

NEW GROWTH FROM OLD ROOTS

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Left to right: Bob Brown (Chair), Linda Brown, Ron "Bear" Cronick, Roxanne Hop, Michael Scott and Beverly Scott in front of the Mendota Mdewakanton Dakota Community Center.

Though the Highway 55 Reroute controversy detoured the Mendota Mdewakanton Dakota's efforts to obtain federal recognition, it led them to a path of cultural re-awakening; which may, in the arena of identity politics, prove to be their greatest need, both in documenting their claim to the federal government and in finding acceptance among the established Mdewakanton Dakota communities.

Mendota: place where rivers meet

Driving into Mendota, a sleepy little town tucked between the hills and bluffs where the Minnesota and the Mississippi rivers meet, is disorienting.

The town, population 164, looks like it should be a sitting on a two-lane rural road in the northwoods, not wedged inbetween the cities of St Paul and Minneapolis. There are two restaurants, a liquor store, a post office, a VFW, and there is a small building where the Mendota Mdewakanton Dakota Community has rented a tiny back office. A place where they are building their future.

Mendota seems forgotten, though it is oldest Euro-American settlement in Minnesota; a place where American Fur Company traders set up shop and men like Henry Sibley and Jean Baptiste Faribault made their homes. Those original buildings are still standing, cared for by the Minnesota Historical Society.

It was also the home to the ancestors of the Mendota Mdewakanton Dakota (MMD). They maintain there has been a continued presence of mixed blood Dakota in Mendota ever since the town was formed.

"My people never left here," says Bob Brown, chair of the MMD. He points east to the hills that overlook the river, called the Upper Horseshoe, where his grandmother's house still stands, now owned by a cousin. "I was born in that house," he says.

"My people were here and were an integral part of this community. My relatives really didn't have anything to do with the 1862 conflict and were therefore not exiled out of the state with the rest of the Eastern Dakota people," says Bob.

Bob, in his late 50s with a tall, commanding figure, is a retired painter who lives in Champlin with his wife Linda. He wears his long hair pulled back into a ponytail under a hat emblazoned with "Go Oaks" across the front. The MMD are central figures in the efforts to stop the reroute of highway 55. Though the four oaks are gone, Bob speaks with a quiet confidence about the road controversy and the silence of the other bands of Dakota to publicly support them, "We made the mistake of letting all the publicity say 'the Mendota Dakota'. We should have just said this area is sacred to the Dakota people of Minnesota. It's hard to heal that."

Legacy of the conflict

Hard to heal as well, are the aftershocks of the 1862 Dakota Conflict. Each year in Mankato, there is a ceremonial remembrance for the 38 Dakota hanged as a result of the conflict. Forced onto reservations and starved due to the withholding of annuity payments, Dakota warriors in August of 1862 broke into a food warehouse and ignited a war fought by the Wahpeton, Mdewakanton and Wahpekute bands of the Eastern Dakota.

At that time, some Dakota had gone "civilized," adopting Christianity and becoming farmers. These 'friendly Sioux,' as history

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records them, many dying from an outbreak of measles. They retained hope of being allowed to return to their reservation on the upper Minnesota River. But in January, 1863 Congress passed a bill to abrogate all Dakota treaties in Minnesota and remove them from the state. By May of that year, 1,300 Dakota were shipped out to Crow Creek, SD.

A few Dakota and mixed blood families were allowed to stay. Some of these agreed to serve as scouts for Sibley's army, and others had established ties to mixed blood and white traders at Faribault and Mendota. The present-day Mendota Mdewakanton Dakota claim these as their ancestors.

Over the next decades, there were several attempts to remove these remaining Dakota. Their advocates included Bishop Henry Whipple, Alexander Faribault and General Sibley. Both Faribault and Sibley at varying times provided land in Faribault and Mendota for their use.

"There's an early article from a Faribault newspaper that quotes Mr. Faribault talking about these Dakota people that he was protecting," says Bob. "The citizens of Faribault want them out of there. He mentions one of my grandfathers in particular, his name was LeClare but his Dakota name was Wakan. He mentions him as being a peaceful man and that they should be allowed to stay."

