

KAREN V. HANSEN

ENCOUNTER ON THE GREAT PLAINS

Scandinavian Settlers and the
Dispossession of Dakota Indians, 1890–1930



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DAKOTA INDIANS, 1890–1930

Karen V. Hansen



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*For Anita and Eva,
undaunted fighters, true friends*

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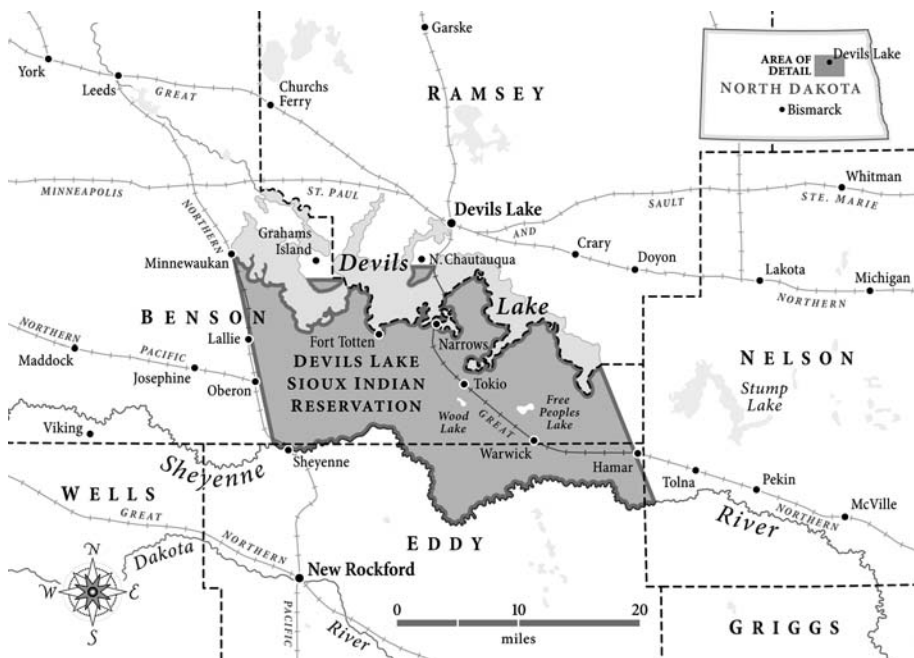


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MAP 1 Map of Devils Lake region.

The Spirit Lake Dakota Reservation at the center is bounded by Devils Lake to the north and the Sheyenne River to the south. Map drawn by David Deis.

Preface: The Story Dowser



AS I WAS growing up in Sonoma County, California, my mother would regale me with stories about her childhood on the homestead in Saskatchewan and the move to Alberta in 1932, under the crush of the Great Depression. She gifted me snippets of bold characters and a farm life I found absolutely foreign. She would conjure up vivid portraits of her kindly father, her heroic brothers who fought in World War II, her mother and sisters full of humor and strength, and cousins with a talent for music-making. By the time I was nine, these story sessions were my primary conduit for intimacy with my mother. They connected me to a family past and to those she had wrenchingly left behind. Many of these relatives were still living, but the distance between us made them larger than life. This inheritance of storytelling linked me with a larger history as I sought my own place within the world.

The mythic figures of the Northern Plains sounded so much more appealing than my ordinary relatives at hand. Here we were, bound in a small knot, far away from the resilient web of security and sanity represented by my extended kin as I came to know them through my mother's stories. On late nights, full of emotion, I would ache to reunite with my idealized family. Often, when sent to bed, I would deploy my most irresistible ruse: "Tell me a story." My mother, Esther, granted my inopportune requests. Suffering from immigration's dismembering, the anguish of her thoughtless children's unceasing demands, and her husband's insensitivity, she sought healing through her stories. So my ploy would work. For Esther, telling stories represented vindication and a reunification of her fractured life. Throughout my

life I have continued to pester people for stories about my ancestors and those of others, even after I understood the many sources of their resistance.

HISTORICAL MEMORY AND FAMILY STORIES

My own quest has led me to seek to understand my mother and her mother in the context of their times and struggles. I see them as agents of their own destinies, and yet they acted within identifiable, collective patterns in North American history. Both of them are protected by our family mythology, which is at least as powerful as the family itself. The stories inspire honorable behavior, elicit shame, and cloak the ephemeral actions of today with the meaning of yesterday. Inevitably we interpret historical events through the prism of the present.

In my family's legends, my maternal grandmother, Helene Haugen Kantén, stood out as a heroic pioneer (see figure 1). She arrived in North America as a flaxen-haired eleven-year-old and became a sturdy woman, tall for her generation, with steel-grey braids folded atop her head. I was awestruck by her fortitude, which, in my mind, implied strength of character. In the face of ever-present Victorian conceptions of women's frailty, my grandmother's endurance and productivity served as a visible rebuff to the dominant culture. My generation-skipping adoration gave renewed meaning to the Norwegian term for grandmother—*bestemor*, literally, "best mother." She cleared new land three times during her life, raised eight children, and lived to be ninety-one years old. Family lore reports that once, while my grandfather was away on a trip, she even built a barn. I did not see her often enough to have her tell me many stories; my cousins were the lucky ones in that regard. She left me with some gems, however. She would say she was born in Hønefoss, Norway. "Chicken Falls," she would giggle, clasping her hands in front of her mouth in delight as her shoulders jiggled. Hønefoss sounded to me like a town in a children's fable, where traveling carnivals would park before venturing into the big city.

