

RECEIVED APR - 4 1988

# Fresh tears soften the sting of an old injustice

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Three weeks ago, photographer Joe Rossi and I witnessed an extraordinary event, one that left us moved and humbled.

The occasion was the solemn reburial, on Nov. 7, of the remains of 31 Minnesotans who died in prison nearly 125 years ago. They were Indians, members of the Dakota or Sioux nation that possessed much of Minnesota until the coming of the white man. And they were victims of a war between the races that resulted from the relentless pressure of the whites to wrest Minnesota from its natives.

With our colleague John Camp, Rossi and I have spent much of this year working on a series of special reports telling the story of the U.S.-Dakota Conflict of 1862, the almost-forgotten war that had an enormous impact on the shaping of Minnesota.

The fourth installment in that effort, detailing the genocidal punishment meted out to the Indians after the war, appears in today's Focus section. But, as we have learned during the months we have spent working on this story, it is not just ancient history. The war was a tragedy that has left scars on the soul of the state and pain in the hearts of Dakota people who are descended from the Indians of long ago.

Rossi and I traveled to Morton, Minn., to the Lower Sioux Indian Reservation, to witness the reburial of 21 Dakota warriors and 10 Indian women, all of whom died of disease or exposure in a prison camp in Davenport, Iowa, where the men were sent with their families after the war.

*The Ma-Sioux*

The bones had been taken from their original burial places by "collectors" and scientists and had been stored in an Iowa museum for years. Now, they were being returned to the earth of the state from which the Indians were banished in 1862.



**NICK COLEMAN**

I don't know what we expected the burial to be like. But we didn't expect to be overwhelmed by the emotions and tears of the Dakota men and women we have come to know during the course of our work. In the white world, tears are not often shed over events that occurred more than a century ago. To most whites, the Indian war of 1862 seems far removed in time, something in a history book with little meaning to today.

Maybe that's because we won. When Rossi and I arrived on the reservation, we went to the home of Ernest and Vernell Wabasha. Ernest Wabasha is descended from Wabasha III, the last in a dynasty of the most prestigious chiefs of the Mdewakanton or Mystic Lake Dakota. Federal law no

*Wabasha, Ernest*

longer recognizes Indian chiefs. Nevertheless, Ernest Wabasha is considered a chief by many Dakota. At the Wabasha home, we found Tribal Chairman Dave Larsen saying prayers inside, preparing for the burial.

As he prayed, a plate of burning sage was taken around the home, purifying the home with smoke in the traditional Dakota way. A dozen of us, gathered in the Wabashas' living room, fanned the sage smoke over our bodies and bowed our heads in silent prayer. We watched as Larsen, taking 20 eagle feathers — one for each warrior about to be reburied — passed them through the smoke and prayed in the Dakota language.

Later, at the grave, a 50-foot-long trench by the side of St. Cornelia's Episcopal Church in the heart of the reservation, Wabasha and Larsen carefully placed the 31 boxes of remains on a bedding of sage and tobacco. Both blinked back tears as they worked. At the edge of the trench, Amos Owen, the spiritual leader of the Dakota, sobbed as he said the traditional prayers of burial.

Rossi and I were blown away. Try to imagine tears being shed at Fort Snelling National Cemetery if, by some chance, the remains of Minnesotans who died at Gettysburg in 1863 should be reburied. There might be speeches, there might be a military honor guard, but there would not be tears. Pain brings tears and the majority of us no longer feel any pain from the terrible events of long ago. But the tears we saw that Saturday afternoon by St. Cornelia's were not being shed for long ago. They

were like the tears that are shed at the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., tears that flow from today's pain.

After the reburial, I asked Ernest Wabasha where the tears had come from. I knew the answer.

"This is what it is like to be Indian," he said simply. "The pain is inside us."



Yes, the war was long ago. So were the hangings and the imprisonments and the forced exile and mass starvation that followed as the state tried to destroy and eradicate an entire people rather than understand the causes of a tragic war.

It was good for two white journalists to see that pain. It was good to recognize that the history we are attempting to explain is not old and dry and unconnected to today. It is important to know that there are people among us, in modern-day Minnesota who still live with the legacy of those times.

The shooting has stopped, but racism and ignorance still separate the white and Indian races in Minnesota. Isolation, poverty and resentment still cause pain among Indian people.

This year, the 125th anniversary of that long-ago war, has been declared to be a "Year of Reconciliation" between whites and Indians, a time for healing and understanding. Standing at that graveside three weeks ago, Rossi and I learned that reconciliation is not painless.

It requires tears.

*Lower Sioux*   
*Indian Community* 

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PHONE 507 697-6185

RURAL ROUTE 1 - P. O. BOX 308  
MORTON, MINNESOTA 56270

March 24, 1988

Dear Ms. Pearson:

This letter is long overdue, but the members of the Lower Sioux Community would like to extend to you many thanks for all your involvement in bringing back to us for re-burial the skeletal remains of our ancestors which were put to their final resting place here on November 7, 1987

We are also enclosing an article that was in the St. Paul Pioneer Press Dispatch that we felt you would like to read.

At the time of the service here we discussed a need to place a historical marker/monument around this burial site. It would depict the story of the 1862 imprisonment and death of these people in Iowa and we know that your organization would like to participate in this memorial. We are requesting from the State of Iowa or DOT to assist us with \$1,500.00, part of the total cost of \$3,000.00. We know that you would be having to request this amount from your legislators. We would like to formally submit this amount to you at this time. We are very honored to have the State of Iowa participating in this project with us.

We are working on having this completed by August 18, 1988 at 12 o'clock noon as this is the Anniversary of the Conflict of 1862. We are planning services and a traditional meal at this time and hope that you will be able to join us.

If you have any further questions please contact Vernell Wabasha at the Lower Sioux Trading Post, 507-697-6288 or Jody Goodthunder at 507-697-6185. These persons are handling this project for the Lower Sioux Indian Community.

We are looking forward to a positive reply from you and your organization.

Sincerely,

*David E. Larsen*

David E. Larsen  
Tribal Chairman

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