DL = Deborah Locke

EL = Ed LaBelle

DL: This is Deborah Locke at the home of Ed LaBelle in Stillwater, Minnesota. It is June 7th, 2012. We are here for an interview for the Historical Society’s Oral History Project. Mr. LaBelle has already received the questions and I will start with the first one, which is: Could you spell your name for us?

EL: Ed LaBelle L-a-B-e-l-l-e

DL: Thanks, do you have a nickname?

[In a later written comment, Mr. LaBelle clarified that Dakota may receive a nickname and a “spirit” name. The latter is given in a ceremony.]

EL: Cek-Pa [pronounced as “Check-pa”]

DL: What does that mean?

EL: That means twin in the Dakota [language]. I had a twin sister that died at 13 days.

DL: Did you grow up with that name?

EL: Yes, I did, well as long as we lived on the reservation. We moved here in 1942. I was seven years old. We spoke the language while we were on the reservation but when we moved here, there was nobody to speak to; consequently, I lost a lot of it.

DL: Who gave the nickname to you?

EL: A man by the name of John Pompier. He was half Dakota [and half] French. He was what you refer to as a Medicine Man or Wicasta Wakan. He was a homeless man that traveled the roads in South Dakota on the reservation and he would go into homes...
and give ceremonies to the newborns and things of that sort. People would take care of him, feed him, give him a place to lay down. He’d stay for a few days and then he’d go to another home. [I] often [saw] him walking down the road all the time. He was quite a character.

DL: You had a name for him or a word for him. What was it?

EL: Wicasta is man, Wakan is Holy. He was a Holy Man.

DL: How would you spell that in Dakota?


DL: When and where were you born?

EL: I was born in Veblen, South Dakota on January 10th, 1935.

DL: Veblen, how is that spelled?

EL: Veblen, V-E-B-L-E-N.

DL: Who were your parents?

EL: My father was Edward LaBelle, my mother was Margaret Quinn.

DL: And your brothers and sisters, their names?

EL: My older sister was born in 1918. Her name was Sarah. She lived into her teen years and she died from an ear infection. My next sister was Ruby. She was born in 1919. She passed away about a year and a half ago. She was the oldest of the siblings. My oldest brother is Eugene and my older sister is Phoebe and my younger brother is Larry. I have three surviving siblings.

DL: What was the twin’s name who died?

EL: Rachel, Rachel Angeline.

DL: Who were your grandparents on both sides?
EL: My grandparents on my father’s side were a man named Baptiste LaBelle and his first wife was Mary Akeron. My mother’s parents, her father was William Quinn the second. Her mother’s name was Sarah LaCroix.

DL: How long have you lived in Stillwater?

EL: I’ve lived in Stillwater 32 years.

DL: Have you ever lived anywhere else? You mentioned the reservation.

EL: Yes, well, Sisseton, Wahpeton, Dakota.

DL: That’s in South Dakota.

EL: Yes, Sisseton. The correct pronunciation is Sissetonwan. That’s in the vocabulary of the Dakota language. Sissetowanwan Wapetonwan Dakota Oyate. Oyate means the nation or the people.

DL: And you were on the reservation for seven years?

EL: For seven years, yes. We moved to the cities during the war, 1942.

DL: Why did your family move?

EL: There was no work up there [for] my father who was a carpenter by trade. There was very little call for that on the reservation. There was no money back then. So he moved down here in 1941. He got a job at the packing houses, Amour Inc. in South St. Paul. He was here probably about four months and he sent money to us so the rest of the family could come down. We arrived here in April of 1942, the family, I, myself, my younger brother, and my older sister, and my older brother. My older sister, Ruby was at Flandreau Boarding School back then. She didn’t come down with us.

DL: Where did you live?

EL: We lived in St. Paul on Mount Airy Street. [There] was very little housing back then during the war. We had to move in with one of my cousins. Her name was Maryanne LaCroix. She was a devout Catholic woman and in order for us to live on her property -- upstairs from her -- my sister Phoebe and I had to attend Catholic School even though we were not Catholic. She had hopes that we would go to Catechism, possibly take up the religion, which we didn’t do. We were in that school for a few months and my sister
turned 15 and she told me one day, she said, “Edward, you’re on your own, I’m quitting school.” [Laughter] I said, “What do you mean, you can’t leave me here.” She did, she went on and got a job. I stayed until we moved out of there. We moved over to the West side in St. Paul to another apartment. It was quite an experience being in a Catholic School as the only Presbyterian in the room. I remember when the kids would go to communion in the morning. Consequently, they didn’t have any breakfast and they’d go to communion and I’d sit in the room by myself till they came back. When they came back, they were given milk and cookies and donuts and I wouldn’t get any because I didn’t go to confession. [Laughter] I told my mother that and she said, “Well you got to get out of there. I’ll take you out of there.” So I went to public school after that, Franklin School to be exact, in St. Paul. Then we moved to South Dakota. My dad got a job in South Dakota again as a carpenter with the tribe. Me and my younger brother and my mother and dad moved up there to Sisseton. We lived in a trailer house way out on the prairie. We almost froze to death. I mean Sisseton winters are 20 to 30 below. [Laughter] We had just a little wood stove. I went to school in Sisseton. This was still during the Second World War. Finally my mother said, “We can’t live here any longer, we’ll freeze to death in this place.” So we moved back to the Cities again. We’ve been here ever since. I think that was – 1945 -- because I remember President Roosevelt dying. That really hit my dad hard. He actually cried over it. Like I said, we’ve been here ever since.