Through my research, I have discovered significant untruths in our family mythology. Hønefoss was not Helene's actual birthplace, but rather the large town in the Ringerike region that others were more likely to know. Many accounts were not merely factually inaccurate, but misleading. For example, we were told that Grandma's father died before she was born. In fact, he died *two years* before she was born. Her biological father was a younger man whom my widowed great-grandmother never married. We were told that my great-aunt Aagot's first husband died in Norway. Yet, ship passage lists from 1903 reveal that he traveled to North Dakota with Aagot and their month-old son. He spent the last seventeen years of his short life in the Jamestown Insane Asylum. Whatever wisps of truth accompanied those stories blew by too quickly to capture them. Through her silence

about her family history, my grandmother participated actively in the mythmaking about her own past. Selectively “forgetting” her family’s history was deliberate; the strategic construction of “ignorance” enabled those after her to hold fast to these misconceptions.¹ In the New World, you can recreate your past—at least until your pesky granddaughter persists in asking questions.

ASKING QUESTIONS

In 1995, I traveled to North Dakota for the first time to piece together the puzzle (see map 1). A town called Devils Lake had been my grandmother’s original North American destination. I wanted to find her mother’s homestead where she came of age. I wanted to imagine the world as my grandmother had experienced it. Staff at the Fort Totten historic site just south of Devils Lake on the Spirit Lake Dakota Indian Reservation pointed me to one of the remarkable local history keepers—Cherry Wood Monson, a “Pioneer Daughter” descended from white settlers who came to Dakota Territory prior to statehood. Born and raised on the reservation and called to record and recount history, she introduced me to plat maps and led me to my great-grandmother’s homestead in Eddy Township.

A plat map records the owners of land within a thirty-six-square-mile township. On the survey grid imposed upon the Northern Plains, every square-mile section was subdivided into quarter sections of 160 acres each. Never having lived in the Midwest, where plat maps are as common as road atlases, I was immediately mesmerized. To my amazement, I discovered that my grandmother and her mother were not the only Norwegians who lived on the Spirit Lake Dakota Reservation. Nor was my great-grandmother the only woman to own land; women’s names were sprinkled liberally across the maps. The mosaic of long Dakota names, difficult for my unfamiliar tongue to pronounce, sat adjacent to the myriad “sons” of Scandinavian origin I remember from my childhood—the Olsons, Andersons, Carlsons.

My drive across the reservation was full of beauty and surprises, from vast wetlands and acres of sunflowers with faces turned toward the light, to the rickety Norwegian ski jump erected atop Sully’s Hill in the early 1930s (see figure 2). Tall green cat-tails line the abundance of bright blue ponds, called “pot holes” or sloughs by locals, that provide habitat for numerous species of waterfowl—from Canada geese to red-necked grebes and northern shovelers. Driving at dusk often pits a car or truck against flocks of birds crossing from one pond to the next. I regularly found myself braking so as not to hit a swooping bird. The windshield and grill of the car stand as a testament to the abundant insect life that attracts birds and feasts on unsuspecting livestock and humans. In the last twenty years, roads have been rebuilt higher and

higher as the water table has been rising and Devils Lake overflows, saturating the earth. The great never-ending flood has washed out highways, turned through ways into dead ends, inundated homes, and rendered thousands of acres on and around the reservation impossible to farm.

As we drove the gravel road wending down to the Sheyenne River, I was struck with wonder at this hilly terrain. This area near the Sheyenne has long been recognized as a magnet for wildlife, and people often come here to hunt for deer. My great-grandmother, Berthe Haugen, took possession of her quarter section in 1905 and built a twelve-by-fourteen-foot home that was just barely standing ninety years later. From this perch at the crest of the hill, right near the northern boundary of her land, she had a magnificent view of the Sheyenne River valley, etched progressively deeper over thousands of years. Clusters of trees sheltered the house, some of the 600 Berthe had planted by the time she took title in 1912. The floors inside the weathered grey wooden structure were broken through in places, evidence of a heavy animal seeking shelter from the elements. Each time I return to the reservation, I am compelled to revisit this spot, a place I think of as my great-grandmother's land even though she sold it seventy-five years ago. How strange that her homestead was on an Indian reservation.

As astonishingly beautiful as the landscape was, nothing was familiar. No formation held markings I recognized. Nothing felt comfortable. In turn, I realized, I was equally foreign to the people who, like Cherry Wood Monson, welcomed me so kindly.

One morning a few years later, as I was interviewing a respected Dakota elder, Agnes Greene, her son arrived to have coffee and inspect me. "Good morning," he said. "Hi, I'm Karen Hansen, visiting from Boston," I replied. "Oh, a stranger, in other words."² Yes, I thought to myself, I am a stranger. I talk too fast. I travel thousands of miles with a university grant to pay for my rental car, my hotel, and the expensive equipment I use to record interviews. I recognized the implicit antipathy to people with advanced education and ample resources; as a college professor from a working-class background, that, at least, was familiar.

With good reason, Dakota Indians did not embrace intrusions from white settlers like my great-grandmother, or from supposedly well-intentioned researchers who visited from time to time. Renowned and controversial anthropologist Robert Lowie briefly traveled to the reservation in 1911, where he interviewed leading men of the tribe, and later wrote "Dance Associations of the Eastern Dakota."³ Native people remained skeptical and resisted European Americans' desire to voyeuristically observe sacred rituals and abscond with mystical powers. Social scientists and photographers, like writers and artists, have sought something in indigenous culture sadly lacking in their own. In the 1920s, the collaboration between Amos E. Oneroad (Sisseton-Wahpeton from Lake Traverse), who was training to be a

Presbyterian minister, and anthropologist Alanson B. Skinner ended catastrophically. In 1925, when, driving near the reservation village of Tokio and collecting artifacts and stories of Sissetons and Wahpetons, their car veered off the muddy road and overturned, killing Skinner instantly. Some locals explained the tragedy as retribution by the spirits for “fooling around with the *wakanwacipi* stuff.”⁴ *Wakanwacipi* is a sacred dance that, according to the missionary Stephen R. Riggs, is performed by “the secret society among the Dakotas which purports to be the depository of their sacred mysteries.”⁵

Most peoples, whether fragile or robust, experience a tug of war over history and integrity, a tension between trumpeting the news and guarding secrets. As I set out to uncover the human stories and societal truths behind my ancestors’ journey across the Atlantic and their new lives in North Dakota, I encountered individuals and groups who are pulled back and forth by this taut rope.