"The history tells us that they were within an eyelash of appropriating land for the Mendota people but that didn't happen," says Bob. There were several leg-

records them, gave warning, refuge and cared for white captives and settlers who feared for their lives during the fighting. When General Sibley rode into their camp in September 1862, he found some 300 white captives and 1,200 Dakota who raised white flags of surrender. Other Dakota were rounded up or surrendered as well.

On Nov. 7, 1862 all the Dakota prisoners were marched to Fort Snelling, numbering 40-50 men, 200 mixed bloods, and 1,500 women and children. They were held there over the winter under miserable con-

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PHOTO COURTESY OF BOB BROWN

The mother of Beverly Scott (Brown) and Bob Brown was Sellsha LeClaire (second from left). Sellsha is pictured with her brothers and sisters (left to right): Albert LeClaire, Sellsha Grob (LeClaire), Russell LeClaire, Margaret LeClaire, and Raymond LeClaire.

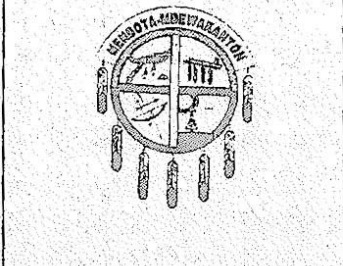
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islative attempts to make provisions for these Dakota, including an 1865 bill entitled, "Act for Relief of certain Friendly Indians of the Sioux Nation." Nothing ever materialized on their behalf.

By the 1890s land was set aside at Birch Coulee (Lower Sioux), Prior Lake and Prairie Island for Dakotas who had been returning to their homelands in Minnesota.

"As I understand it," says Kim LaCroix, who teaches Dakota Culture and History at the University of MN, "they used all the money to purchase land at Prairie Island, Lower Sioux and Prior Lake, and there were no funds left to purchase land for the Mendota group."

"We were assimilated to the point as not being looked at as needing a reservation," notes Bob, offering another reason land was never appropriated for the Mendota. "Without a reservation, you are going to get your people assimilated. It is just going to work that way. The reservations hold the blood together better."



was just like one big family here." But without a singular land base, the family was also spread out.

"My mother's parents, in addition to living in Mendota, farmed out at what is now the Shakopee reservation for twenty-some years. At that time it was called Prior Lake Indian community. My grandfather farmed out there until his death in 1942. He was involved in an auto accident out there and he was not admitted into the hospital at Shakopee because he was an Indian. It took some time to get him down to the Indian hospital in Pipestone. He died, we believe, from a lack of care."

Addressing the prevailing racism of those times, Linda adds, "His grandmother didn't like to be out at the farm at Shakopee because of the way the Indians were treated out there. She moved back to Mendota and grandpa stayed out at the farm. But she moved her kids to Mendota because it was much nicer to be living in a place where

you were treated like a human being."

Although Bob's mother was enrolled in the Santee Sioux tribe, he grew up in Minneapolis and says he didn't learn much about his heritage. "I had heard that grandpa had the farm. I was only 10 months old when he died. My mother was one of those people, because of her experiences when she was a girl, who denied being Indian as much as she could. I knew that I was part Indian. It was typical in trying to protect us."

In 1994, several families, including Bob's, tried to get enrolled with the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community. Says Bob, "Virtually all of those people are related to me. We went out there to get enrolled, because of what people call the new buffalo, the gaming. It was suggested by their enrollment person, who said, 'you're Dakota people, form your own community,' which is what we've been striving to do."

He wants to make it clear that there is no resentment in being denied enrollment at Shakopee. "The decisions that Shakopee band makes are their decisions and I don't think it's right for us to condemn them. It's their business."

After being denied at Shakopee in 1996, the group began the work of petitioning the federal government for acknowledgement as an Indian tribe. In 1997, they incorporated as a nonprofit organization.

"You might say we're Johnny-come-lately; but we've learned so much. When I heard that story about how my grandfather died from that day on I was Dakota. I don't care who would argue that with me. I am, and I will be the rest of my life. I've been around a lot of Indian people the last five or six years and not one of them has ever said to me, 'you don't look Indian,' but I've had white people say that. I had a guy who said 'you don't look Indian' and I said, 'well you don't look like a fool.'"

