?

BW: I know some people who live there. It was more like visiting. It wasn't anything really historical.

DL: How about the Upper Sioux Agency?

BW: Yeah, I've been there too and that's about the same with Lower Sioux.

DL: Fort Snelling?

BW: Been there, yes.

DL: Any thoughts there? Especially the campsite?

BW: It's a feeling that's hard to express. Here were Native Americans who were human that were treated like subhuman people; having to suffer. Maybe a lot of them didn't even do anything. It was a sorrowful feeling. At the same time I could almost understand and see what those Jews must have felt like when they were in those concentration camps. Humanity sometimes is cruel.

DL: Sometimes a comparison is made with the Japanese internment camps during World War II when Japanese Americans were rounded up and herded into a prison camp.

BW: Yes.

DL: Similar to what happened to the Dakota.

BW: Yes.

DL: Do you think that's a good parallel as well?

BW: Sure.

DL: Here's another place – Camp Release?

BW: No, never been there.
DL: Wood Lake for the Wood Lake battle?

BW: No.

DL: New Ulm?

BW: Been to New Ulm. [Laughter]

DL: You’re laughing, what’s funny about New Ulm?

BW: From what I’ve heard, I wouldn’t want to stay too long. [Laughter]

DL: You’d be afraid of New Ulm?

BW: Yes because we had a person who used to work at the Historical Society – he has slides of the War of 1862.

DL: Ken?

BW: Osmond I think his name is. He retired from there now.

DL: I don’t think he works there anymore.

BW: No, but he had slides and he came down and showed us these slides. When he got done, I said, “Have you ever been to New Ulm with this?” He said, “No.” I said, “Well if you ever do, I’d like to know their reaction when you get done.”

My two sons work with the tribe. We were lobbyists, so we visited different representatives and legislators. One of the representatives who was running for election lived out that way {New Ulm}. I couldn’t make it so I told my two boys, “Why don’t you go and talk with him and tell him about Prairie Island?” They called him up and made an appointment. They said it was at a café. They said when they walked in there you could feel the tension. My older boy said, “I just felt like, oh, oh.”

DL: “Oh, oh.” It felt like 1862 again.

BW: Yes. The person who was running for office at that time told them, “I know all about Prairie Island and I’m going to stick with what my people here tell me to do so I don’t want to listen to what you have to say.” They {Byron’s sons} said they were glad to get out of there. [Laughter].
DL: When was this?

BW: Oh this must have been four or five years ago.

DL: {Have you been to} Black Dog Village?

BW: I’ve gone by there. I haven’t stopped.

DL: Camp Coldwater?

BW: I’ve gone by there, too. I haven’t stopped there.

DL: What’s your opinion of the war?

BW: You know, being Native American, I can say it was all their fault. [Laughter] But I’m sure there are two sides to every story. I think if the United States government and the people who were responsible for handing out the rations and payments had done their job correctly, they probably wouldn’t have had any problems. I heard that when someone asked the person who ran the store for rations, he said “Let them eat grass.” That kind of sits the wrong way. After the attack, they found him and he had grass in his mouth. I thought “Wow! How did they know?” Somebody must have told. Something must have been going on.

I’m sure the United States, in good faith, tried its best. Who knows? Someone told me one time that he had heard of or seen a document that President Lincoln had signed calling off that hanging. But it never got here [to Minnesota] in time. I’ve never seen nor heard anything like that.

DL: What do you think about the treaties?

BW: It’s almost like when the federal government tells you – “Trust me.” [Laughter] Who said once, “Treaties are made to be broken.” Well, I guess they were right. I don’t know of one, maybe you do, that hasn’t been broken.

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

BW: Yes, I think it is because if we look back and see what happened, where we came from, like they say, “History is a good teacher,” then hopefully in the future, something like this won’t happen. I know some people still get a little irritated by what happened
but I think we’ve still got to move on. We can’t dwell on the past because that doesn’t do any good.

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

BW: Well I know at Fort Snelling, Amos Owens, one of our tribal members, has that pipestone plaque. It has something to do with honoring those people that were at Fort Snelling. I think that this is something they can do. I know I’ve heard, and you probably have too, of different organizations that have this—what do they call this when you forgive?

DL: Wiping of tears?

BW: Wiping of tears. A lot of that is good for those people that are there. But the people that aren’t there, it doesn’t affect them. I don’t know what you could do to tell the whole state of Minnesota that, “Hey this is what happened” unless the State Legislature or the Governor does something or signs something so everybody knows: “Hey this is what happened 150 years ago.”

DL: We’ll switch gears here and get back to your life which would take us past high school. What is or was your occupation?

BW: I’ve had several. I went to Winona State for a year. I left there because I thought I wanted to get an education and go to work, really earn some money. So I went to Rasmussen Business School. From Rasmussen, I left Minnesota and went to Kansas City, Missouri and worked for Jenkins Music Company. I did that for a couple of years and then worked for Commerce Bank of Kansas City. Finally I left there and went to work as an electrician with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. I had a four year apprenticeship. I did that until I went to work for General Motors and worked as an electrician there with robots. Then while we were living in Kansas, I got a letter saying “Why don’t you come on back and run for Tribal Council.” So I got elected, we moved back and I’ve been on the Tribal Council and working for the tribe until last December when I retired.

DL: Did you marry?

BW: Yes.

DL: How many times?

DL: You lost count.

BW: No, I just married once.

DL: What’s your wife’s name?

BW: Faye. I think this September it will be 43 years. I have two sons – Byron Lee and Timothy.

DL: Grandchildren?

BW: Three grandchildren – two granddaughters and one grandson.

DL: Do they live nearby?

BW: Yes. One lives in Woodbury and the girls live in River Falls, Wisconsin.

DL: What is your typical day like?

BW: Right now since I’m retired, I do a lot of going back over what I did and listening to newscasts, listening to music, visiting… We have an elders group at Prairie Island where we have lunch and breakfast. I usually go down for breakfast and sometimes for lunch and try to catch up on community news; just kind of stay in touch with what’s going on with the tribe.

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

BW: We’ve given a pretty rich history of our tribe. I know the four Red Wing chiefs that we’ve had, they were pretty well known in the area for what they did and their leadership. At one time all of our tribal men had gone into the military service. We even had some women who went and served their country. I know all of my brothers have. I think I’m the only one that hasn’t. I had an older brother who was killed in Korea. He was in one of the first battalions that went over. That was in 1950, I think.

We’ve brought bingo and casinos to Minnesota. [Laughter] Those have added a lot of jobs for a lot of rural people. Treasure Island has between fifteen and sixteen hundred employees. While I was working there, we would have people come in off the farm and
one person would work for the health benefits because they weren’t making it as farmers, having hard times. So at least they would have health insurance.

We’ve done quite a bit as far as contributions and what have you. I know Mystic Lake gives many millions each year.

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

BW: Education. I feel if we all were educated we could probably do a lot more with our lives and with our tribes than we can now. It seems we get to a certain point where we stay because we don’t have the education or the – I don’t want to say ambition-- to move on. It seems we keep getting stuck at a certain place. But now with our funding from Indian gaming, we have tribal members who have graduated from college and are coming back. So that’s real helpful. Now we have mothers, grandmothers. They just started a program this spring, earlier this year where instead of getting a GED, they can get their high school diploma. It was really encouraging to see these people work toward that. I know there is a joke going around that to work for the tribe you have to have a high school education or a GED. We had people who wanted to mow the lawn, cut the grass but they couldn’t because they didn’t have a high school education or GED. So we kid each other – “Well now you can go cut grass.”