

*Owasin cante wasteya iyuskinyan nape ciyuzapi do:*  
*Translating Each Dakota Letter*

**Dakota Prisoners of War Letters from the 1862 Dakota Minnesota Conflict:  
Grant Application to the Gundlogson Fund**

Date: 14 April 2010

To: Thomas Riley, Dean of the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences  
Michele Reid, Dean of Libraries

From: Clifford Canku, Assistant Professor of Practice in Dakota Studies

CC: Michael Simon, Elder, Sisseton Wahpeton Sioux Tribe  
John Peacock, Professor of Language, Literature, and Culture, Maryland Institute  
College of Art, Baltimore

Bruce Maylath, Professor of English

Kelly Sassi, Assistant Professor of English Education

Re: Proposal for Gundlogson Fund and Institute for Regional Studies

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**A. Description of the Project**

This project aims to show how Dakota people and their language and culture have a history deeply embedded in our region, are still vital in the present, and are determined to survive and strengthen in the future. We are proposing to translate and edit letters written in the Dakota language by prisoners of war at Fort McClellan, a U.S. Army post later converted to a federal prison, during the 1862 Dakota Conflict and to make those translations available through a volume published by NDSU's Institute for Regional Studies. Publication would be followed by a series of book talks. The translation of these letters from Dakota to English creates an opportunity for both Native and non-Native readers to think about fundamental issues of freedom in our country's history. This project spans several disciplines in the humanities—history, jurisprudence, language and linguistics, and literature—and will facilitate collaboration among humanities scholars at tribal colleges and other institutions of higher education.

Coming in the midst of the American Civil War, the Minnesota Dakota War was conveniently forgotten in many subsequent European-American histories of the State of Minnesota. However, it is notorious, by those who know, for the largest mass execution in U.S. history: the hanging of 38 Dakota warriors in Mankato, Minnesota, 2 at Fort Snelling (Minneapolis-St. Paul), and 10 more who have not been documented but are known to tribal members. President Abraham Lincoln allowed the hanging of the 38 in Mankato, even while commuting the sentences of 265 additional warriors who had been sentenced to death in show trials. Only in the past couple decades has widespread attention again been focused on this war. However, the memories of the struggle have never been forgotten by members of the Dakota Oyate. Their memories are supported not only by oral tradition but also by a collection of 150 letters written by Dakota prisoners-of-war from 1862 to 1869 while they were held at Fort McClellan in Davenport, Iowa. The letters were all addressed to Stephen R. Riggs, named "Tamakoce" (meaning "His Country") by the Dakota. A Presbyterian clergyman who had spent many years serving the Dakota, Rev. Riggs worked with the Dakota prisoners in developing a writing system for the Dakota language. Notably, the contents of all the POW letters are written in the Dakota language from that time. The letters continue to be relevant to historical research and documentation, as only a few human remains have been repatriated to the Flandreau Santee Dakota tribe.

The original 150 letters were stored at the Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul. However, in the 1990s in Flandreau, South Dakota, a group of Dakota elders, fluent in the Dakota language, began to translate the letters from Dakota to English. The work transferred to Sisseton Wahpeton College in Agency Village, South Dakota, in 2004. The translator group included Mr. William Iron Moccasin, Mrs. Doris Robertson, the Rev.

Michael Simon, Mrs. Hildreth Venegas, and is led by the Rev. Dr. Clifford Canku, who now teaches full-time at North Dakota State University.

The contents of the letters are especially heartrending to Dakota women today. The letters depict how U.S. prison guards audibly took sexual advantage of the POWs' wives and daughters, while the POWs themselves could only sing in their prison cells to their Creator to intervene on their behalf. One letter describes how the young men were adept at learning to read and write in Dakota, but at the same time, these young men disappeared (probably because they refused to convert to Christianity). Only the old men and those who converted to Christianity survived. The letters as a corpus depict the prisoners' emotions in facing death daily as they encountered starvation, freezing weather, and the gallows. The translation and dissemination of these prison camp chronicles are critical to complete and make available to the public.

### *Project Aims*

The immediate aim of this project is to complete translation, editing, and publication of the letters in book form, under the imprimatur of NDSU's Institute of Regional Studies and through a grant from the Gundlogson Fund. However, the ultimate aim of this project is to disseminate excerpts from the finished book's letters through public programming funded by the North Dakota Humanities Council in the following forms (prioritized from most preferred to least preferred, based on targeting the audience we want to reach):

- 1) a television program through Prairie Public
- 2) a DVD of the television program
- 3) a radio interview or program through Prairie Public
- 4) a traveling museum exhibit
- 5) a summer seminar

Naturally, before such public programming can begin, a bound volume containing key letters from the Riggs Collection needs to be translated and published. This stage of the project could be completed with funding from the Gundlogson Fund. Once translated from Dakota to English and distributed through NDSU's Institute for Regional Studies, this volume will be

•*A resource to the Dakota community to learn about their ancestry.* Many of the letters were written by ancestors of current tribal members. Through the letters, members of the tribe can learn about the travails that their ancestors faced. The letters will give tribal members a vivid first-hand portrayal of their tribe's history as European settlers encroached on their traditional lands.

•*A resource to historians wishing to learn the Dakota perspective on the history of the Dakota tribe, the history of the then-new State of Minnesota, and the history of official United States policy toward American Indians and their sovereign tribes.* The translation of the letters will open new primary sources recounting **Dakota history from a Dakota perspective**. To date, such primary sources in English are sparse. The Dakota POW letters discuss events that are key to understanding the history of Minnesota and U.S.

federal government policy toward American Indians, e.g., the roots of the 1862 Dakota Minnesota War and the subsequent enforced exile of Dakota people from Minnesota.