North Dakotans, white as well as Indian, have long expressed distrust of outsiders, profiteers, big business, those who come only to extract natural resources. My field notes from my early visits reflect people’s skepticism about my motives. They might hang up when I called, or simply never answer my letters. The resistance paralleled that found by Daniel Mendelsohn, who sought narratives about what had happened to his Polish family before and during the Holocaust. One family member refused to give him an on-the-record interview because, she protested, “I don’t want my life in your book.”⁶ Frustrated, Mendelsohn conceded that “she knew that the minute she allowed me to start telling her stories, they would become my stories.”⁷ She would lose control, and perhaps in his hand the meaning of her stories would shift.

From North Dakotans’ perspective—Dakota and Scandinavian alike—the main thing that gave me legitimacy was my ancestry. My great-grandmother homesteaded here. My grandmother grew up here. As I traveled around the reservation and its environs, people would automatically accept my quest when they learned that I sought to understand my grandmother’s life. Like those third-generation children of immigrants who seek histories buried in the Americanization process, I sought to understand my heritage as a means of coming to terms with a history that privileged my family at the expense of Native Americans.

Some people found my questions nettling, bothersome, unsettling. Some greeted me with silence. Others rejected my requests altogether. Like the clamoring grandchildren in Tillie Olsen’s story about a life reconsidered, *Tell Me a Riddle*, I would refuse to accept “no” for an answer. Olsen’s short story centers on an elderly protagonist, Eva, and her agonizing effort to maintain her personhood as she faces her mortality. Her desire to retreat unhindered into herself and her books after a lifetime of interruptions is greater than her desire to reach out and embrace. “I know no riddles,” she protests.⁸ But some seek healing in this history: setting the record straight,

confronting painful truths, finding catharsis in the telling, and holding on to the promise of reconciliation. Over time others' distrustful stance toward me seemed to shift. Perhaps I lost my acute sensitivity to their skepticism; maybe our interactions changed as I learned more about this place and people got to know me.

DOWSING FOR STORIES

In an oral history recorded for the State Historical Society of North Dakota, second-generation Norwegian American Gurine Moe (b. 1890) told of her husband's rare and valuable talent: he was a water dowser. "He could go out with the willow and wherever . . . there was water, the willow turned down to the ground." Many on the prairie were called upon to find and tap that scarce, essential resource. Water was harder to find in some places, and farmers would dig as many as twenty wells before they found it. In other places, such as the Moes' farm, they were lucky enough to find water with the first dig and have the well last for over fifty years.

One of the many delightful people I met in North Dakota is a different kind of dowser. Second-generation Norwegian American Juel Smestad (b. 1921) is a *bone* dowser. Instead of locating water with a willow branch, he has the gift of finding bones. In locating people's skeletal remains, he links the living to the dead by enabling them to know precisely where their ancestors lay. In the process of identifying these unmarked graves, Smestad unearths the consequences of judgment, superstition, and prejudice. Some wayward souls were buried outside consecrated ground because the church fathers found their lives unworthy of holy sanction or forgiveness. Others were excluded because they were the "wrong" religion or nationality. Novelist and editor Willa Cather wrote powerfully and insightfully about ethnic tensions and homesteading hardships in the Midwest at this historical moment. In *My Antonia*, her fictional Bohemian Catholic Mr. Shimerda was refused burial in the Norwegian Lutheran cemetery.⁹ Juel Smestad once located the remains of an African-American family buried on the periphery of a church cemetery. "Sure enough I found one outside the fence. See, they wouldn't let 'em in."

Like Juel Smestad, I feel the calling of a dowser—a story dowser. I search for the forgotten or vexing stories of the past, bringing some unrecognized members into the family plot and marking their graves. But I do not always put people at ease by telling them that their ancestors are rightfully placed. My unearthing is often unsettling. I aim to make the reader think deeply and uneasily about these stories, many unhappy, some tragic, others victorious.

Unlike Juel Smestad, I do not leave the bones where they lay. I dig them up, reassemble them based on my best guess of how they fit together, and hope that doing

so will bring us closer to understanding the meanings and consequences of actions long ago.

This book took me more than a decade to write after I first visited North Dakota. I now understand that stretch of time not as a series of delays but as a necessary condition for the completion of this project. By doggedly returning year after year, as small discoveries led to new insights, the puzzle pieces eventually started falling into place. People on the reservation came to understand that I was a serious researcher interested in giving back, not a passerby or an expropriator. In various ways people let me know that they not only felt fine about my project, but they wanted to be interviewed, they wanted to show me their treasures, they wanted me to write this book. When I first formally interviewed Dakota tribal member Phillip John Young (b. 1944), he found my questions challenging in a way he had not expected. He told me he was “asking for strength, to know this meaning, so I can help *you*.” It is not the historical sources that changed over this decade, but my relation to the living that brings meaning to the departed.

