DL = Deborah Locke
Minnesota Historical Society

ML = Melvin Littlecrow

DL: This is Deborah Locke on January 18, 2012. I’m at Dakota Tipi First Nation with Mr. Melvin Littlecrow. Melvin, however, is from the Whitecap Dakota First Nation. This is part of the Oral History Project. To start with Mr. Littlecrow, could you spell your name?

ML: First name is Melvin M-E-L-V-I-N and then Littlecrow L-I-T-T-L-E-C-R-O-W.

DL: Do you have a nickname?

ML: Well sometimes I do, sometimes I don’t.

DL: When and where were you born?

ML: I was born at Whitecap, at that time it was known as Moose Woods Reserve but since then it’s been changed to Whitecap First Nations.

DL: What was the date?

ML: Sixteenth of May, 1942.

DL: Who were your parents?

ML: My father was Andrew Littlecrow and my mother was Jessie Buffalo.

DL: And your siblings, how many brothers and sisters?

ML: Six brothers and four sisters.
DL: Who were your grandparents on both sides?

ML: My grandfather on my father’s side was Harry Littlecrow

DL: And your grandmother?

ML: My grandmother...[was Margaret Flying Buffalo] [added later as edit to transcript from ML]

DL: What about on your mother’s side?

ML: On my mother’s side was William Buffalo.

DL: And his wife was?

ML: Elizabeth Red Hawk.

DL: How long have you lived at Whitecap?

ML: I was born there and I’m still there.

DL: Do you have family members at other Reserves or Dakota Communities?

ML: Not my immediate families, no, but I’ve got relatives down in the United States. That’s where my grandfather’s dad is from: John Littlecrow.

DL: Where is your grandfather’s dad from?

ML: From the Minnesota area.

DL: Where did you go to school?

ML: At Whitecap.

DL: You finished through what grade?

ML: Grade eight.

DL: Was it a boarding school?

ML: No, just a [day] school, just a one room school house.

DL: What is your earliest memory as a child?

ML: Probably when I was about five or six years old.
DL: What was it of?

ML: Mostly of culture, traditional ways of life, all the do’s and don’ts that my grandparents taught me on both sides [about the] caring for animals, livestock and stuff like that, and caring for each other, helping each other.

DL: You’re talking about traditional Dakota life then.

ML: Yes.

DL: You are lucky that you had grandparents who passed that on to you and that you remembered it.

ML: Yes, like I said earlier, how we were brought up is: what I was told was supposed to stay in my built-in computer or whatever you want to call it. That we don’t forget.

DL: Yes.

ML: We never wrote nothing down. I didn’t. I was told lots. There was other elders on the Reserve that came and talked to the young people. That’s our way of living, I guess.

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

ML: The migration of the Dakotas from Minnesota I guess, or wherever we were. That’s where my great great grandfathers are from.

DL: Your age would be what right now?

ML: I’m 69 right now, come May I’ll be 70.

DL: When you were a little boy, did you hear anything about World War II?

ML: Yeah, oh yes. I’ve got three uncles that were in World War II. Two came back and one didn’t.

DL: Sorry to hear that. How did the family learn about events? Was there a radio?

ML: Well not too much radio but through visiting and through powwows and gatherings. That’s how they identify and know each other, who they are, who their relatives are. We didn’t have phones in them days but still we knew who we were.

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

ML: Well actually I can’t say one or the other because they all treated me equal. I learned a lot of things from both sides of my [family].
DL: Were you raised with Dakota language and culture and spirituality? Did they include Christianity in there somewhere?

ML: I don’t know about Christianity but I was raised with our culture and our traditional ways of life and our beliefs. Our culture and our traditional ways; [that’s] our way. I never went to church, a white church. I was taught to believe in a Creator and this is how I am all my life.

DL: Do you have a Dakota name?

ML: Yeah.

DL: Who gave it to you?

ML: My mother’s uncle.

DL: What is it?

ML: It’s Wicáhpi Oyate.

