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SPOTLIGHT

Native American Heritage Day a chance to dig into Minnesota history

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As a part of National American Heritage Day, Americans are encouraged to take another look at Native American history including camping at this site in Yellow Medicine County that allows people to spend the night in a "teepee." (Photos by Annie Harman)

Every fourth Thursday in November, Americans everywhere settle in for a family dinner decorated with turkey, mashed potato mountains drizzled with gravy, cranberry sauce and enough stuffing to leave them all satisfied.

The traditional Thanksgiving meal is centered on the tale of the shared feast between the Plymouth colonists and the Wampanoag tribe. But since 2009, the following day has been designated as Native American Heritage Day, recognizing the first people of the United States and celebrating both their cultural heritage and integral importance to the past, present and future. The day also provides an opportunity for residents to dig into the truth behind the "stories" about the relationships between Native Americans and white settlers.

"Thanksgiving is the perfect time to bring it up because that's what the issue is about: Thanksgiving and how it makes Natives feel," said Sharon Lennartson, chairwoman of the Mendota Mdewakanton Dakota Community. "So many people just don't know the true history of Natives in Minnesota, which is why we need to get our story out there."

When peeling back the layers of Native American history in Minnesota, Lennartson said people are often shocked when they discover a dark and devastating reality. For many, to call the truth about how Native Americans were treated in the Land of 10,000 Lakes bloody and hideous is an understatement.

"White people hated Native Americans," Lennartson said as she discusses the various stories from areas such as St. Peter and Faribault. "The governor at the time, Alexander Ramsey, put a bounty on Natives for \$200 – any person who killed a Native received \$200, which was a lot of money back then. A lot of innocent Natives were killed because of him. He is a murderer as far as I'm concerned."

The distressing reality of Minnesota's history with Native Americans is a prime example of the whitewashing of classic tales, such as the first Thanksgiving, that has allowed many Americans to remain unknowingly ignorant of reality. Lennartson said this contributes to feelings many Native Americans have toward the holiday.

"A lot of Native Americans don't celebrate Thanksgiving, but at the same time a lot of us do because we were raised white," Lennartson said. "I grew up celebrating Thanksgiving, and I still do, but some of the older, more traditional Natives do not celebrate it."

For a time, Lennartson boycotted Thanksgiving because of how her people were treated, but elected to continue celebrating the holiday with her family by allowing it to symbolize gratitude for the blessings she has in her life.

"It means something different for me in my heart and in my soul and in my passion," Lennartson said. "But had I been raised Native, I wouldn't have celebrated Thanksgiving."

Lennartson comes from a proud line of Dakota men and women, dating back to Wakon LeClair, a close friend and "helper" of Alexander Faribault, who founded the Rice County city. In 1863, following the Sioux Uprising – also known as the Dakota War – Lennartson said Faribault brought five families of "friendly" Natives to the Faribault area. In a column he penned to the local press at the time, Faribault described LeClair's family as "entirely innocent" with educated children who "talk English well." Lennartson said this is a basic example of how many Natives are "raised white" and also fall victim to losing out on their own heritage.

"It just wasn't talked about – being Native," Lennartson said. "So much has been taken from me, including my culture. My grandmother was forced out of her home to go to a school where they cut her hair, changed her name, took away her language. Men that wouldn't conform to the white world were forced to go to insane asylums, because clearly they were 'insane' to not conform to the white ways."

"The history in Minnesota and in our region is horrifying," Lennartson continued. "And many people don't know that."

Traverse des Sioux

Ramsey is a familiar name in the region, largely for his influence in the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux in 1851, where he helped convince the U.S. government to negotiate the purchase of land from Native American groups living in the region – specifically the Sisseton and Wahpeton bands of Dakota. The treaty transferred ownership of much of southern Minnesota from the Dakota to the United States, followed by the Treaty of Mendota that same year. The two treaties opened 24 million acres of land to settlers, and became another step for the Dakota to become increasingly marginalized and dismissed from land that had been – and remained – their home.

By 1850, the two bands of Dakota were in a difficult situation as animals they hunted for food and trade began to dwindle. This made coming to an agreement at Traverse des Sioux quick work. According to the Minnesota Historical Society, the Dakota were in a very weak bargaining position because they believed that if they did not sell their land, the United States would take it. Negotiations took several days, and some Dakota leaders initially resisted the demands made by the commissioners because they asked for so much, but ultimately the Dakota gave in.