In 2005 I arrived on the reservation in late July, just in time to catch the Fort Totten Summer Theater’s production of *Fiddler on the Roof*. Coming from Brandeis University, an ecumenical, secular but Jewish-sponsored institution where such a production would be commonplace, I found the idea jarring, even comical. Until the moment that I saw the blue-eyed Tevye on stage, I did not understand how the play could work on the Great Plains, even as exotic entertainment. The drama is set in a Russian village in 1905. The threat of pogroms hovers as the ominous backdrop to Tevye’s efforts to eke out a living by selling milk to the villagers and to marry off his daughters to good Jewish men. Astonishingly, the cast became peasants before my eyes, their stirring performances resonating with the universal truths of the story. The embattled and soon-to-be-landless Tevye and his family could have been impoverished Norwegians forced to migrate or Dakotas ousted from their ancestral lands. The profound pain of dispossession infused the production, making it a deeply North Dakotan story. I realized that my absorption with the encounter at Spirit Lake, a seemingly remote place at an idiosyncratic time, reflected a deeper need to comprehend recurring patterns in world history.

That same summer, I had a change of heart as my responsibility in the reciprocal exchange of doing fieldwork became clearer to me. My calling was to retell and interpret the stories I was being told. As Agnes Greene had pointed out several years before, the interview was mine, not hers. At the end when I asked her, “Is there anything [else] I should know?” she responded, “Ask me. You’re the one who wants to know. Ask me. If I know it I’ll tell you.”

Her clarity helped set me straight. Ultimately, however carefully I listened, however much I let storytellers shape their own narratives, the interviews I conducted

were mine. I directed the conversation; I asked the questions; I was motivated to publish. My challenge was to ask the *right* question. But I should never make the mistake of thinking the story I was telling was hers. In the retelling, these accounts became mine, reframed through the prism of my interests. For Agnes Greene, I was not filching her stories, I was constructing my own.

By the time I left the reservation that year, I felt a new sense of validation and respect from others. I had met with the local history group that included both Cherry Monson and Louis Garcia, the honorary tribal historian for the Spirit Lake Dakota. Although Cherry had always been welcoming and eager to share her remarkable archives and personal knowledge, perhaps this time she too recognized that I could do more than poke around. As we were driving across the reservation, Phillip John Young took the initiative to stop and introduce me to Ambrose Littleghost (b. 1932), the pipe carrier of the tribe, and his gracious wife, Anna Littleghost. The manager of the Fort Totten bed and breakfast, Joyce Gross, willingly turned the inn into my base camp by cheerfully taking messages for me and cooking an elaborate breakfast for Ambrose and Anna so that I could host them. After returning home from that trip, I received a card that closed with: “Thanks for making our lives more interesting. Love, Cherry Monson.”¹⁰

Listening to people involves more than hearing their words. It requires respecting and honoring their secrets, joys and sorrows, triumphs and tragedies, and sense of humor. And it requires recognizing their common humanity despite divisions and differences. I understood more profoundly that my scholarly quest reassembled my own disrupted ethnic identity and brought my forgotten and erased family history into view. I could legitimately search for the family I had fantasized about, although my discoveries would not necessarily fill me with pride and admiration.

Dakota and Scandinavian people of Spirit Lake have given me so much of themselves and shared their historical memories. The question remains: What responsibility do I, the historical sociologist—a stranger of particular kind—have to reciprocate?

Social scientists debate what researchers should give their subjects in return for their engagement. Some think that listening is sufficient because the act validates the life of the storyteller. They worry that giving money can be a thinly veiled form of expropriation, trading dollars for answers. What if the accounts were tailored to their monetary value, corrupted by the profits to be made from the opportunity? Others argue that the researcher should give something back. After all, researchers typically hold powerful social positions and use other people’s testimonies to advance their careers. Anthropologists have long understood the gift exchange as fundamental to doing fieldwork. Some go further and say the researcher should help mobilize resources for political ends, teach skills, or provide services. Some feminist scholars

suggest that you should give something of yourself—friendship, empathy, a relationship—to equalize the interaction and diminish the lopsidedness of the exchange.

Compensation seems like the least Native people could expect from those out to study or profit from them. For centuries, Indians have been ripped off, their secrets exploited, photographs taken, and mythologies revealed, all for the sake of non-Indians' benefit. We have to ask, if the exchange is consensual, does that alter the outcome? If payment is robust, does that make it sufficient? How does paying for stories differ from, say, buying a novel? I gave small tokens of appreciation to my subjects—a flashlight, a calculator, a pen knife, a pie. But Native people also expected to be paid. Money was not an additional nicety or a vulgarity; it established an understanding, a foundation of exchange for the conversation.

My ability to give back in other ways has been hobbled by my outsider status and by my acute awareness of the fine line I walk as someone interested in Native American history as well as Scandinavian immigrant sagas. This book is my effort to reciprocate. I now realize that I came to this project in order to repair my fractured sense of ethnic identity and remedy my placelessness, as a daughter of an immigrant mother and a restless father who thought that frequent moving was a way to repair mistakes and start over. I hope readers will join me in grappling with a history of this space where Native Americans and Scandinavian immigrants lived side by side, each enmeshed in their own people's worldview, but where, 100 years later, they are able to reflect on the stories that both divide and link them.

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Introduction: Illuminating the Encounter



AS I BEHELD my great-grandmother's long-vacant dilapidated homestead shack on a hill overlooking the Sheyenne River (see figure 3), I became increasingly perplexed. How did Berthe Haugen, a fifty-one-year-old widow, and her children leave Norway and end up homesteading on the Spirit Lake Dakota Indian Reservation? From reading U.S. history, I knew about European Americans' perpetual expropriation of indigenous people's land and natural resources, as well as the devastating diseases and warfare that reduced Native populations and undermined their autonomy. And I knew that women homesteaded in the American West. But Norwegian women on an Indian reservation? Thus began my own encounter with my ancestral past and my face-to-face meeting with Dakota people whose land the reservation had once been.

