DL: This is Deborah Locke; I’m at Dakota Tipi First Nation near Portage la Prairie, Canada, and I am with Elsie Noel on January 18, 2012. This is part of the oral history project at the Minnesota Historical Society. Elsie is an elder with the Dakota Tipi First Nation and we’re about to start our questions now. The first question is: could you spell your name for me?

EN: E-L-S-I-E. Middle name too?

DL: Sure.

EN: B-O-H-P-A N-O-E-L.

DL: Very good; thanks. Do you have a nickname?

EN: No, I don’t. Not that I can think of.

DL: That’s all right. When and where were you born?

EN: I was born on Birdtail Sioux Reserve.

DL: And on what day?

EN: June 15, 1924.

DL: That would make you about 87 or 88.
EN: 87. I'll be 88 in June.

DL: Who were your parents; what were their names?
EN: My dad was Samuel Bohpa.

DL: And your mother?
EN: She was Florence Paul.

DL: How do you spell her last name?
EN: Just Paul.

DL: P-A-U-L.

EN: Yes.

DL: Your siblings, your brothers and sisters; how many did you have?
EN: 8 all together, but 2 died very young.

DL: Are any of them still alive?
EN: Yes, 2 sisters.

DL: What are the names of your grandparents on both sides?
EN: My grandfather on my dad’s side is Silas Bohpa and Ruth Bohpa, his wife. And Silas' mother is one of Red Cloud’s sisters.

DL: I see, Silas' mother.
EN: Yes, is Red Cloud’s sister.

DL: Do you remember his mother’s name; Silas' mother's name?
EN: No, I don’t. They must have told me, but I was too small to remember. Before I went to school they told me a lot of this stuff and then I was in a boarder school, so I never did find out what their Indian names were.

DL: Silas was your grandfather, is that right?
EN: Yup.

DL: So then Silas’ mother would be your great-great grandmother.
EN: Just my great-grandmother.

DL: Your great-grandmother. And she was the sister of Red Cloud.

EN: Yeah. I met a woman in Brandon Dakota, and she came from Rapid City; I kind of forgot her name. Anyway, we all had to tell our background, like who our parents were and all that. I told them that my dad always said Red Cloud was his grandfather, and his sister was his grandma. And my grandpa, her husband, is John Bohpa; that’s my great-grandpa. I guess they’re all from the States; they all came from over there. As a matter of fact, my Grandma Ruth Paul, my dad’s mother, she has land in Sisseton and one time they phoned me and told me I inherited my grandma’s land. But she never made a will so they said I have to get the rest of the family, like my grandma’s two daughters have children in that area still living, I have to get their birth certificates; it’s the only way we can get anything out of it.

DL: Have you tried to get their birth certificates yet, to get it moving?

EN: Yes. This one family, my Auntie Mary’s family, they all seem to be getting Alzheimer’s. Two of her brothers had it and now my cousin told me that she’s getting it too. So I’ve been wanting to see them. Maybe her daughter can get those birth certificates, even if her uncles are out of it. One doesn’t know who he is.

DL: How long have you lived here?

EN: Oh, I didn’t live here very long. I got married to Max Noel and lived here with him, but I stayed in Portage for quite a while; over 35 years, I guess, and then I moved back to my reserve where I was born.

DL: And that would be where?

EN: Birdtail.

DL: Birdtail; you mentioned that. And did I ask you where you were born- what city or town?

EN: Yes, Birdtail Reserve.

DL: Birdtail Reserve. Do you have family members at other reserves or communities that are Dakota?

EN: Yes, my cousin lives in Sioux Valley; her name is Margaret. Don’t tell me how they spell her last name because I don’t know.

DL: Where did you go to school?
EN: Birtle.

DL: Birtle, what's that?

EN: That's a town. There was an Indian School there; it's still there on a hill.

DL: Is it still a school; do children still go there?

EN: No, it's not a school anymore; it's just a building on a hill.

DL: What grades did it offer?

EN: I think they went from 1 to 8.

DL: What kind of student were you? Did you like school?

EN: Oh, I didn't mind.