DL: You are an enrolled member of Sisseton?

EL: Yes I am.

DL: Do you have family members at other reservations?

EL: Not that I know of. There might be some distant relatives probably at Prior Lake or probably some at Standing Rock or Crow Creek or Prairie Island.

DL: What kind of student were you?

EL: I was not very good. I never graduated from high school. I went [through] the eighth grade. I quit. Back then you could quit school. I turned fifteen and got a job on the railroad, Northern Pacific Railway, as dining car dishwasher. I was only fifteen but I forged my birth certificate and I got a job. I had to have a job. It was an experience traveling the country. Our route was St. Paul to Seattle, Seattle back to Chicago and then back to St. Paul again. I only made about 35 or 40 cents an hour back then.

DL: What was it about school that turned you off?
EL: I don't say I was slow or anything but they were [teaching] subjects that I couldn't keep up with. I just wasn't interested in school, not like I am now. I'm an avid reader now. I read everything. I love reading especially historical things, especially things that involve native people. That's where I got most of my education on native facts and figures and things of that sort. It was nice, I like it.

DL: Did the subject of boarding school ever come up?

EL: Not for me, no. [added later: My sister Ruby attended Flandreau Boarding School.] My father went to boarding school. He went to Sisseton Indian Industrial School. I've still got his diplomas; I've got all his stuff. My father was a minister on the reservation. He was a Presbyterian [in] what they called back then the Dakota Presbyterian Mission Society. They are probably disbanded now. Like I said, he was a carpenter by trade and we used to travel to different reservations with the family and he'd fix up the churches and fix up the roofs and give the sermon on Sunday. He was never ordained as a minister but because he spoke the language, he was very much into ministry and the Dakota Bible. It was a learning experience for me and my sister. We traveled down to the Yankton Reservation. We lived there for about a year. It is by Sioux Falls. We traveled around and did different things. [It was] very interesting.

DL: What is your earliest memory as a child?

EL: Going to country school I guess. I went to country school with my sister on the reservation. There were probably only about 12 kids in the whole class. They were mostly white kids, though. We lived quite a ways from the school. We didn’t ride the bus or anything but my sister and I, we had to walk to school. I remember one time; we used to take our lunch pails with us. They used to pack Karo Syrup in pails. [The pails] had a little handle on them and that was our lunch pail. My mother would bake bread and make peanut butter sandwiches and we’d take that with us and we’d go to school. One day we were coming home my sister and I and a big storm came up. The wind was blowing and my sister said, “Come on run, we’ve got to get home, the storm is going to kill you.” The wind blew and it blew my pail and [the pail] started bouncing across the prairie. I took off after it and my sister said, “Forget that pail, come on let’s go.” [Laughter] That was quite an experience.

DL: Did you capture the pail?

EL: No I left it go, I went looking for it a couple days later. I did find it again. [Laughter]
DL: Was it all right?

EL: Oh yeah.

DL: Did you eat the sandwich?

EL: I already had eaten the sandwich at school. [shows photograph] In fact this church here is a… My dad built that church. It’s on the reservation west of Veblen.

DL: Still standing?

EL: No, in fact that’s the second church he built. The first one he and my uncle built, my uncle Howard. They built a church and it burned down so they built this one. I think this one burned down in 1960. The cemetery [is] right next to it.

DL: Would you describe this picture for us?

EL: This is a picture of the church at Veblen, South Dakota. It’s an Indian church, mostly a native congregation attended it. We lived in a little house that was about over to here. It was called a guild house where the people would come to church and they’d have prayer meetings in this little bitty house. It wasn’t very big. There was a wood stove in there. It was big enough to hold about 40 people. We lived in there for awhile. I’ve got a picture on the wall of me.

DL: The little boy standing on the stoop.

EL: Yeah, I was six years old then. That was taken of me when I was standing on the steps of this church.