A historical sociologist by training, I began a journey that led me out of my geographic and temporal areas of expertise. I confronted two cultures utterly foreign to me, those of turn-of-the-century Norwegian immigrants and of indigenous Dakota people. How did so many newly arrived Scandinavians come to homestead on the reservation? What was the impact of their presence? How did Dakotas, who had been promised territorial integrity, respond to this incursion? In the end, what did the two groups' uneasy coexistence yield, given the paradoxical actions of the U.S. government; the divergence between subsistence farming and industrialized, market-oriented agriculture; and the differing cultural logics of two peoples who were complete strangers to each other? What can we learn about encounters that accelerated a process of dispossession?

Taking these questions as a point of departure, this book explores the underlying historical encounter between immigrants and Indians in the early twentieth century. In the United States we think of cross-cultural encounters as beginning between indigenous peoples and European traders in the sixteenth century and culminating in warfare between the U.S. government and Indian nations in the

nineteenth century. But this particular engagement of separate worlds involved Scandinavian immigrants and Dakota Sioux on an Indian reservation in North Dakota *after* 1900. Decades of living side by side created multiple and contradictory layers of conflict, adaptation, resistance, and mutuality within the social relationships on this land.¹

Encounter on the Great Plains brings into the same frame two dominant processes in American history: the unceasing migration of people to North America, and the protracted dispossession of indigenous peoples who inhabited the continent. The historical encounter at Spirit Lake in a small corner of eastern North Dakota encapsulates the story of conquest and white settlement of North America and the less publicized but equally important story of the dispossession and survival of Native Americans. Further, it demonstrates the consequences of offering land to peasants from abroad in order to recruit laborers for the expanding nation's mission of development. The material wealth and the nationalist mythology of the United States are built upon this history.²

The Sisseton and Wahpeton bands of Dakotas whom immigrant Scandinavians encountered were not this place's primordial residents but had themselves settled here in the wake of the U.S.–Dakota War of 1862. They joined another band, Ihanktonwannas (labeled “Cutheads” and Yanktonais in historical documents), who claimed Spirit Lake as their place of origin and the region as their territory, who had not lived in Minnesota and were not part of the war but were nonetheless displaced by it. Reeling from the loss of their historic way of life but still recognized as a sovereign nation, they collectively negotiated a treaty with the United States in 1867 that established the 240,000-acre reservation. At the turn of the twentieth century, when homesteading began, tribal enrollment numbered slightly over 1,000. Dispossession meant relocation and population decline. Native people worked to find a home for their families and make a new life under unfamiliar and unstable legal, environmental, and economic circumstances.

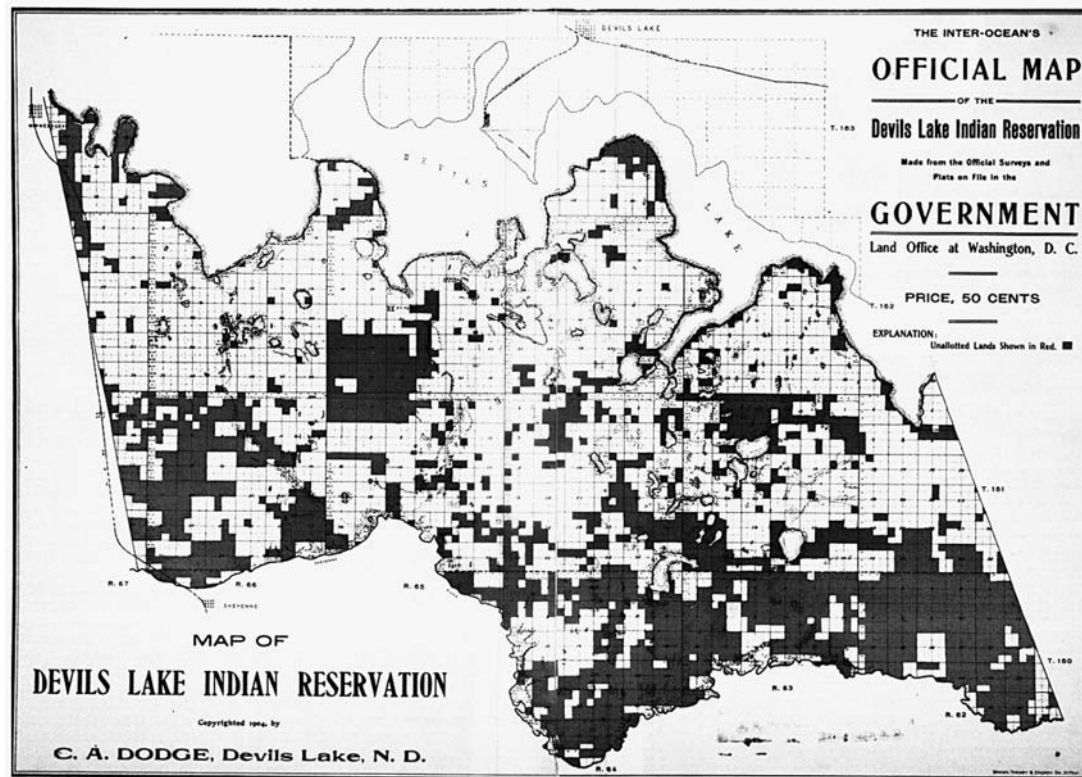
Impoverished immigrants who had set off from their ancestral homeland, too, sought land and a place to remake home.³ While they did not venture forth as mercenaries or as conscious participants in a colonial scheme, they nonetheless advanced the U.S. imperial project of seizing and transforming North America. White settlers were recruited as instruments of the twin federal policies of westward expansion and the economic and cultural assimilation—or, as many Dakotas saw it, the cultural annihilation—of native peoples.⁴ In northern Europe, the governments of Dakota Territory and later North Dakota found a seemingly inexhaustible source of destitute and eager immigrants to populate the region. Those making the journey did not see themselves as serving Manifest Destiny, furthering western civilization, or

spreading Christianity among a pagan people, but they nonetheless acted as instruments of colonialism.