DL: What is your earliest memory from being a little girl?

EN: Oh, I told something one time that my dad said, "Oh, you couldn't have remembered that," he said, "You were only two weeks old." I said, "You took me to this place where my two grandmothers were," I said, "My mom's mother and my dad's mother, they were by a campfire, they were cooking, but it was away from the reserve somewhere. I don't know what was going on there, but they were both cooking. But they drove up and they stopped and they come and picked me up, and that's what I remember." And I told him that and he said, "Oh, you couldn't have remembered that," he said, "You were only two weeks old."

DL: But you did remember.

EN: Yes.

DL: You remember being a little baby?

EN: Yes.

DL: You do!

EN: That's crazy; it sounds crazy, but that's how it was!

DL: What else do you remember from being a little tiny baby?

EN: That was it.

DL: That was it. That's a remarkable story.
EN: (laughing) Yes, that’s what my dad tells me. They were in a buggy; it wasn’t a wagon. But of course, they had nothing but horses then. And one of my grandmas come and picked me up- that’s what I remember. And I told him and he didn’t believe me, because they never told me anything like that, I just told him that’s what I remember.

DL: So the transportation then was not cars, obviously. You were in a buggy?

EN: Yes.

DL: And it was horse-drawn?

EN: Yes. It must have been 1924, because he said I was only 2 weeks old.

DL: What do you remember from when you were a small child? Like, where did you live; what was the house like where you grew up?

EN: Oh, we had a big log house; well, lumber roof anyway. And I always remember there were two beds, a table and chairs, wash stand, a cupboard, stoves- two of them- one was a heater. And then one day there we seen some Mounties going by on a sleigh; about 4 of 5 them standing in a double-box sleigh.

DL: Mounties.

EN: Yes. And I said to my mom, “Why are these police here, Mom?” And she said, “A girl ran away from school. They think she froze somewhere.” And sure enough, they never found her, but in the spring a farmer found her along the bush in his field. She never made it. She was just about two miles from the reserve when she froze. That’s what I always remember.

DL: How tragic.

EN: I wasn’t in school then; I was still at home. I asked my mom, “Why did she run away?” And she said, “Maybe she didn’t like it there.”

DL: That’s a sad story.

(interruption on tape)

DL: There were 2 beds (in the family home), but yet you said there were 8 children in the family?

EN: I was the first one. Then there must have been my brother, and my sister was a baby then. We moved to a bigger house.
DL: What did you do for fun as a little girl?

EN: Oh, we just played ball and we had a swing, and that’s about it.

DL: Did you help around the house?

EN: Oh yeah, we helped. One time we went to the garden and pulled weeds and here we pulled all the onions out. (laughing) She sure got after us! My Auntie Mary was there and she was making dinner and we were supposed to be helping our mom. Mom chased us and we were both crying and they said, “Florence, what are you doing, killing your kids?” (laughing) That’s one of the things I was remembering.

DL: Tell me about the food you ate as a child; what did your mother prepare? Did she bake bread?

EN: Yes, all kinds of things. You see, my mother was a half- her father was a white man, and so she did a lot of fancy cooking. I grew up eating nice things; I got used to it. She must have been a good cook, I’m still alive.

DL: And pretty healthy.

EN: They took some skin out of here to see if I have cancer or something, and they told me that I was very healthy for somebody my age my doctor says. I had this skin problem and that’s where I lost a lot of my hair, and now it started growing. It’s here, see? They’re black here on this side. It wasn’t like that before; it was all white. My hair is coming out again. I lost a lot of my hair. The doctor gave me a pill that dried up my skin so bad. See the scar it left on my head? My hair came out, falling out, and my hair was as white as snow. Then I had to see a specialist and I got better. He said, “Oh, Elsie, you’ll be dancing around in 3 weeks’ time,” he said to me. “Yeah, if somebody gives me a good knee,” I said to him, because I had a bad knee. I think that’s from falling off a horse and the horse landed on my legs.

DL: How old were you then?

EN: Oh, must have been 17.

DL: I see. That was your primary way of getting around, the horse? Horse and buggy or horse riding?