DL: Which is a wood framed structure. It looks fairly small. I don’t know that you could get more than 20 people in there.

EL: No we couldn’t.

DL: And it’s quite old even now in the photo – weather beaten with no front door for example. [It] looks like the paint has come off. Was it painted white when your father built it?
EL: It probably was maybe grayish white. I still remember going to church there and having these Indians sing the hymns in the Dakota language. It brings back a lot of good memories.

DL: Was your family belief system a combination of Dakota and Christianity or was it mostly...?

EL: It was mostly Dakota Christianity. Like I said my father spoke the language quite well. My mother wouldn’t speak it. I don’t know why. She couldn’t get some of the words and she was embarrassed, I guess, that she couldn’t speak that well. My mother also was semi-illiterate. She did go to boarding school. She could write her name but she couldn’t read very well. She could count money though. [Laughter] She’d send me to the store. She’d say, “Don’t let that Jew cheat you. I want that change back.” [Laughter]

DL: The store owner was Jewish?

EL: He was Jewish when we lived on the West side. In fact they owned all the property on the West side back then. We lived in their apartments and they owned the grocery stores and clothing stores and everything. [Laughter]

DL: Had he cheated her before?

EL: Well, I don’t know if he did or not but back then during the War you had to have ration stamps to buy food, you know sugar and meat, things like that and gasoline. It was called an “A” stamp. You put it on your windshield. You were only allowed so many gallons of gas. It was an experience. [Laughter]

DL: What did you do after school as a child, both on the reservation and then later?

EL: Well, on the res we used to run around down on the creeks and the bottoms and my sister and I just running. Having fun!

DL: Outside.

EL: Outside most of the time, yeah.

DL: Even in the winter months?
EL: In the winter months we’d sit in the house. We had a radio and the last house we lived in on the res did have electricity. But before that there was no electricity. In that house, we had a radio. That was quite an experience to listen to the radio. [Laughter]

DL: That’s a good answer leading to this next question which is: What’s the first news story you remember from your childhood?

EL: It’s probably stories of the War going back in the early forties, things of that sort. I still remember some of the old news casters; H. B. Kaltenborn was one of them and Edward R. Murrow. Some of the old news casters were on radio back then. The radios before that, my dad would… When we didn’t have any electricity, I remember he wanted to listen to the fights – Max Schmeling and… It was the World Championship heavy weight fight. He hooked a radio up to the car battery till he got it focused but the battery went dead. He couldn’t hear it. [Laughter] That was a disappointment to him.

DL: Which relative had the most influence on you?

EL: Oh, I guess my father did. I really loved my father. He was quite a guy.

DL: What made him special?

EL: Well, he was a very kind person. Like I said, he was a minister. He took great pride in speaking to all our relatives and speaking the language and giving the sermons and things of that sort. My mother, she was probably the same way but she had kind of a critical [nature] about her. She would say to my father once in a while. The Indians would come to church on Christmas Eve or on Sundays. All these Indians would come on horseback, some in old cars. They all had their new clothes on – bib overalls like that. [Laughter] My mother would say, “Oh, those Indians, they just come to church to show off their new clothes.” [Laughter] My dad would say, “Now Margaret don’t be saying things like that.” She would cook for them in this little house that I told you about. She’d cook something for them every weekend. She baked bread and she’d feed them. She’d say, “Oh, these Indians just come to church to get something to eat. Then they’re drunk all week.” [Laughter] She was very critical of some of these people. It was comical sometimes.

DL: Did your family celebrate the holidays?

EL: Yes we did. Yes we did because of my father. I still do. I keep my Christmas cards up all year. I get new ones and put those away and put the other ones up. I’m between Christianity and Dakota spirituality. I think they’re similar, they’re very much similar. We
all believe in the same God. It's a higher power and it’s good. As we say, “wah-ste” or “good” or “lila,” very good indeed.

DL: Who taught you the most about being Dakota?

EL: I guess I taught myself, with all the reading I did. When I was younger, I did speak to my grandfather but he didn’t [speak] too much English. I’d have to listen real hard and try to figure out what he was talking about. My grandfather Baptiste, he was a… I would say he was more of a progressive type of person. He never went to school. He never had an education but at one time he had a lot of money. He was a farmer. He raised his own horses. He raised his own crops. I think at one time he had the first threshing machine in Roberts County. He had a crew of probably 20 or 30 guys and he would travel around with these Indians and this threshing machine. It had a boiler that they had to take with them that they would feed wood in to keep the threshing machine running. He’d go to different counties and I think probably he did go all the way up into Canada to do this to help the farmers thresh their wheat. That was another thing. Back then wheat farmers during the harvest…

DL: We’re back after a short break. Ed’s wife Shirley returned home. Ed was talking about farmers during the harvest when we left off. Now he just mentioned that his father was in the First World War but why don’t we talk about farmers first.