DL: What does it mean?

ML: It means “The Nation of Stars”.

DL: The Nation of Stars, that’s beautiful. Did he give that name to you after another relative of his?

ML: It’s my own.

DL: What did you learn about Dakota history while you were growing up? By history we usually look at dates and events. Did you learn anything about that while you were growing up? Probably not in school but…

ML: No, not in school, we weren’t taught [our] history or culture. But as we grew up, we lived our culture and traditional ways so we didn’t have to be taught that in school. We learned from our elders and grandparents or whoever wanted to tell us. We listened; we sat there and listened to what we were told and what to believe. That’s how it was then.

DL: Do you have grandchildren?

ML: Oh yes.

DL: Do you do the same thing with them?
ML: I would say yes. I've got my daughters and my sons. I tell them about our culture and traditional ways of life and how we used to live, the hardships we had comparing it to today. I taught them about that. This is how we used to do it and this is how we carry on. But with today’s modern living with power and with heat, natural gas and all that, life is different. At one time we burned wood. We had to haul water. Now today we've got running water from the taps and everything. At one time we all did everything by hand. We had to work [hard]. I know if ever something happened where there was no power or no heat, I'll live because I know how to survive on just wood to keep warm and all that.

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

ML: I learned through reading and hearing and talking to my grandparents that there was the Great Dakota Conflict of 1862. Probably my great great great grandfather was involved in that Littlecrow Uprising. I'm a descendant.

DL: So you’re a direct descendant of Chief Little Crow.

ML: Right, that's right.

DL: Therefore I would guess you heard quite a few stories while you were growing up.

ML: Oh yes.

DL: What did they tell you about that time?

ML: All the hardships that they put up with. The US Government promised them rations and didn’t live up to their promises. That’s what caused that conflict because my great grandfather was living in a house and wearing white man’s clothes and then things didn’t go right so he went back to his Dakota ways. That’s how he was involved in the Dakota war.

DL: What stories did you hear about your grandfather? What kind of man was he?

ML: Well first of all, he was a real woman’s man. He had, I believe, seven wives. There was a family of seven girls and he was involved with every one of them, living with them. Of course he was a warrior and a nice looking man. I guess everybody looked up to him, all the women.

DL: A natural born leader?

ML: Yeah.

DL: I believe he was considered very intelligent as well.

ML: Yes, I would say that too from what I was taught about and read about.
DL: Didn’t he have the confidence of the people?

ML: Meaning what?

DL: Meaning they would follow him.

ML; Yeah, some did and some didn’t. There were some people there that didn’t want to follow his life style and they wanted to live in a civilized way. You know there's always two sides to all conflicts. The do’s [do go to war] and the don’ts, [don't go to war] -- he was one of the ones involved with the do’s.

DL: Right, he said that he wasn’t confident they could win but he would lead them anyway because he was not a coward. Does that sound accurate?

ML: Yeah well he knew that there were a bunch of settlers, white people, coming to the states, that area there. Eventually he knew it was going to happen to where it is today [with the influx of white people]. Yet he still stood up against that for a while until he got killed.

DL: So we know basically the story of Chief Little Crow which was to step forward and say, “I will lead you into this battle”. Could the outcome have been any different?

ML: Meaning?

DL: Meaning was there any way that if more Dakota had joined him… I guess I’m trying to speculate here about the outcome of that war, a different sort of outcome for the Dakota people. If he had not gone to war, what would that have meant? But they did go to war and what did that mean?

ML: Well he did go to war and eventually of course we lost. So that’s when the migration started – the Dakota people coming north to Canada to live out here. But before that we were always in this country [Canada]. But this was north of what is now the US – Canadian border. At one time back in those days there was no border. We hunted all over the place, north of the present day border. So we’ve been back and forth. We use the words back and forth just on account of that line [border] that’s there. One time it was just back and forth but from north to south. That’s all it is from what I gather.