EN: Yes, riding horses. I used to visit old people, rode around visiting old people, seeing how they are, because some of them were living alone. The one day there I was going over a creek on a horse I never rode; it belonged to my brother, he loaned it to me. You know, when she got to this creek she kind of reared up and jumped over that creek and she slipped and somehow I fell and she fell on top of both of my legs. And we went to town; I put on a skirt and blouse and Mom says, “Put your slacks on. What
happened to your legs,” she said, “they’re both black.” The back of both my legs were bruised to bad, she told me to wear slacks again.

DL: Which relative had the most influence on you?

EN: Relative. I guess it must be my uncles; they were always teaching me to ride. My mom’s brothers. The one that’s younger, he’s Mom’s favorite brother; he was always teaching me to ride, always teaching me to draw, always teaching me to do things before I even went to school.

DL: And were you speaking the Dakota language then?

EN: Yeah. Mom talked to us in English now and then, so we knew a bit before we went to school.

DL: You knew a bit of English, but you spoke mostly Dakota.

EN: Yeah. That’s how Dad talked to us.

DL: Can you still speak Dakota?

EN: Not very good. Dad told me not to talk in a crowd in Dakota because he said, “You might give them the wrong idea,” he said. I don’t speak it very good, he said. You see, you lose your language when you go to boarding schools because we had signs on every door that said, Speak English. And if you don’t, you get strapped.

DL: Where did you go to boarding school?

EN: Well, that’s Birtle.

DL: Birtle. So Birtle was grades 1 through 8, and that was boarding school.

EN: Yes.

DL: Okay, did you finish all 8 grades?

EN: Yes.

DL: Did you go on from there?

EN: No.

DL: And who was running that Indian school, was it a religious group, or the government?

EN: It was a Presbyterian school.
DL: Was your family Christian, or did you follow Dakota ways?

EN: They were Christian. They were Presbyterians. We had a nice church right on my dad’s land,

DL: Did your family celebrate the holidays?

EN: Like Christmas and Thanksgiving? Yes.

DL: Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving?

EN: Yup.

DL: How did they do that?

EN: The same as everybody else. As far as I can remember it’s always the same way as the white people celebrate Christmas and…

DL: So you might go to church and you might have a special meal- that sort of celebration?

EN: No. Just the same meal that we usually get, I guess. I never knew of any special meals except for Easter and Christmas, you have turkey for Christmas and Ham and scalloped potatoes for Easter.

DL: Do you still do that?

EN: Yes, I still do that.

DL: Are you still Presbyterian?

EN: Yes.

DL: Do you still go to the Presbyterian Church?

EN: No, we don’t have our church now. We do have a church, but there’s no minister. That’s really bad.

DL: I’m going to try to adjust your mic (microphone); I’m getting some background noise. There- now it’s more quiet. So, who would you say- you mentioned your uncles who taught you to ride and to draw. And the language you learned at home. Did you learn any of the traditional ways? Did you have any relatives who understood the medicine?

EN: Yeah, my grandmother.
DL: What was her name again, which Grandma?

EN: Ruth Paul.

DL: What did she teach you, or what did you learn from watching her?

EN: I learned quite a bit because I spent a lot of time with my grandma. What medicines are good for this and that.

DL: And they worked, I bet.

EN: Yes, they do.

DL: She knew what to get from the forest; she knew what to pick.

EN: Yup.

DL: Did you learn it too, and were you able to carry on that tradition?

EN: Some of them. Some of them we use yet; the medicines she used.

DL: I see. If I had a cold, could you fix it?

EN: (laughing) You wouldn’t like to drink it, though.

DL: Would it work?

EN: It works.

DL: Does it still work? Do you still use it?

EN: Yes, a cousin of mine told me that she had a real bad cold when she came over here. When we went home and she was using that same medicine, “It tastes awful, but it’s getting rid of my cold,” she said.

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

EN: Not much, because we were in a boarding school.

DL: And there were signs that said do not speak the Dakota language, and they did not teach anything about Dakota ways.