EL: Well like I said my grandfather had that threshing machine and he did make some money doing that. Then his first wife passed away in 1905 and he married a woman named Katherine LaCroix. As a matter of fact, she attended Carlisle Indian Boarding School. She was pretty well educated in [Carlisle], Pennsylvania. That was one of the first boarding schools created after the Civil War. They brought children from all over the country there from different tribes. I have mixed feelings about boarding schools. It was the right thing to do. It introduced natives to civilization and things of that sort. It taught them how to read, how to act in public, but it took away spirituality. And the way they did it. They took young children 8, 9, 10 year olds away from the home for nine months of the year. Culturally, that was a bad thing to do with children because of the [cohesiveness] of the family. In our culture, family is everything. It’s called Tiospay-ya, extended family or immediate family. To take a child out of a family and put it in a boarding school and expect them to learn something. They were culturally not prepared to do [that]. It was a very hard thing to do. A lot of the children died in these boarding schools from disease, home sickness. The area surrounding Carlisle Boarding School is covered with over 200 graves containing the children that never made it home. One of the first things they did when they arrived at these boarding schools was they cut the hair of the little children. They went up, the child started crying; give them a piece of
candy. Indian children never had candy. They didn’t know what it was but it was sweet. It pacified them. But cutting the hair in our culture is a sign that someone in the family had died. We never cut our hair unless someone dies. The child believed, who died? Was it my mother, my father, my sister? That made it even more difficult for these children to explain. Like I said, boarding schools were good to an extent but the way they did it was not good.

DL: Did you learn traditional ways while you were growing up?

EL: Yes, I did from my grandfather. Some of my uncles would come and tell stories about the old people. And this old medicine man, he’d come to the house. He spoke English. He’d tell stories of the old times of how they should live their lives. Everything in our culture depended on getting together. The word Dakota means the alliance. We have to stick together. That’s the meaning of Dakota. So that in itself was… I learned a lot from that and like I said, I’m an avid reader. I love to read history, anything that has to do with native spirituality, native ways, and things of that sort.

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

EL: Well like I said, my uncles and my grandfather. My father was more into Christianity. As far as the 1862 Conflict, my father only would call it the New Ulm Massacre. We didn’t know what that was. That’s the only time that he ever mentioned things of that sort. The Dakota Conflict, the New Ulm Massacre, well who got massacred? Mostly the white people defending the town and Fort Ridgely. I did learn a lot. Like I said some of my uncles would come to the house. It was a learning experience. I loved it and I still do.

DL: Did your father or your uncles have a relative who fought in the New Ulm battle?

EL: Yes, this Louis LaBelle. He was my grandfather’s brother. I gave you that picture of him. He was living at Fort Ridgely when the outbreak started in 1862. His name was Louis LaBelle. Under the direction of Henry Sibley, they formed a group of young Indian half-breeds to go and fight in the Civil War. They were called by the name of the Renville Rangers. They were a group of Indians to help, like I said fight.

At that time the [Dakota] war broke out which was on August 16th and they took a lot of these Renville Rangers along with Sibley to go down and try to put down the insurrection. On the way, Louis LaBelle, my uncle, thought to himself, “Why am I doing this, why am I going down there to kill my relatives?” Consequently he deserted. He
went over with the Little Crow band. He fought in the battles. Birch Coulee, Wood Lake, Fort Ridgely, New Ulm. He fought in all those battles. When they rounded them all up, he was one of the 350 to 400 Indians brought to trial. He was convicted because all they had to say under this trial was, “Were you involved in this battle, that battle?” All they had to say was yes. “You’re guilty, you stand over there.” Consequently they made the list -- 342 of them were condemned to die at Mankato. But they sent the list to President Lincoln; he reduced it to 38, actually 39. Sent it back and Louis LaBelle’s name was not on there. He got a reprieve.

But he did do three years’ incarceration at Fort McClellan in Iowa. He was not married at the time so he didn’t have any wife or children to worry about. He did time there and he was released. He didn’t come back to Minnesota because at the time the Dakota’s were banned from the state under the direction of Alexander Ramsey. They took every Dakota Indian in the State and shipped them on a river boat down to St. Louis, Missouri. Some of them boarded cattle cars and were taken west to the border on South Dakota. Then they were put back on river boats and taken upstream on the Missouri to Crow Creek where they were dropped off. A lot of them died on the way. The surrounding hills above Crow Creek are covered with graves (mostly children’s graves) who died that first year from disease and starvation. There was nothing there. It’s a barren country. Trees don’t even grow there. How did they think these Indians were going to survive? They didn’t care. You started this war, you pay for it. They were taking it out on the civilians, the little children, the women and old people. My thinking is yes, to this day we can forgive, yes, but we will never forget, we will never forget. I won’t.