DL: I see. My guess too is that if you have the last name Little Crow immediately after that war, you were not safe. You weren’t safe if you were Dakota anyway but it seems to me it would be especially unsafe if your last name was Little Crow. Do you agree?

ML: In some ways I always feel that way as a Little Crow descendent. I’ve read about and heard about all the chiefs that got executed through the white government so I, and
I’ve said it before, I don’t fancy the US white government. [But as an elder, I promote reconciliation.] [comment added to transcript by ML]

DL: Have you been to Mankato? Have you been to Minnesota?

ML: No.

DL: Never.

ML: I’ve been to North Dakota and Montana. I’ve got relatives in Montana, sisters of my grandpa, Harry Littlecrow. That’s how I’ve got relatives over there. I went and visited them last summer to get reacquainted. But we still need more communication to see exactly who’s who. We haven’t come to that point yet but we already know some of the people like my grandpa’s sister so traditionally, they’re my grandmothers. But I know who some of their daughters and sons are.

DL: Do you have any desire to visit Minnesota?

ML: Oh yeah, if I have a chance to go there. Like I said we’ve got to get reacquainted and see who we are and who they are. They [have] much interest in seeing us too, like when I went there last summer. Through introductions I told them who I was and they got a surprise [from that news] and really looked up to me being a Littlecrow from the original [Chief] Little Crow.

DL: What is your opinion of the war?

ML: Well there’s two sides to looking at that. Looking at the US white government side: well they wanted to conquer the Indians, do away with them so they take over the whole North, South Dakota, Minnesota country [so] it wouldn’t be populated with Indians. That’s the way I look at it on that side. On the aboriginal side, that was all our country, our sacred hunting grounds and all that. So it was a losing battle for us [considering] what present day is. We have to live the life of the white people. [In the] back of my mind, I’m still a Dakota and I’m going to remain that way. It could change all at once but I’ve got to remain who I am. I was taught, “Don’t ever forget who you are.” I was told that.

DL: Is there something about what you learned that is universal and can pass from generation to generation no matter what the outside world is?

ML: I don’t get the question.

DL: Well you mentioned earlier that your grandparents taught you to help each other, to care for animals, the do’s and don’ts.

ML: Yeah.
DL: It sounds to me like those are things that you can teach a generation and exclude everything else. Forget about the computers, forget TV technology. You can still teach a child how to care.

ML: Yeah, you can always teach...

DL: Hold on I think your microphone just fell off. We're back. The microphone fell off and now it's back on. I was asking Mr. Littlecrow about certain traditions and culture that can be passed on.

ML: They should all be passed on. That's us Dakotas. We shouldn't lose our culture and traditional ways of life although we can't live like that anymore, [the way our] ancestors did 150 to 200 years ago. But we still should remember that who they are makes us what we are today.

DL: Could you tell me please, a couple of things you would like remembered about Chief Little Crow?

ML: Well from what I've heard he was a very understanding man. [He had] his own ways and he also was a very good horseman. That's why even today I'm still a horseman. My grandfather was. He had a bunch of horses. He showed me how to work with horses, handle horses, break horses, and train horses. I never forgot that. Today I still carry on what I was taught [about working] with animals, training animals and using them for transportation and all that. Without horses, I've said this before in other meetings, without horses we wouldn't be here today because they were our transportation when we migrated into present day Canada. I've always been taught to respect and honor horses.

DL: If your great great great grandfather could walk into the room today, what would you ask him?

ML: First of all I'd ask him am I doing the things that you expect us present day Dakota [to do]. Are we doing the right thing? Like this interview here. We're talking about him. Is it right that we talk about you? That's the first thing that I'll ask him. But for my teaching and learning, you offered me tobacco here and our belief is that when you are offered tobacco and talk about the past, you can use their names and you wouldn't offend them in any way or offend yourself. With the presenting of tobacco, I can talk freely of him with this pouch of cigarettes or tobacco sitting here. Without it, it's not right to talk about our ancestors.

DL: Would you ask him anything about his role as a warrior?