EN: Nope.
DL: Wasn’t that difficult for you as a little girl, to not be able to speak your native language?

EN: Yeah, we’d come home and start talking to our dad in English. He understands all right, because he went to school too. But he used to teach us words a lot. Some words he used and he said they weren’t even words, he said, “you made them up.” So that’s when we had to really smarten up and try and learn our language. So I spent a lot of time with the old people; they’re the ones who talk Sioux all the time, so I learned a lot from them.

DL: What stories did they tell you? The school wasn’t going to teach you anything about being Dakota, but what family history did you hear from your relatives?

EL: Oh, lots. My grandma told me stories that really happened, I guess, a long time ago. We found out that the Sioux were in Niagara Falls. She told me a story about a couple, a man and his wife who had a little girl. She told me that man was fooling around behind that woman’s back, and somehow she found out, and to an Indian, that’s like an insult to a woman. And they heard somebody singing out where the river goes over the falls; they looked, and here that woman was sitting in the canoe with her little girl in the front. They had all their best clothes, whatever they are, and they were going to go over the falls. She was committing suicide with her baby because her husband fooled around. They called him and he seen them and he tried to save them and he couldn’t do it. They never found the body, but my grandma said they used to see tracks of a little fawn along the river down where it was flat, and they said those were the ones.

DL: The woman and her child who came back.

EN: Yes, they came back as a deer. That was a story she told me one time.

DL: Did you ever hear of the 1862 Dakota War when you were growing up?

EN: No, growing up nobody never mentioned things like that, so I didn’t know.

DL: Did you understand that some Dakota people lived in Minnesota at one time and had to leave?

EN: Yes, my grandmother was one of them, this Ruth Paul. She had a first husband before she married Silas, so she must have lived over there first and then came to Canada.

DL: Ruth Paul, then, was from Minnesota; do you remember where she lived in Minnesota?

EN: My auntie, one of her daughters, one of my dad’s sisters said that we have relatives over there. She told me their names; I should have wrote them down.
DL: Why did Ruth Paul leave Minnesota?

EN: I don’t know why she left, because they used to talk about Minnesota a lot.

DL: Do you know when she left? Was it with her first husband, or her second?

EN: It must have been after her first husband died or something, because I don’t know where she met John Bohpa, but that’s the one she lived with in Birdtail.

DL: So she left Minnesota, but you’re not sure why. Would it have been in about the mid 1850’s, 1860’s, around that time.

EN: Yeah, must be around that time because when her family came across, they were here in Portage. She said they used to be down by the river, they used to be swimming. She said one time a minister came there and baptized them all. She was laughing, she said, “I don’t know what kind of names they gave us.” She doesn’t even remember, but I heard- her brother must have because they were McClouds. She was Ruth McCloud and he was John McCloud. And they had a sister, but that sister had an Indian name, she didn’t have an English name. And that’s all she had was just her Indian name; no last name, nothing. So I often wonder where she was. But they said she was married over here and lived in Long Plain. She married one of those Sotos, and dad said they never had no children.

DL: When did you first hear about everything that happened in Minnesota in the 1860’s about, first it was a conflict, then it turned into a war, and then all the Dakota were chased out? When did you first hear about that?

EN: Oh, just what the old people used to say. This one old lady I used to visit in Birdtail, she lived by herself and her name was an Indian name, but the white people gave her the name Jennie. Her Indian name could have been Blue Bird, only in Sioux, because that’s her last name; they just translated it to English.

DL: Jennie Blue Bird; that’s pretty.

EN: Yes. And her mom was Annie Red Bird. They both married there, and they both have tombstones there with their names on.

DL: I see. And what story do you remember her telling you?