Like I said, my Uncle Louis was a true “patriot.” He did what he had to do. He believed in his people and he paid for it. He went to South Dakota and settled at the Sisseton Reservation and he married a Dakota woman. They received an allotment from the Federal Government under the Dawes Allotment Act which was in 1887/88. They were given 160 acres of land up there. That’s where he spent the rest of his life. He was elected County Sheriff of Roberts County while he lived there. In fact I’ve got that picture over there. He died on the reservation. He was a great human being and he was my uncle.

DL: Do you think he ever wanted to return to Minnesota?

EL: He couldn’t, like I said the Dakotas were banned from living in Minnesota. There were very few that stayed here. There was a group that lived along the Minnesota River. A group of probably about 200, they stayed in Minnesota. But they had to hide out in the corn fields. If a farmer [saw] him walking down the road they’d kill him. They
wanted revenge, white people wanted revenge. There are many stories about the movements of my people. The walk from Mankato to Fort Snelling, 1400 Indians, men, women, children, old people were made to walk from Mankato to Fort Snelling. This was in 1862. In the towns that they went through, people would come out with rocks and bottles and pitchforks. One woman came out with a teakettle of boiling water and threw it on some kids. One woman took a baby away from a woman that she was carrying, threw it on the ground and stomped on it. She killed it. The woman picked up her baby and stopped up the trail and put it in a tree and said the prayers and left it there. This was the feeling that Minnesotans had against our people and it's not good. They want us to forgive and we do forgive to a certain extent but we don't forget.

DL: Little Crow told the warriors at the soldiers lodge to spare the women and children when they went into battle.

EL: He did, he did.

DL: And that was ignored.

EL: It was.

DL: The Dakota went from farm to farm and basically wiped out with tomahawk and rifle, children, the women, the old people. The men were away at the Civil War.

EL: They did, yes.

DL: The men were away at the Civil War often. There were no guns. There was no defense and there were reports of mutilations of the bodies afterwards. So the families who did survive would return to farms and find this horrible aftermath. That led to a white hot rage.

EL: It did, it did and it still does to this day. These were the soldiers under Little Crow that were fanatical. See, our culture in the past was based on a warrior society. They lived to go to war against the Chippewa. That was an honor to go against your enemy. But that was gone when they tried to civilize, when they took the land away from the Dakota. They're saying that the soldier lodges [added later: “Tio-Tipi”] that they formed which were traditional, [but there was] no one to fight. [They] had no one to bring honors back to their people. This is why I think they killed the white people. They were so fanatical about the warrior society, the warrior lodges that they took it out on women and children. There was over 500 settlers killed along the Minnesota River. To this day
it’s a black mark on our people. It is. Sorry for that but that’s the way it is. They took out their revenge [added later: “because the people were starving to death”].

You’ve got to look at it [this way] too, the Dakota were starving to death when the Government owed them money. They had warehouses full of food down there at the Lower Agency, the Lower Sioux. Thomas Galbraith the Indian Agent said, “No, you can’t have that food. You have to wait for that annuity money to come from the Government. Then we’ll pass out the food.” But these Indians, a large group came from Sisseton and they settled around there. [They] brought their teepees. There was over a thousand lodges settled there. August 2012 addition from Mr. Ed LaBelle following the interview: The Indians could not understand the concept of being cooped up on the small land area along the Minnesota River (the Lower and Upper Sioux Reservations). Because they had always been free to roam the whole Upper Midwest and Plains areas on their yearly buffalo hunts for thousands of years, they could not adapt to a different way of life.

[They] came looking for food and it wasn’t given to them. That’s what started it. But the money wasn’t there. In fact the money came the same day that the outbreak started. The same day it came to the bank! It was too late then. [Added later: That annuity money that came was confiscated by the State and given to the white victims as compensation.

One of the traders, Andrew Myrick, said if they’re hungry, let them eat grass or their own dung.]

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

EL: Umm, there are the LaBattes; John LaBatte is one of my relatives. I understand he’s somewhat of a historian down there at New Ulm. Well, the Quinn’s, the LaCroix’s. There’s a book out about the Indians that were brought to Fort Snelling and put in that stockade during that first winter. In a list there published a group [named] LaBelle, now I still can’t figure out who these people are. I thought for a while it was probably Lewis LaBelle’s wife and children but he wasn’t married back then. He didn’t get married until 1873 so it couldn’t have been his dependents. I’m still wondering who these people were. It’s been a mystery, I can’t figure it out.