ML: Well, see there again, it's part of our cultural and traditional ways. I don't know if it's the right thing to ask him 'why [did you do] this.' I believe that if you sort of mention it and then it's up to him to tell you. You can't just say, “Well come on, tell me.” That's not proper. The reason I answer the questions you ask is because like I said, through...
the tobacco, it’s an honor that we talk about him, talk about myself, my grandfathers and
my grandmothers. Yeah, so I’ll ask him in a roundabout way and it’s up to him to tell me
his life’s history, the do’s, don’ts and all that.

DL: Could I ask you something about his death which I’ve seen conflicting stories. I’ve
read that Littlecrow was out with someone else picking berries and was seen by the
property owner who then shot him. But then I’ve also heard that it wasn’t that simple,
that Littlecrow was armed as well and they both shot each other. The guy was shot in
the leg but of course Littlecrow died from his injuries. Have you heard that story at all?

ML: I heard that he was picking berries unarmed with his son or his grandson. Some
little boy was with him when he got shot. He didn’t shoot anybody or anything. He just
got shot while he was picking berries.

DL: How old was he then?

ML: I don’t know but I would say between maybe 40 or 50.

DL: What contributions have the Dakota people made to Canada and even beyond
Canada, to the world?

ML: The Dakota were involved in the War of 1812 in Canada, fighting against the US.

DL: If you had a magic wand and could wave it and make any change you wanted,
what would you wish for Dakota people today?

ML: First of all I want to identify who we are, who all our relations are. It would be just
like a reunion. To know who are our cousins, our second cousins, all our relatives,
that’s the first thing I would want to know.

DL: So you want to have a clearer picture of where you came from.

ML: Yeah, yeah.

DL: You are one of the lucky ones because you do have a last name that takes you
back directly. So that’s an advantage but it only tells you a piece of your story.

ML: Yeah.

DL: There’s still more.

ML: Oh yeah. There is more but if there is ever another interview, maybe a guy… After
a guy goes through this maybe things come up that you forget or either somehow didn’t
think about. It’ll come back to you. So as far as I’m concerned, further on in a year or
so maybe two years if I’m still around, I can do that. In the mean time, I’ve got to read
this and go over it and different thoughts or things come back to mind and then a guy can go over it again.

DL: And you may add to it if you wish. You are free to add anything.

ML: Oh yeah, OK.

DL: Do you think it's a good idea to commemorate the events of the late 1800's? To remember them?

ML: Well that's our way of remembering people from the past. Even our own immediate family members… A few years ago I lost two of my grandsons in a car accident and every year we have a memorial feast for them, honoring them and the life we had with them. So I would say we should honor people that are lost including the ones that were hung in Mankato. The Historical Society wants to put together commemorative projects. People read about those things here. Maybe you'll come up with something like that, a commemoration. It can't be a one man operation. It's going to take a whole bunch of Dakota to do that. Sure it's got to be some descendents of chiefs that are honored today. So I would say yeah, we should do some kind of commemoration or memorial or do something like that, honoring people of the past. That's our belief. We still carry it on.

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

ML: Well there's a couple different ways maybe, sometimes with a feast or a Sun Dance or Pow Wow. Whatever the immediate family thinks or the head people of any organization to do a big commemoration.

DL: Of remembering or honoring?

ML: Yeah, remembering and honoring.

DL: Is it important to remember and honor the descendents of the white people, the white immigrants who were in the Minnesota River valley at the time, who were killed?

ML: I never did think about that but for me, I don't know why I'd want to honor them because they were trying to kill us.

DL: So the white settlers or the white farmers…

ML: Well the white government…

DL: Your grandfather, [Chief Little Crow] watched waves of immigrants coming in, and he knew more and more were coming. I heard recently that he had told the warriors beforehand “Don't kill the women and children.” Don't kill them, but that happened anyway and so when we talk to the descendents of the settlers, they too feel very badly
for their families who were killed back then. Some of them still mourn them to the
degree that people mourn the 38 who were hung and the many who died at Fort
Snelling and in Davenport Iowa and everywhere else. So that’s what I was wondering if
you could look at them and say, well they too should be remembered and it’s a very
tragic ending that they also met. Or you could say they were a bunch of impediments
that were in the way and they had no business being there in the first place so if they
were wiped out they were just wiped out.