EN: She said when they were running across (Minnesota) They must (have been) coming this way (to Canada), because they said they were carrying her on her mom’s back. She said she was about 3 or 4 years old and she was tired, so her mom carried her. (They went) at night and stayed in the bush all day, and then they traveled at night. Jennie started laughing and her mom says, “If you don’t keep quiet, we’ll push you off here and leave you here.” They were supposed to be quiet; they didn’t want the white people to know that they were running away.
DL: The little girl didn’t know there was a price on her head.
EN: No, she didn’t.
DL: But the parents did.
EN: Yes. That’s how they came across.
DL: Can you imagine what an adventure that was for that family?
EN: Yeah.
DL: How many children did they bring with them; just her?
EN: Just her.
DL: And they made it; they were successful.
EN: Yes. They made it and some of them went as far as Prince Albert, that came from over there.
DL: On foot.
EN: Yes.
DL: They ran from Minnesota to Prince Albert.
EN: They kept moving further north, I guess, because they didn’t want to be found. That’s how they ended up over there. And they talked just the same as the people that come from Birdtail. They all seem the same. There is a difference, kind of, in the Dakota language, but they all talk the same.
DL: Did Jennie say that her parents ever returned to Minnesota?
EN: No, never.
DL: They stayed here.
EN: Yes, they did because both her and her mother died in Birdtail; they’re both buried there. So they never returned.
DL: They never returned. That’s a very dramatic story that Jennie told you.
EN: Yes, she told me things when I’d go visit her.
DL: Do you remember anything else she told you from that time?

EN: Oh, not that I can remember. She did tell me funny things, but it’s all that happened over here. The only story that I know is how she came across. She told me that a lot.

DL: Did she have children?

EN: No. She never had children.

DL: I’m going to name some places, and you can tell me if you ever visited them. Have you ever been to Minnesota?

EN: Yes.

DL: When did you go?

EN: Oh, 1981, I guess I was over there. We went to a powwow there. And I’ve been through there, flying through from Arizona.

DL: You are from here; you were born here, but your mother had land in Sisseton…

EN: No, my grandmother.

DL: Your grandmother. So you probably have a clear family tie to the United States.

EN: Yeah, so was my other grandmother, my mother’s mother, she had land over there, but they sold it after she died. The ones that were living, her family, they all got something out of it. So they’re all from over there.

DL: When you went to Minnesota- this may sound like a peculiar question: when you went to Minnesota did you feel anything different about it than your home in Canada? Because some Dakota say they still think of Minnesota as home, although many of them have family members that were kicked out a long time ago, they still feel a tie to Minnesota. Do you feel any sort of tie?

EN: Yeah, I feel like that when I go to the States; as soon as I go into North Dakota I feel as if I’m home.

DL: Seriously!

EN: Yes. I said that and this woman that I met in Brandon, when I told them that my dad, Red Cloud was his grandpa, and I said, “You know, whenever I go down to the states, as soon as I cross the border, I always feel at home.” “You should!” she said, “because your family was all from there.”
DL: Do you think they welcome you when you go back there?

EN: They do. They even told us to go down to Rapid City. She lives right in Rapid City, but the reserve she comes from is Pine Ridge. I said one time one of my boys asked me, I said, “How could we have some relatives in the states?” “Well you tell him,” she says, “He’s got lots of relatives over there, the Red Cloud family.”

DL: Wouldn’t it be delightful to meet them all.

EN: Yes, we were thinking of going over there to see her. My two older boys want to go with me down there. Because her mom is still living; she said she would be a distant cousin to me. She said her mom was two years older than me, and I haven’t heard that she died or anything, so she must be still living too.

DL: Wouldn’t that be wonderful if in the summer you could drive down?

EN: Yes, that’s what we’re going to do. Both my boys work in Brandon Maple Leaf, they work for Maple Leaf, and they said they’re going to take their holidays together so they can take me down there.

DL: How many children did you have?

EN: I had eleven. I lost two; the others are all still living.

DL: You must have fed them well.

EN: Three of them are here with me right now.

DL: When you went to the States, you said you went through North Dakota to South Dakota, did you get to Minnesota?

EN: Yes.

DL: Where did you go there?

EN: Oh, just in Minnesota, the town. That’s where we were invited to. And there’s another place we went to, Bacon Ridge or something. There was a wedding there, we were invited over there, we went down there one time.

DL: Did you ever go to any of the locations where the war took place, the battles, or Mankato, or anyplace like that?

EN: Yes. Mankato was the one we seen.