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

EL: Yes, we go down there every year for their pow-wow. Like I said, I’m in the vending business and sell fry bread and mini donuts and pop and water. Yeah we go down
every September. We also used to go to Winona. The city of Winona used to put on a Dakota Gathering they called it. It was in the Spring. It used to be in June. They moved the date up now to September. This was kind of what [you] probably would say was a healing ceremony put on by the city. They would bring speakers in from all over the country to speak about the culture, spirituality and the Indian Wars. [It was] very interesting. I'd go down with my trailer and sell fry bread. [It was] very educational to visit with some of the speakers.

DL: I'll mention some locations if you'll tell me if you're familiar with them and if you've ever been there – Fort Ridgely?

EL: No, I've never been there.

DL: Birch Coulee?

EL: No.

DL: Lower Sioux Agency?

EL: I've been there, yes.

DL: Why did you go there?

EL: I was just traveling through there one time and we stopped. This was quite a few years ago. Another place was at Traverse des Sioux. They have that museum there now or Interpretation Center. I've been there.

DL: Upper Sioux Agency?

EL: Yeah, that's at Granite Falls. I have relatives living there. We used to go there for their Pow-Wow a few years ago.

DL: What do you think of Henry Sibley?

EL: I think Henry Sibley was the most greedy person in the world. He was out for himself. He was a land hungry person who wanted to exploit the Indian people in order to gain riches for himself along with Alexander Ramsey. The money that they stole ended up in banks out east. Thousands and thousands of dollars they had in bank accounts. On the salary that they made, it couldn't be possible on that salary [to have so much money]. Where did that money come from? It had to come from the Indians,
the graft that went on back then. That’s coming out in a documentary by Sheldon Wolfchild. He’s making a documentary now. It will be finished in August. That’s something that should be viewed by everyone involved in this. And there’s a lot of truth in it. Also, Henry Sibley fathered a child with a Dakota woman long before he married a white woman. The Dakota woman hung herself when she discovered this.

DL: What are your thoughts about Alexander Ramsey?

EL: The same thing. He was a land hungry grafter. He knew what was going on. He knew what was going to happen. He was no dummy. He knew that signing the treaty in 1851 to gain land, all the southern half of Minnesota was ceded to the federal government except for the strip of land along the Minnesota River, the Lower Sioux and Upper Sioux Reservations. He knew that was going to happen. Whether or not he knew there was going to be this massacre, he might have known it but he might not have. To him it was probably collateral damage. Along with Afghanistan when they bombed whatever, they called it collateral damage. Yes, I think they were not very honest people.

DL: Fort Snelling, have you ever been to Fort Snelling?

EL: Oh yes.

DL: What are your thoughts about that?

EL: Fort Snelling is still Indian land as far as I’m concerned. [The remainder of this section was heavily edited by Mr. LaBelle.] The Dakota were never paid for it. And it galls me that they (the state park service) charges me money to go in there. Our people have populated this area for centuries. Here is our story of creation, it’s where our world began. Here and at M-Dota (Mendota) is where the two great rivers, the Mississippi and the Minnesota, joined together. The land gave birth to our ancestral grandmother and grandfather. This is our Eden. The ground is “Wakan,” sacred.

There are many thoughts about what went on there. How they build a fort on sacred land after Zebulon Pike came up the river and supposedly discovered it.

There’s another story about the people who came there and wanted to buy that land. One of the men was Franklin Steele. I’ve got a story in here about it. [sound of rustling papers] Oh, here it is. It’s titled, “The great treasury of the Fort Snelling prison camp.”
OK, now we’ve got to go back to the Treaty of 1830. On the signing of that treaty, a suggestion was made by Chief Wapehasha that concessions be made concerning the half breed members of the tribe to set aside land ownership consisting of 360 acres for each one who fell within that category. This was done and finalized because these members were neither white nor Indian. These tracts of land were located in and around Wabasha and Kellogg, Minnesota.

How many of them, I don’t know. But one of them happened to be my Great Grandfather, William Quinn.

After the Dakota Conflict of 1862, the Government leaders Alexander Ramsey and Henry Sibley, wanted to get those Indians, those half-breeds, out of there. They didn’t want them to own any kind of land in Minnesota.

And so to make this action semi-legal, the government issued legal “scrip” certificates comparable to money. My Great Grandfather Quinn had to give up his acreage under the title relinquishment of federal land. I still have that document.

Also, this Scrip could and did sell on the open market to anyone, and in the fall of 1862 was selling for fifty cents to $1.50 per acre in Minnesota, and was about to go higher.