Here we confront the human face of expropriation: the land takers and the dispossessed. Spirit Lake attracted Dakotas and Scandinavians from Minnesota who had engaged in armed conflict with one another. Scandinavians anticipated struggles with Native Americans—although for the most part they had not fought in the 1862 war, they had read about it in Norwegian newspapers and in the Scandinavian American foreign-language press.⁵ Indians were described as the “Red race,” and Scandinavians’ attitudes and actions reflected the racism of reigning ideologies.⁶ At the same time, they saw themselves as worthy land takers and proficient farmers.

By 1900, as Scandinavian immigration to the United States swelled, few opportunities for homesteading remained. The exceptions were in arid, relatively inhospitable parts of North Dakota and Montana and on Indian reservations. In North Dakota, most settlers were first- and second-generation Scandinavians who were exceedingly poor, had little formal education, and spoke broken, accented English, if they spoke English at all. But they knew that land, provided they could obtain it cheaply, could serve as a foothold and be made to yield a livelihood. Whether they came directly from Norway or Sweden or elsewhere in the Midwest after spending years as landless laborers, they sought to improve their lives through landownership. By 1929, Scandinavians came to dominate as residents and farmers, owning fully one-third of reservation land—indeed, more acreage than Dakotas themselves owned. What does it mean when one group’s acquisition of land is predicated on the dispossession of the other?

Four decades following the U.S.–Dakota War, this stigmatized space was the site where dispossession and immigration faced off. The startling 1904 map of the reservation advertised Indian land available for homesteading, where, in effect, the Dawes Act converged with a version of the Homestead Act (see map 2). Published as a broadside, the black (red in the original) checkers mark the unallotted Indian land that homesteaders could newly settle. Like a blotchy plague, the invasive squares appear to creep north from the Sheyenne River. Homesteaders at Spirit Lake lived close to the indigenous people they had just dispossessed; after all, this geographic space was still legally designated as an Indian reservation. Living on the reservation marked its residents—white or Indian—as distinct from the surrounding community. My grandmother, Helene Haugen Kanten, attended a public school just south of the reservation in Eddy Township. She recalled the stinging taunts of the other students who called her a “squaw” because she lived on the reservation. As Dakota women well knew, white people used this racial epithet to mark and degrade Native women.⁷



MAP 2 Map of unallotted lands at Spirit Lake, 1904.

This broadside, made from "official survey and plats," advertised unallotted lands available for homesteading on the Spirit Lake Dakota Indian Reservation (then called the Devils Lake Sioux Indian Reservation). Potential homestead sites are marked in red on the original. Published by the *Devils Lake Inter-Ocean*, copyrighted by C. A. Dodge, 1904. (Courtesy Lake Region Heritage Museum.)

MY QUEST

As I pondered the implications of this peculiar situation, I wondered: Why had no one studied this sort of encounter before? Although the two groups converged here, as they did at other times and places, the histories of immigrants and Indians have generally been treated as separate fields of study. Until recently, stories of homesteaders have been told as if they had nothing to do with the fate of Native peoples whose lands they took.⁸ Historical chronicles of “pioneer settlers” have privileged white Yankees⁹ and European immigrants and cast Indians as a colorful backdrop, an exotic remnant of an earlier era when Native peoples constituted a formidable threat and obstacle to settlement. The history of dispossession has understandably centered on Indian peoples, the horrors of the reservation system, and the continuing loss of land. From Dakotas’ perspective, the federal government and its representatives figured as aggressive invaders, white traders appeared as shysters who swindled Indians, and white settlers actively displaced and replaced Native people. Non-Indian farmers who lived on reservations are entirely absent from these histories.

The convergence of federal policy and economic opportunity positioned Scandinavian immigrants and their children to gain from the expropriation of Indian land on the Spirit Lake Reservation. Here they were settler colonialists.¹⁰ Embedded in transnational migration streams, they relocated to find a place to stay indefinitely, not to extend the power of the nation-state but to make farms and families. Like seventeenth-century European colonists, Scandinavians saw the land as “vacant” and “unused.” Second-generation Norwegian Palmer Overby (b. 1894), who lived just east of the reservation, articulated his perspective: “There was nobody living up here till 1905, because the Indians had that, you see.” In this view, “nobody” inhabited the Dakotas’ vast expanses of land. Dakotas’ historic strategies for extensive land use were superseded by the logic of private property, homesteading, and agricultural development. Like the U.S. government, Scandinavian settlers privileged agriculture and therefore saw uncultivated land as unused. Most Dakota families cultivated a portion of their land, raising vegetables in one- to two-acre gardens and planting crops, but few raised livestock and grain. Scandinavian settlers knew they could cultivate the soil and use the land well according to their agrarian sensibilities, which dovetailed perfectly with the U.S. government’s design. They imagined reshaping the landscape to suit their needs, leaving an indelible stamp on it and making it their own. Despite their poverty and foreignness, they participated actively in a process of dispossession that continued incrementally into the twentieth century, with cumulative devastation to Native ways of life.

The clash of logics about land use in effect, from the point of view of white settlers, erased Dakotas’ successes in making homes and adapting to this arid environment. This perspective allowed them to rationalize appropriating the land and exploiting it

land and import foreigners who would develop the land with little expectation of short-term profits, but also to promote assimilation through coexistence within a demarcated geographic space. In a period when scientists and governments sorted, categorized, and stratified people on the basis of their perceived race, ancestry, and immigration status and when Southern state legislatures were passing laws that segregated and subordinated black people in defiance of the Reconstruction-era amendments to the U.S. Constitution, the federal government recruited whites to take land on reservations and live amongst Indians.