•*A resource to those wishing to learn to read and write the Dakota language.* As the number of mother-tongue Dakota speakers dwindles, tribal members are taking the initiative to maintain the language and revive its use among younger generations. (Witness the annual series of Lakota/Dakota/Nakota Language Summits begun in Rapid City, South Dakota, in 2008.) Creating resources to teach and then use the language—in writing as well as in speech—are critical to the language’s survival. A so-called “dual translation” volume—translated letters appearing on facing pages with printed transcriptions of the original Dakota handwriting—will be compelling reading and a teaching resource of the first order. Indeed, some tribal members will be motivated to learn Dakota primarily to read their ancestors’ letters in the original language.

•*The first step to a larger-scale project to translate historical and cultural documents currently extant only in the Dakota language.* Many other culturally and historically significant documents exist in Dakota. With the number of mother-tongue Dakota speakers continuing to decline, the translation of these documents for them to be accessible broadly in English becomes more and more critical. The completion, publication, and distribution of a volume of translated letters from the Riggs Collection would serve as a pilot, a model, and an impetus for the translation and publication of other documents preserved in their original Dakota language.

## **B. Timeline**

The translation of the 1862-1869 Dakota POW letters has been a three-phase project. Phases 1 and 2 have been completed. Phase 3 still requires completion. The grant proposed would ensure completion.

*Phase 1:* Identifying and retrieving from the Minnesota Historical Society over 150 letters written in the original Dakota language by Dakota POWs incarcerated at Fort McClellan.

*Phase 2:* Transcribing and translating (initially word for word) the 150+ letters. A team of four Dakota elders, who are descendants of the POW letter writers, completed the major parts of this difficult task, as follows:

- A. The legible passages in the letters were transcribed and translated literally from the Dakota context.
- B. A few letters have been rendered in current idiomatic American English.

*Phase 3:* Editing the translations and writing accompanying prefatory and commentary material.

- A. The remaining letters need to be edited for current idiomatic American English and then formatted.
- B. The history of the POW’s experience, from the time that they stood trial until the survivors’ reunion with their families, needs to be researched and

written. Research needs to be conducted, including an investigation of U.S. Army files. A site visit to Davenport will be required.

- C. Copyediting the letters and then compiling, reviewing for accuracy by bilingual native speakers, typesetting, and proofreading them.

### **C. Key Scholars and Other Personnel**

The Rev. Dr. Clifford Canku, Assistant Professor of Dakota Studies at North Dakota State University, fluent Dakota speaker and enrolled member of the Sisseton Wahpeton Sioux Tribe

Dr. John Peacock, Professor of Language, Literature, and Culture, Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, intermediate Dakota speaker and enrolled member of the Spirit Lake Sioux Tribe

The Rev. Michael Simon, fluent Dakota speaker and enrolled member of the Sisseton Wahpeton Sioux Tribe

Yvonne Wynde, transcriptionist, fluent Dakota speaker and enrolled member of the Sisseton Wahpeton Sioux Tribe

Students in the ENGL-758 American Indian Rhetorics 2010 summer seminar with Dr. Malea Powell, visiting professor from Michigan State University and founding member of the National Center for the Study of Great Lakes Native American Culture

### **D. Audience**

This project is intended to reach a wide audience in this region and the nation: Dakota People, tribal college students and scholars, other scholars who deal with historical events in this region or with Native American historical events more generally, descendants of the prisoners of war, those who are exiles from Minnesota (families who left during the Dakota Conflict and are living elsewhere), scholars of the Dakota language, Native American women's groups, Minnesota State Historical Society, and the Agnes Ross Educational Center, where some of the letters are housed.

### **E. Plans for attracting an audience**

We plan to offer a series of book talks at the following locations: the University of Minnesota main campus; the Agnes Ross Educational Center (where some of the original letters are housed); Sioux Valley, Manitoba, (near Brandon) to which numerous Dakota people fled and settled during the Dakota Conflict and where many of their descendants continue to live; and NDSU through the Tribal Partners Series. We would also like to reach an audience by asking both respected Dakota scholars and possibly a nationally or internationally prominent Native scholar to write a review of the finished book. also In addition, we envision reaching our audience through a website that would include a podcast of readings in both Dakota and English—an especially useful resource for Dakota studies programs.

## F. Cost Sharing

For separate funding of the public programming related to this book (see "Project Aims" above), we will be sending a separate grant proposal to the North Dakota Humanities Council.

## G. Registration or Admission Fees

Our book talks will be free and open to the public.

## H. Evaluation

We will give a survey to participants who attend our series of book talks, with questions to gauge how we might gather additional data related to the project. As part of the usual process of bringing a manuscript to publication, we will ask reviewers to comment on the manuscript. Reviews after publication may also serve as evaluations of the work.

### Grant Request Budget Summary

Budget Category	Grant Request	Total
Translating, editing, preface authoring, and public programming planning Clifford Canku John Peacock Michael Simon	\$200 x 5 days x 3 people = \$3,000	\$4,200
Transcribing (averages 2 pages per letter x 150 @ \$4 per page) Yvonne Wynde	\$1,200	
<u>Travel expenses</u> Airfare (Peacock)	\$400	\$3,176
Car rental \$30 x 7 days (Peacock)	\$210	
Personal car .50 per mile x 200 miles +10 miles per day x 6 days (Canku & Simon)	\$130	
Per diem \$46 x 3 persons x 7 days	\$966	
Lodging \$70 per diem per person x 3 persons x 5 days	\$1470	
Indirect costs	N/A	
<b>Total Amount</b>		<b>\$7,376</b>