These mixed bloods with their homes destroyed and the threat of death from white settlers; they joined their relatives, the full bloods, in the long march to Fort Snelling and were incarcerated in that pen below the fort.

That was when Franklin Steele and many of his partners got involved, starting with the great riches brought to the fort by the mixed bloods. It was called “half breed scrip.” Steele and his partners included men like Sen. Henry Rice, Henry Welles and William Chapman. Much of the scrip was sold by the prisoners for five to ten cents an acre just to buy food for families. It was later sold by these men at ten to twenty dollars per acre. Some of that profit went to buy a silver mine in Colorado.

And so after all these riches were gobbled up by white industrialists and entrepreneurs, the end result was this. The banished Dakota had given up their land for federal annuities. They lost their annuities and reservation in a desperate war, and then finally helped finance the explosive growth of industrialization and white civilization with their only remaining resource, their scrip.

DL: What was that published in?
EL: This was published in the magazine, the Minnesota History magazine.

DL: That might be from the Historical Society.

EL: It is.

DL: Have you ever been to Wood Lake?

EL: No, no, I've never been there.

DL: How about New Ulm?

EL: No, no.

DL: Camp Coldwater where the springs are?

EL: Yes, I've been out there.

DL: What were your thoughts of that? Any particular emotion there?

EL: I'd say that's a holy place. What they call makoce wakan. It's a holy ground.

DL: It's very beautiful.

EL: It is. In fact when they wanted to build that highway, was it 52? They wanted to acquire some of that land to build that highway across. Oh you remember when they had those demonstrations. They put up quite a demonstration there. In fact they were cutting down some oak trees there and they said no, you can't do that either. But the government came in and arrested them. Took them all to jail and cut the trees down and built the road. [Laughter]

DL: Pike Island, ever been there?

EL: Pike Island, yes, down below Fort Snelling. It's where they had the stockade the winter of 1863 where they put all these Indians. I know that a lot of the thugs from St. Paul and Minneapolis back then climbed over the walls and went in every night and started beating on these Indians. Revenge, they said that we'll get you. We'll kill all of you before they take you out of here. The army had to go down and disperse them. That's another deal where they didn't have very much to eat. They lived on crackers and bread that were thrown away by the troops up at the garrison and the water from
the river. Many children died there from whooping cough and tuberculosis. An epidemic of measles broke out in that camp and killed many of the children. Before they even moved again, just that first winter, a lot of these Indians died right on that ground. It was tragic.

DL: What's your opinion of the war?

EL: I think that the war was very unfortunate for our people. It stamped us with that stigma that we're nothing but a bunch of savages. We're a bunch of killers. We killed five hundred settlers. That's the way they want to look at it. But my vision of it is, we did it for survival. We did it to get something to eat, to feed our children. I don't condone the atrocities they did to the white people. That should never have happened but it did. Like I said, it was the fanatics amongst the troops, Little Crow's people. Just like Nazi Germany. There were fanatics in his army. It was inevitable and I'm sorry for that. I feel very bad about that. As far as the hangings of the 40 Dakota at Mankato and Fort Snelling – the fact is, I believe the wrong people were hung. Most of the Indians that committed atrocities against the settlers during the war fled west with Little Crow. The Dakota hung at Fort Snelling were Shak-Pey (or Little Six) and Medicine Bottle.

But like I say, "We can forgive but we never forget." I will never forget. I tell my children this. I guess maybe they're not interested. [Laughter] They're not interested in speaking the language either. I speak some of it but not very well.

DL: How many children do you have?

EL: I have eleven children. My current wife and I never had any biological children. We adopted two girls from the Sisseton Reservation. They are in their 30's now. [details on children]

DL: What do you think about the treaties?

EL: I think the treaty was a farce. Why they had to give up all this land. It was something they couldn't comprehend. The Indian had no comprehension of buying land. {You} couldn't own land. This land was put here for all of us. You can't say you're going to put a fence around it. This is mine, this is yours, no, we didn't believe that. That's not our culture. You think you own your land, quit paying your taxes and see how long you own that land. [Laughter] It was a farce. They tried to tell these Indians that they would be better off not living on this land because we need this. This was the story that Alexander Ramsey and that whole crew gave to the Indians and said you're going to be better off. Why could we be better off? {You} put us on this little
strip of land. There were over 3,000 Indians put on that land and they were starving to death. No, it didn't work. It was the worst thing that could have happened to the Dakotas in Minnesota.

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

EL: No it’s not a good idea. We have to forget this. We have to forgive but like I said it’s very hard to forget. We shouldn’t celebrate, don’t celebrate this. It’s not what that was meant for.

DL: It’s not a celebration; it’s a commemoration or remembering.