CONSTRUCTING RACIAL CATEGORIES AND AFFIRMING GENDER HIERARCHIES

The state constructed systems of racial classification to facilitate governance and entry into the country. Indians were subjected to “blood quantum regulation” that in theory parsed the fraction of a person’s ancestors who were Native.¹² According to O’Brien, governments imposed classification schemes that served as “tools of colonialism” against Indian peoples.¹³ Federal laws specifying blood quantum determined tribal enrollments: to be recognized as Dakota, a person had to have a minimum of one-fourth Dakota ancestry. The regulations required a person to prove their lineage and present evidence of being descended from a tribal grandfather or grandmother. The categories of “mixed blood” and “full blood” contradicted Native practices of deciding group membership based on cultural affinity as well as genealogy. The federal government used the malleable and contested fraction of “blood” as a basis for determining tribal standing in different, sometimes contradictory ways. As it simultaneously promoted integration and “amalgamation,” by which it meant intermarriage and the absorption of people with some white parentage into the dominant society, the government strategically aimed to reduce the number of Native people by denying recognition to those whose blood was “diluted” according to its calculus. Over time, by imposing these criteria in conjunction with other serious assaults on Indian people, including war, destruction of natural resources, and efforts to undermine language and culture, the government succeeded in causing a numerical contraction of tribal populations.¹⁴

This approach to Indians as a racialized minority was profoundly different from the treatment of blacks in the post-Civil War era. Under Jim Crow, African Americans were subject to the “one-drop rule” that identified everyone with any visible African ancestry as black, regardless of whatever Native American and/or European ancestry they might also have, and in effect expanded the nation’s black population. Laws, customs, and violence worked to separate and subordinate African Americans, disfranchise them politically, exploit them economically, and segregate them spatially and culturally. As the Australian historian Patrick Wolfe observes,

“Indians and Black people in the U.S. have been racialized in opposing ways that reflect their antithetical roles in the formation of U.S. society.” In regard to African Americans, integration and interracial marriage were held up as a specter to fear, not a “solution” to seek. This racialization process consolidated inequality through the law and was applied differently across regions. In the South it segregated growing numbers of blacks from whites, while for Native people on reservations across the continent it applied what Wolfe terms “the logic of elimination.”¹⁵

Assuming that all things indigenous—tribal governance, land held in common, time-honored religious observance, language use—were antithetical to modern American society, the U.S. government sought the assimilation of Native people. Militarily defeated and repeatedly dispossessed, Dakotas were deprived of their customary forms of livelihood and were rendered dependent on the goods, services, and annuities that the federal government had promised to provide in exchange for land taken. Native people worked to make a home for their families and to create a new life under adverse legal, environmental, and economic circumstances. Although they cultivated large gardens, they were not accustomed to or equipped for commercial farming, which by the turn of the twentieth century meant raising large crops of grain, particularly wheat, for sale on the national market. Subsistence on the reservation was a challenge, particularly when Congress retaliated against Dakotas after the 1862 war by abrogating annuities agreed upon in earlier treaties. Thereafter, rations were dispensed only to those *in extremis*, on recommendation of the Indian agent and subject to congressional appropriations. It was not until 1906 that Congress reinstated annuities for Sisseton and Wahpeton Dakotas, who had long claimed they were not enemy combatants in the war but rather had led efforts to protect white settlers and prisoners and served as scouts for the U.S. Army. Even then, these annuities were insufficient for basic nutrition and sound housing.

The process of land taking was gendered as well as racially structured. Not only were women as well as men active participants in the land taking as both individuals and family members, but notions of masculinity and femininity defined the project of continental settlement by white Europeans. The West was infamous as a proving ground for white men and boys keen to earn their manhood as miners, cowboys, Indian fighters, or soldiers. The turn of the twentieth century saw the founding of the Boy Scouts and the presidency of Teddy Roosevelt, the former “Rough Rider” who signed the proclamation opening Spirit Lake Reservation land to homesteaders. Idealized womanhood was portrayed as fragile and refined, the opposite of masculine ruggedness; its most popular constructions expressed white, middle-class, and urban sensibilities. In practice, notions of “true womanhood” were used as a cudgel to judge and stigmatize indigenous, foreign-born, and African American women.¹⁶

Many immigrant women ignored or defied the gendered strictures of the dominant society. It was my widowed great-grandmother, not her husband, father, or son,

who established a farm on the gentle hill near the Sheyenne River. As she ventured to leave Norway and arrived in time to participate in the land lottery, she demonstrated that the dominant gender hierarchy could be subverted to enable her to provide for her family. How did women's landownership shape these communities and offer new options to individuals over time?

Differing histories and competing interests pitted Dakotas and Scandinavians against each other. Scandinavians held crucial advantages, as experienced farmers, as resident aliens with a legal status superior to that of Indians, and as white immigrants eligible for full U.S. citizenship. Yet in the early decades of the twentieth century, when these poor and dislocated people took homesteads on the reservation, these two groups faced common challenges with more comparability of circumstance than a casual backward glance might suggest. Different as they were from each other, Dakotas and Scandinavians shared an outsider status.

Today, after enduring hostility from the dominant culture and struggling to survive in the harsh environment of the Great Plains, Dakotas and Scandinavians continue to live as neighbors on the reservation. Although this book begins with the social conditions and political machinations that allotment entailed, it centers on the influx of whites onto the reservation and the first three decades of their homesteading and farm making. It concludes in 1929 with a platting of the reservation that documented Dakota dispossession and Scandinavian land acquisition, before the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 ended the allotment policy. I explore the everyday practices of Dakotas and Scandinavians during this cross-cultural encounter. Like other sociologists who have sought to understand how people adapt to new environmental, economic, and social conditions, I want to know: How do groups that start out as "strangers" in an encounter come to coexist in a spatially bounded community?

