Melvin Longclaws  
Narrator

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Interviewer

Dakota Tipi First Nation  
Portage la Prairie, Manitoba, Canada  
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DL = Deborah Locke  
Minnesota Historical Society

ML = Melvin Longclaws

DL: This is Deborah Locke with the Minnesota Historical Society on January 19, 2012 interviewing Melvin Longclaws – L-O-N-G-C-L-A-W-S at Dakota Tipi in Manitoba, Canada. This is part of the Oral History Project. Mr. Longclaws, when and where were you born?

ML: I was born in Portage la Prairie in 1957.

DL: What day?

ML: February 13th.

DL: Who were your parents?

ML: Clifford Chaske and Eliza Longclaws.

DL: And how about your grandparents?

ML: My grandparents on my dad’s side were Harry Chaske and Winona Hall Chaske from Sioux Village here.

DL: On your mother’s side?

ML: On my mother’s side it was Jerry Longclaws and Clara Atkinson. Jerry Longclaws was from Long Plain and Clara Atkinson was originally from Roseau River.

DL: How long have you lived here?
ML: I have lived in Long Plain for 15 years since I got out of the military. Prior to that I lived in a boarding school. I was raised here from the time I was one to eight years old at Dakota Village – Sioux Village. So I went from Sioux Village to Boarding School till I was 14, then 14 to 18 I was reunited with my mom and family. Then at 18 I went into the military until I was 24, 27, something like that. Then I got out and became a roofer for 25 years. That took me to Calgary, Winnipeg, and Brandon. I lived in various places till I finally came home here to Long Plain. My roots are here.

DL: Do you have family members at other Reserves?

ML: At other Reserves? Yes I do. They’re intermarried, whatnot, we’re spread out but we know where we are. Most of us are here at Long Plain though because of my mother. We’re not too well liked out there because of my father. [Laughter] Dakotas! They don’t want to admit that they’re Dakotas over there. They have their own history. They tried to change the history of the Reserve, the people that are in power.

DL: Which relative had the most influence on you?

ML: That has to be my mom.

DL: Tell me about your mom.

ML: Well, she is a survivor of the Residential School System. She was instrumental in gathering us all back together again because of what happened to us. She was a very strong figure in my life because of her politics. Just the way she was, she was a very strong woman.

DL: Did you learn traditional Dakota ways?

ML: No I didn’t. I think my mom said we spoke Dakota when we were young but the Residential Schools took that out of us. We never learned Ojibwa either.

DL: Did you ever hear of the 1862 US Dakota War?

ML: I’ve heard of a lot of wars down there but this Mankato thing…this is my first time hearing of it.

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

ML: That is quite possible. I don’t know but I’ll have to go back on my dad’s side to Harry and they go back to Charlie Chaske and Lidia Chaske who were Harry Chaske’s parents. Then Ruben Hall and Joana Bell Hall were Wynuna’s. On my mother’s side also we have a lineage that goes all the way back to Jane Besurely. She passed away in 1940 in Sisseton Wahpeton, South Dakota. So if I look back on both sides, we do come from there. Like my mother’s from up here but they come from over there. My dad’s from here and so on.
DL: Why did they come up here?

ML: From what I know of it’s because of the battles that happened with Custer and that and whatnot. They came north. They were settled. Some people went back others stayed and you know we’ve prospered I guess. [Laughter]

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

ML: I can’t really say about the lineage on that. I’ve often wondered because I have a camera here. My kids took a picture of me holding a picture of Sitting Bull, one of his famous pictures. They said, “You look like him. You’re going to get there yet someday dad.” When they put it on the computer to look at it better, whatever, they noticed on the wall there’s a spirit or something. There’s a man on a horse holding a… Like when I’m standing like this with that picture, but on the wall on the side, which there’s nothing there, they show a man on horseback. I can show it to you. It’s kind of freaky.

DL: I’m going to pause right now.

DL: We’re back after looking at the picture. Have you ever been to Minnesota?

ML: Not Minnesota itself. I’ve been to… Where is that? I was working down there doing roofing in 2000, just south of us here. What’s the name of that State? It starts with an M too.

DL: Oh, North Dakota or South Dakota?