The treaty was signed on July 23, 1851, which resulted in much of the southern and western portion of Minnesota being ceded to the United States for about seven and a half cents an acre, provided reservations of 10 miles on each side of the Minnesota river, and arranged payment to the Sisseton and Wahpeton bands for the land they had ceded. While they were to receive a portion of the money immediately, some funds were set aside for the construction of schools and other services. The rest was placed in an account managed by the federal government.

In the decade after the treaty was signed, over 100,000 white immigrants moved to Minnesota to live on the land recently ceded.

Dakota War

The Dakota War of 1862 — also known as the Sioux Uprising, the Dakota Uprising, the Sioux Outbreak, the Dakota Conflict and Little Crow's War — was a conflict between the United States and several bands of Dakota along the Minnesota River in the southwest portion of the state. Violations of treaties — including the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux— and late annuity payments by Native agents caused increasing hunger and hardship among the Dakota.

History books talk of extensive attacks by the Dakota on hundreds of settlers and immigrants, including in the New Ulm area, which resulted in many fleeing the region. When word arrived to Le Sueur from New Ulm that the Dakota were attacking area settlers in August of that year, two militia companies known as the Le Sueur Tigers were organized in that city.

A little more than a month following the siege of New Ulm, most Dakota fighters had surrendered. Hundreds of trials of Dakota prisoners were held. Deficient in many ways, some lasted less than five minutes. According to the University of Minnesota, the Dakota were tried before a military commission and convicted for "killings committed in warfare" and the trials were conducted in an atmosphere of "extreme racist hostility toward the defendants" expressed by the citizens, elected officials of the state and by the men conducting the trial. By the beginning of November, 303 Dakota prisoners had been convicted of murder and rape, and sentenced to death.

President Abraham Lincoln later commuted the sentence of 264 Dakota found guilty in the trials, but on Dec. 26, 1862, 38 Dakota men were hanged in Mankato. To date, this is the largest mass execution in U.S. history.

Princess Owatonna

Some Native American legends that exist in American culture are fabricated. The legend of a princess and healing waters is one of the most popular in Steele County, alluding to the city of Owatonna being named in honor of one of the area's first residents.

According to the legend, Chief Wabena heard of the curing waters called minnewaucan. His daughter, Princess Owatonna, was very frail so he moved his tribe to the site of the natural springs on the banks of Maple Creek. Princess Owatonna drank from the springs daily and recovered her health. Her kindly spirit hovers near the bubbling waters and beckons weary travelers to pause in the beautiful valley and drink the magic waters.

Though Owatonnans have embraced this legend for decades, erecting a statue of the beloved princess in Mineral Springs Park, the story is simply that – a story.

According to Kevin Lorek Strauss, a Rochester author and advocate for accurate education of Native American history, stories such as Princess Owatonna popped up around 1880-1910 as a part of industry advertising efforts. Strauss said "fake" stories about Native Americans will often feature a princess of sorts, despite no kings in Dakota culture.

"[These stories] often make white people feel good about a connection to a fake history, but ignore the real history of genocide and land theft that happened in Minnesota," Strauss wrote in a recent letter to the *Owatonna People's Press*. "Each time we share these kind of stories, we're causing harm to ourselves and the real Minnesota history we should be working to understand."

HERITAGE DAY

Despite the masking of the truth for centuries, Lennartson said that Native American Heritage Day is a great opportunity for all people – Native and non-Native – to take the time to educate themselves on both the tragedy and the beauty that is Native American history and culture.

"Still to this day my people are discriminated against, so check out the history of the Natives in your area," Lennartson said. "For everyone here, look into the 1862 Sioux Uprising – it is something all Minnesota people should check out."

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HERITAGE DAY

Native American Heritage Day takes place on the Friday after Thanksgiving. November is Native American Heritage Month.

FARIBAULT DAKOTA PROJECT

In partnership with the Faribault Heritage Preservation Commission, Rice County Historical Society, Faribault Mural Society and Santee Sioux Nation, the Mendota Dakota Community will offer historical insight to a project that will honor the Dakotas' impact on Faribault's early years.

Initially envisioned land near the River Bend Nature Center as the location for the Faribault Dakota memorial, the new options include Peace Park, the Buckham Memorial Library Plaza and Heritage Park. The project is expected to begin in 2021.

According to his overview of the Faribault Dakota Project, Jeff Jarvis listed the goals as follows:

- *To honor the Dakota culture for playing a formative role in Faribault's early days.
- *To restore a connection with the Faribault Dakota through their descendants.
- *To show respect for Peace Cemetery.
- *To educate the public on Faribault Dakota history through the use of graphics and Dakota language.
- *To recognize the unique supportive role that Faribault citizens played.*

Annie Harman