ML: For my own thinking, they [were] coming anyway and they were going to stay here,
which they did. Sure they lost lives too [because of] the Dakota and other tribes down
[in the] States. But yeah, they were also human beings too, white, brown, yellow or
black, it don’t matter. If you’re a human being, you're a human being. You should be
remembered. We’re all human beings. You’re white, I’m brown, the Chinese are
yellow, and Africans or whatever they are, they're black people. They call us red
people, so yeah the Creator looks at us as one person even though we are different
colors.

DL: Do you think the Dakota people will ever again speak with one voice or do you think
they always had differing opinions on things such as to go to war or not to go to war, to
remain in Minnesota and be hidden, to run off to a different State, to become a farmer,
to become a Christian, to become a warrior. Was there a time when everybody thought
the same?

ML: No, I don’t think they ever thought the same [way]. There are some people that
[follow] the ways of the church and some don’t. For instance, I don’t live in the world of
church but I believe in my own ways of living the church styles if thats what you want to
call it.

DL: It must have been quite... I cannot imagine how dramatic life was for them at that
time. How it must have felt to watch everything unravel and not to know how to keep
your family safe.

ML: [this paragraph heavily edited by ML] Through the migration they all ended up in the
Cypress Hills and from there they split. Some went to the Wahpeton Reserve near
Prince Albert and some of us went to White Cap near Dundurn and some went to Fort
Qu’Appelle. See at that time it [wasn’t] only Dakota, there were Lakota involved too in
that migration when Sitting Bull [was in Canada]. He settled around the Wood Mountain
area, that’s how the Wood Mountain Reserve was created. He went back to the States.
Some of the people used to live in Moose Jaw and then from there they went to Wood
Mountain. My mother’s sister married into Wood Mountain and her children are half
Lakota and half Dakota and they still exist today

DL: Can you explain why there are still hard feelings among Dakota who live outside of
Minnesota for some of today’s Dakota who are still there. They were the families who
for one reason or another were protected or they managed to hide. Sometimes they’re
called Loyalists or whatever they’ve been described. These are the people at
Shakopee and Prairie Island, not so much at Upper and Lower Sioux. They’re called Loyalists or Turncoats or rather negative terms. Is this still good to call people those names 150 years when you don’t really understand why their ancestors made those decisions to stay?

ML: Some of that came about lately and is about money, it’s money. Some of the from down in the States call us runaways, cowards or something that we didn’t stay there. I think it all relates back to money when they [received] land settlements, payouts, or whatever. I don’t know but that’s my own feeling.

DL: What’s surprising to me is that this antagonism exists today still among some of the Dakota who look at those Minnesota Dakota and may be envious because of the casino money but they don’t like them anyway because they’re calling them names for events that occurred 150 years ago. And they are judging them based on what happened 150 years ago and the reaction of those relatives.

ML: Yeah, I think that’s pretty much close [to what happened]. Even back in my days when I hear people… There’s good in every people and bad in every people as well. It goes both ways like at home there years ago, old people used to tell us white people have helped them and they in turn helped the white people too. So it’s a matter of understanding what eventually happened. So it’s a matter of talking things over and thinking about things that lead to what it is today. That’s my belief anyway.

DL: Is there anything you’d like to add?

ML: There’s one place here earlier you forgot what I said or you didn’t hear it right, can’t read very good.

DL: I’ll take a break here so Mr. Littlecrow can look at the question.

DL: We are back after our break. Mr. Littlecrow identified the names of Harry Littlecrow’s wives and we’ll make that addition to the transcript. Thank you Mr. Littlecrow.

ML: You are welcome.