Seven mandatory criteria



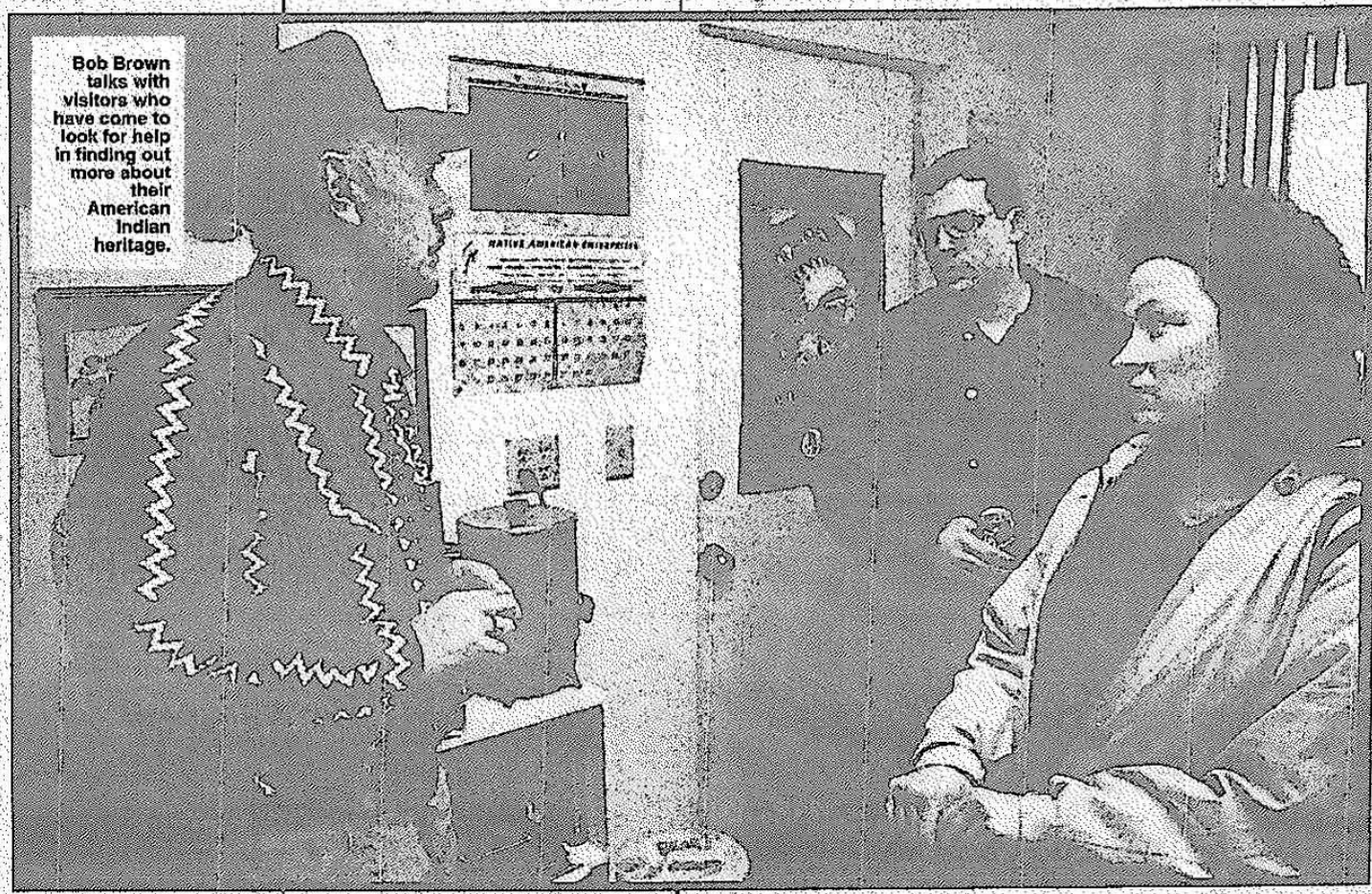
While Bob is candid about the often arbitrary and superficial criteria of deciding "who is an Indian," he speaks without joking when addressing the

fact that the federal government, through the Branch of Research and Acknowledgement (BAR) under the BIA, has instituted what are called the "seven mandatory criteria." Unrecognized tribal groups must meet these criteria in order to receive federal acknowledgement of their existence as a sovereign Indian nation.