THE TRANSFER OF INDIAN LAND TO IMMIGRANT HOMESTEADERS

During the second half of the nineteenth century, two major pieces of national legislation encouraged immigration and westward expansion. Passed twenty-five years apart, they were both predicated on the conception that the territorial claims and rights of indigenous peoples posed a barrier to the acquisition of land by white settlers and established a plan for their dispossession. The Homestead Act of 1862 entitled a homesteader to settle 160 acres of land, commonly called a quarter section. Signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln, the legislation stipulated that a homesteader had to stake a claim, "improve" the land by cultivating it and living on it, and file for title, called the "patent," to public land owned privately for the first time. Single women were included in the homesteading legislation, which codified a vision of family settlement. The foreign-born could take land as long

as they declared their intention to become naturalized citizens. The land was not free: homesteaders had to pay a filing fee and live on the land for five years and improve it; alternatively they could live on it six months and pay \$1.25 per acre, still far below the market price.¹⁷ These lands in the public domain of the United States had recently been ceded by Indian peoples negotiating as sovereign powers.¹⁸ From the perspective of American Indians, therefore, the Homestead Act amounted to a wholesale scheme for further encroachment, violating the terms of the treaties they had recently signed protecting their land. In reaction to the continuing advance by white settlers, Dakota Chief Waanatan, attending a peace commission in July 1868, said, “I see them swarming all over my country. . . . Take all the whites and your soldiers away and all will be well.”¹⁹

The second piece of legislation was the General Allotment Act of 1887, commonly known as the Severalty Act or the Dawes Act, after Henry Dawes, the Republican senator from Massachusetts who spearheaded the bill. Under this act, reservation land, which belonged to tribes as nations, would be subdivided into individual lots. Adult heads of families were allotted private property in 160-acre parcels; single persons over the age of eighteen years were allotted 80 acres, as were orphans under the age of eighteen; and children, 40 acres.²⁰ As historian Tonia Compton points out, gender was not explicitly discussed in the legislative debates, but as with the Homestead Act and in an affirmation of women’s property rights in many tribes, single women were included.²¹ At the urging of Native people, including vocal Sissetons, an amendment to the Dawes Act in 1891 increased allotments to eighty acres for all Indians. Implicitly, this change extended allotment to married women, in effect profoundly differentiating it from the Homestead Act, which purposely excluded married women.²²

By design, once tribal members had been assigned their own plots, “surplus” land on reservations was opened to white homesteading. Policymakers transferring reservation land to white farmers thought that the subsequent integration would promote the incorporation of Indians into the American way of life. This legislation laid the groundwork for a shift in U.S. policy from conquest to assimilation of Indian peoples.

This particular case at Spirit Lake is a consequence of social structures and local processes—government policies and legislation combined with people’s everyday practices—that facilitated systemic land acquisition and dispossession. The reservation system, devised by President Thomas Jefferson, had reflected a strategy of removal of Native people to Indian Territory, by force or negotiation. The result was a shrinking land base, rendering them economically dependent on trade with whites and, later, on the government. Best known are the federal government’s seizures of land in violation of treaties to extract valuable resources, such as uranium in the

Southwest and gold in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Less well known are the federal government moves to make reservation land available to white settlement, which brought settler colonists to live on reservations where Indians remained.

Strikingly, the late nineteenth-century reformers organized as “Friends of the Indian” embraced allotment and integration as components of their assimilation agenda, which they saw as the best chance of helping Native people survive into the future. This well-organized and vocal pro-Indian group opposed those who vociferously called for wiping out the Red race.²³ As Frederick Hoxie has pointed out, reformers such as Alice C. Fletcher, probably the most famous agent to allot reservation land, believed that “individual homesteads would protect the Indians from removal and dispossession while it spurred them on to ‘civilization.’”²⁴ As the Friends of the Indian reasoned, the Indian “must be taught industry and acquisitiveness to fit him for his ‘ultimate absorption in the great body of American citizenship.’”²⁵ In response to government efforts to negotiate the implementation of the severalty act, Dakotas argued that the reservation was already theirs because the Treaty of 1867 “provides for a permanent reservation.”²⁶

Central to the Dawes Act was the primacy of private property. It was not only an economic and political building block of the United States, where yeoman farmers and landholders were regarded as rightful voting citizens, but also antithetical to the indigenous approach to land. As Patrick Wolfe puts it, “Tribal land was tribally owned—tribes and private property did not mix.”²⁷ The logic of reformers had two intersecting premises that suited competing constituencies in the concerned public and the U.S. Congress. The first was that owning land individually in a legal system built on private property would guarantee a base for Indian people in perpetuity, correcting the shortcomings of negotiated territorial rights that had been repeatedly transgressed and proven ineffective in holding the U.S. government and white settlers at bay.

The second aim of allotment was that Indians would come to think of themselves primarily as individuals, not as members of collectivities. In so doing, their allegiance would shift from tribes, nations, and indigenous leaders to themselves and their own “Christian family.” These two suppositions converged in the allotment of land and fit subtly but precisely within the “elimination of the native” logic.

At Spirit Lake, Scandinavians were incongruously cast into the role of agents of assimilation, although they hardly represented American culture. Immigrant homesteaders spoke their ancestral languages and came with few resources other than their labor power; even their American-born children spoke English haltingly. These desperately poor new arrivals were themselves targets of Americanization projects and English-only campaigns. The immigrants came to take land but had difficulty accumulating the capital that commercial farming required. They built houses and