DL: You went to Mankato; that’s where the hangings took place.
EN: Yeah.

DL: That’s very tragic.

EN: Yes.

DL: How did you feel when you were in Mankato?

EN: It makes you mad to have things like that happen to your own people. I don’t think I had any relatives there, but these boys’ dad and them, did.

DL: Your sons’ dad?

EN: Um hum. He died about two weeks ago. It’s over two weeks now. He’s buried here at the old Dakota cemetery.

DL: I see. So on your husband’s side then, there was a direct connection to the hangings in Mankato.

EN: No. But the grandfathers used to say that they’re related to Sitting Bull; their grandfathers.

DL: You said the boys here, that would be your sons?

EN: Yeah.

DL: I see. I’ll mention a few other places and you can tell me if you ever went to these places too: You mentioned Mankato. St. Paul or Minneapolis; did you ever go there?

EN: Yup.

DL: And did you ever go to New Ulm?

EN: No.

DL: There’s a sacred place with a spring near St. Paul that’s very important to Dakota people. Did you ever go there?

EN: No. I hope to go there sometime.

DL: I hope you can. What about the Lower Sioux or the Upper Sioux communities.

EN: No.

DL: How about the Birch Coulee battlefield.
EN: No.

DL: Or Fort Ridgely?

EN: No.

DL: What is your opinion of the war?

EN: I don’t know what to think of it because I don’t know much about it.

DL: What do you think of the treaties that were drawn well before the war?

EN: Were they all kept? No. Not much.

DL: Not much of the treaties.

EN: Yeah. And we’re not treaty Indians over here.

DL: Not in Canada?

EN: The other tribes are, but not the Sioux.

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

EN: Yes.

DL: Why?

EN: So people will know what went on a long time ago among the Sioux. A lot of them don’t know nothing, the white people, you tell them and they’re really surprised.

DL: And everyone should know, right?

EN: Yes.

DL: What is a good way to commemorate those events?

EN: I don’t know.

DL: Well, you’re doing it right now, by offering your story and your history.

EN: Yeah.

DL: Well, now we’ll talk a little more about your family. You mentioned that you were married. Were you married once or twice?
EN: Twice.

DL: And you had how many children, again?

EN: Eleven.

DL: And how many grandchildren do you have?

EN: Oh, about 15; there’s not very many, and with 7 great-grandchildren. They’re all working and among white people I think, most of my grandchildren, the older ones.

DL: Did you marry Dakota men?

EN: Yes.

DL: So your children are all Dakota.

EN: Yes.

DL: Tell me about a typical day for you. How do you spend your time?

EN: Well, I used to work all the time. I worked for 25 years here in Portage.

DL: What did you do?

EN: Well, I worked at a soup plant, Campbell’s Soup. Everybody knows Campbell’s Soup. There was a man that came from the States, and he was the boss of the Campbell’s Soup Company, and he was talking to me and he asked me what my name was and I told him. He went back and he came back about three or four years later and I moved to- there used to be a mushroom plant here across the road that Campbell’s Soup owned, and I lived way over at the other end there. And I transferred to the mushroom plant. I said, “I’d like to transfer there so I’ll just have to walk across the road and work,” I said. “Okay, they said, you can do that. And he came there when he came to the plant. It used to be way over there, northwest of Portage, that’s where the big plant used to be. He come over there and I said, “I’ve seen that man before,” we had a coffee break. And he turned around and he tapped me on the shoulder and I looked back and he said, “Elsie, can I borrow your spoon?” We were having coffee. And everybody looked surprised because he called me by name. And he says, “Elsie’s one of these people you meet once and you never forget.”

DL: Very kind. Here’s a hard question: What contributions do you think Dakota people have made to Canada?

EN: Gee, I don’t know. I can’t think of…
DL: That is a hard question. If you had a magic wand, if you could wave a wand and change whatever you wanted, what would you wish for Dakota people today? If you could make a great big sweeping change, what would it be?

EN: For all of the Dakota people to be honest. Because nowadays it seems they’re not.

DL: All right. Thank you for your time.