After submitting a letter of intent to the BAR, the group began compiling genealogical evidence, including a current mem-

Getting the family together

A network of family ties held the town of Mendota together throughout the last century. "At one time," says Bob, "virtually everyone in this town was related. It



Bob Brown talks with visitors who have come to look for help in finding out more about their American Indian heritage.

PHOTO BY CATHERINE WHIPPLE

bership roll that numbers 280 persons, most of whom reside in the metro area. Late in 1997, the group received their first response from BAR, a technical assistance letter, or TA, outlining the deficiencies in their initial documentation.

Bob admits the process is daunting. "The government is going to grill us, and say 'where have you guys been?' Until 1978, all you had to be was Indian people living on trust land. If they had taken some of this Mendota land and made it trust land our people wouldn't have any trouble. But that is not what happened. So it's going to be an uphill battle for us. I do worry about the criteria."

The criteria includes being able to prove a continuing and distinct identification as an Indian community, including political autonomy since 1900. Gathering evidence to prove that is one of the areas cited as a deficiency in the MMD's petition. "They have no problem with the lineal descendency part of it," says Linda. "But then they want you to take every decade from 1900 to the present and show how the community was together."

The bulk of the painstaking work has been carried out through the volunteer efforts of Linda and Bob's two sisters. "I got immersed and it's kinda taken over my life," says Linda. "We were pretty naive when we started this, thinking we could do it on our own without any help." The group has sought legal input in drafting their constitution and by

laws. They found a lawyer via the Internet willing to work without compensation on their behalf. And an east coast private consultant, who used to work for the BAR, is currently considering whether she will take up their case.

The Browns note that the work of getting federal recognition was interrupted by their involvement in the highway 55 protests. "Since we got that TA letter, this fight came to us to protect these sacred places and we got away from working on the recognition in favor of the fight," says Bob.

"The mission statement [of the nonprofit organization] is the preservation and protection of the Dakota language and culture and that's what we do. If we don't ever get recognition, we don't get it. The other things that we do seem more important to us," says Bob.

Linda shares that their members have been involved in various ceremonies, pow wows and cultural celebrations. They also started a Dakota language class.

"We have a lot of plans to do some useful things for people that need help. That is what I want to see. Things that will help Indian people," says Bob. Although those plans are still nebulous, some of their hopes include building a community center, a library and a museum.

He relates a story about an elder who told him, "The spiritual people of the Dakota nation know what that area meant to people a long time ago, where the two rivers come

together, and what he said is, we've been waiting a long time for anything cultural or spiritual to come out of that area, so we've been watching it."

The Minnesota Mdewakanton Dakota



Marie LaCroix Nordin (Roxanne Hop's mother) is the baby seated on the lap of Jeannie Felix LaCroix (Roxanne's grandmother). Behind from left to right is Roxanne's Aunt Lillian and Aunt Agnea.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ROXANNE HOP

and Shakopee Mdewakanton could not be reached for comment.

"At this point they don't really trust us, they don't really know what our aims are," says Bob.

The addition of another federally recognized tribe in Minnesota would conceivably have ramifications for the other tribes. "There have been a lot of cases out there of existing federally recognized tribes objecting to other tribes being recognized," says Brad Jolly, an attorney with BlueDog, Olson and Small. "There can be an impact on the distribution of federal resources available to Indian tribes. That creates some tension, especially today where Congress is cutting back like crazy, especially in Indian Affairs. I suppose from an economic development perspective, there could be concerns about competition."

Whether the dollar factor will hinder the Mendota's success in building relationships with the other Mdewakanton Dakota bands remains to be seen. The Browns muse that things will work out the way they are meant to be.

If the Mendota area has been sleeping, it seems the Mendota Mdewakanton people are awakening. Whether they receive federal recognition or not is secondary to their members remembering who they are as Dakota people and participating in the drive to protect and continue Dakota culture.

communities have been largely silent about both the highway controversy and any relationship to the Mendota. In response to this story, the Prairie Island Indian Community Tribal Council stated that the MMD are not recognized by them, and offered no further comment. The tribal councils of Lower Sioux