ML: No, no. It has two rivers, twin rivers, Michigan; I think that was the State I was at. I was down there roofing in 2000. They had a big tornado.

DL: What’s your opinion of the war?

ML: They did stuff like ask to take what was ours. I realize that there was expansion, that they were going to move this way. They said something about… What was the name they called it? It’s our divine right to take that land. There’s a word for that – Manifest Destiny. Now that I don’t believe in. Our people from what I know were willing to share it. From what I gather and the way I know our people today is that we’re willing to share. But they just kept on taking and taking and it was genocide. They used germ warfare on us, I guess you could say. It was just dirty. It shouldn’t have happened but that’s the way things were done back then I guess.

DL: Is it a good idea to commemorate the events from then?

ML: People have to know it or else we forget.

DL: Haven’t many forgotten already?
ML: A lot of them have forgotten. I’m bringing my children up to know these things. They are going to know about this incident here that you were just asking about. They are going to know about that because I’m going to find out more information about Mankato. I didn’t know that there was a Chaske involved in that. Apparently there’s going to be some sort of pardon – a pardon ceremony coming up or something?

DL: I don’t know if that’s passed. I don’t know what the legislature will do with it.

ML: That’s something my kids have to know.

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

ML: I was thinking about that. That they would be recognized as the First Nation of North America and have all their treaties and claims settled and adhered to, to take their rightful place at the head of the line. The Dakotas and the Vietnamese people are the only are the only people to ever defeat the US forces in combat. To commemorate it there should be an international Pow Wow at the Canada, US border – Peace Gardens. Make it a good ten day event every year – annually. Something like that. What contributions did Dakota people make to Canada? I believe they brought strong blood north. They showed persistence. They brought the Sun Dance and tradition and culture. Apparently here around this area they were seed farmers. Seed farming today is going to be a billion dollar business because of what they’re doing with seeds and stuff. I keep following that too. Some of that comes from our people. I keep telling my kids, “You know, you have nothing to be ashamed of because everything you were taught in school, half of it is lies.” It’s their story and sooner or later, we’re going to be included. We can’t blame the people of today but if you look back at the people from before and say, “Why did you do this?” Well now we know why.

DL: You’re confident the truth will come out?

ML: Oh yeah, it always does. With things like the Freedom of Information Act and stuff you know, it’s bound to come out. It’s going to hurt a lot of people but it has to be told because history has to be set right.

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

ML: I hope this goes somewhere. I hope it’s made more public. I really hope that this goes somewhere so that more people are aware of it. I was sad to hear of this, you know.

DL: Which part of it were you sad about? The executions?

ML: Yeah.

DL: We’ll pause for just a moment.
DL: We were talking just a little bit about the executions in Mankato and my question for Mr. Longclaws is that the Historical Society has also done a tribute with the descendents of white settlers who were killed in this war. From the records we’ve seen that four hundred to five hundred of the settlers on their farms were killed by Dakota people during the six-week war. Many of them have come to us with their stories and their tears and their regrets for what happened to their family members as well. So my question for you, and it’s a difficult one, is: Would you say they too deserve honor and commemoration and the memories from their family members who still to this day are sorry for what happened to them at the hands of the Dakota?

ML: Yeah. Both sides have to be treated equally in all matters. There’s two sides to every story. You have to hear both. This is the first I’ve heard of this and now I’m thinking about their side too. In the end there has to be a coming together. There has to be a realization that what happened was wrong. Can we fix it somehow? Can we do something so that it’s never forgotten and hopefully in this day and age, nothing like that will ever happen again. But both sides have to talk; there has to be a meeting. I don’t know if there ever was but there should be. If there is, I’d like to attend. I’d like to meet some of these people. I’m sure they’re good people – some of them. Convicts or whatever, but you know that’s in our history too. We’re not always good people, some of them have been to jail, whatnot. Some have served in the military. You know it’s walks of life but get them together. Maybe you can come to a good understanding as to how and why. It’s like when you meet people and you talk about your history, you find out other things – who your relatives are. Well there’s some things in here that maybe the government doesn’t know about but the people will be able to put these things together. Then the government will be able to hash things out.

DL: All right Mr. Longclaws, I appreciate your time.