EL: The Mankato Pow Wow is going to have a commemoration. They’re going to bring in people from the media from all over the world to come and see this to be aware of what happened here in Minnesota. That’s not a good idea.

DL: We’ve heard that opinion from other Dakota who said, “Let’s look to the future and spend our energy on the present.”

EL: This was the basis (like I mentioned before the Winona Gathering) [that] is what they emphasized. Let’s forget this, let’s go on. We can’t dwell on this all of our lives. It’s not right. They tried, they attempted, well they still are. It’s a good thing. Winona did a good thing. To some natives it’s not happening. It’ll never happen.

DL: What will never happen?

EL: They’ll never forget, never.

DL: Is anger ever a good thing?

EL: It’s not a good thing, never was, never will be.

DL: What’s the best attitude then?

EL: The best attitude is look to the future and live the way you want to. Our way of life, the Dakota way of life is gone, it’s gone forever. It’s never coming back. The attitude is go on and be thankful that we’re still here. We have a life. Some people don’t have what we have today. I see this in prison. [Mr. LaBelle works in food service at the Stillwater Correctional Facility.] I see these guys sit there, some of them doing double life. They have no future. I compare that to the Indian cause. It’s not good to dwell on
but still it’s there, it’s there. It happened and it’s there. I speak to some of the native boys in there. They hate white people. The prison authorities took a whole bunch out of there a month ago called the native mob. Every prison in the State went on lock-down. Federal Marshals came in and took out over 200 of them. {They} took them to Federal Prison because they were a bad influence on the other natives in the prison system. But it’s still there. They still talk about it. Some of these young kids come in there and they have bad feelings. There’s fights in there all the time. Not good. But fighting in prison, you’re never going to get away from it. There’s so many thoughts and actions and black people against the whites, the Indians against the whites, the Indians against the blacks. It happens every day, not good.

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

EL: I’d wish that we’d go on. We don’t believe in magic. [Laughter]

DL: That’s just a play question.

EL: We believe in destiny. We believe that your life is set out for you from the time that you come out of the womb. You have a plan. It’s the way you’re going to live your life and you can’t do anything about it.

DL: Do you believe that you were destined to quit school at 15?

EL: I think I was, I think I was. I think I was made to like I said, take meaning from what I’ve learned from the books that I’ve read, take meaning from my relatives. I have this reunion we have every year. I have it for that reason, I want my relatives to know that we’re Dakota, this is what we believe in and it’s great. We love being Dakota.

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

EL: Ever since the time of Columbus [Indians have] [introduced] many foods to the world, corn, potatoes, green beans, squash, tobacco. Plenty of medicines were introduced to the Europeans since the conquest of the native people. Penicillin comes from Peruvian bark in Central America. Tea made from evergreen trees that treats scurvy in seafaring people. It’s vitamin C actually. Yes, we [made] many contributions. Our way of government was copied from the Algonquin tribes by Benjamin Franklin who was an Indian Agent back during the Washington administration. He took thoughts and ideas from the Algonquin and introduced them to form the Constitution of the United States. He did. The word quorum is an Algonquin word. It means the meeting, the gathering of the people to have the same thoughts, how to run our government.
DL: What was your occupation and what do you do now?

EL: I’m a cook. I’ve been in food service for over 60 years. Like I said, I started out washing dishes. [Laughter] I worked on the railroad after I left there. I got a job in town at the St. Paul Athletic Club. I started there as a broiler cook, when I left, I was executive chef. When I left there I got jobs in different restaurants all over the country. I got a job with prison industries back in, well 30 years ago. I’ve been into prisons over 30 years now. In fact I’ve spent over a third of my life in prison. [Laughter] It’s a good job. I love meeting people that come in there and tell them about the native culture and our beliefs.

DL: You worked in the prison kitchens then?

EL: The prison kitchens, yeah.

DL: What would you say is your specialty? What is your favorite thing to make?

EL: I have no favorites as long as it’s edible. [Laughter] Because we’ve got the worst clients in the world, people in prison. That food better be acceptable or they’ll throw it at you. [Laughter]

DL: What would you like to add? We’re at the end now.

EL: Not a lot other than what I’ve already said. It’s a good feeling that I’m doing this contribution to the Historical Society. I have a lot to offer here, things of this sort which you probably already have down there. I’ve gained a lot of information from the Historical Society. My younger brother is a member of the Seventh Day Adventist Church. He’s the one who has the Dakota Bible. Now you mentioned maybe they already have one down there. He also has the Dakota Hymnal called the Dakota Wowapi Olowa a Hymnbook from my dad’s church. It came from that church. He still has it in his possession. I can get that if you would like that put on display at the History Center.

DL: I’ll check on that. Thank you for your time.

EL: OK.