

In Search of Lorenzo Lawrence
Video Podcast transcript
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Ellen Miller: In the history business, it's rare to meet someone as closely linked to history as Elden Lawrence. Dr. Lawrence grew up near the town of Peever on the Sisseton Wahpeton Reservation in South Dakota. His career teaching Dakota history at the tribal college led him to research his own family history. He found out a lot about himself and his family's place in history. His parents were forced to deny their roots, but Elden used his research to reclaim his pride as a Dakota person.

Elden Lawrence: One of the things that happened in my early life is that my parents were both what I call victims of the boarding school system. A lot of people like to call them the products but they are not actually the products, they are the victims and I'm the product because, because of the boarding schools, my parents never taught us the language and they never taught us anything about the culture or the history because they thought it was just going to be more of a problem for us. So they figured if we didn't learn it then we wouldn't have to confront it. And so I ...because of that I never learned a whole lot but in addition to that and because of the way that we had to live in those days... being Indian was just a bad thing. There was nothing any good that anybody was really saying about Indian people. And so I got the impression that because of the way that people acted toward you, like you were a second class citizen. You didn't go into public places unless you really had to. That was the domain for white people. Indians usually walked in the alleys and just stayed off the main street.

And those kinds of things...and then the fact that my folks would not speak the language in front of me; they would talk to themselves but when we would come into the house or something, and they would start talking in English. And so then I just began to think that we must be bad if they don't ever want to talk Indian in front of me. They never said anything about my history or the culture. I didn't know anything about my ancestors. And I think they did it because they were, they thought they were probably were protecting us. But as a young kid, they read that different, so I grew up thinking that I was born with a curse because I was born Indian. And I went through 32 years of my life that way, and that was a big problem for my because I thought that no matter what I did, no matter how much good I did, it would never be good enough because I was Indian and I would always be Indian.

Ellen: Elden's family history led him to the story of his great grandfather Lorenzo Lawrence. A somewhat controversial figure, Lorenzo was the first Dakota Indian to receive citizenship. Lorenzo is famous for saving the lives of three woman and thirteen children during the 1862 U.S.-Dakota War. The rescue is well-known, but Elden has dug into Lorenzo's post-war life including his forty-one-page memoir, written in 1895, housed at the Minnesota Historical Society.

Elden Lawrence: One of the biggest breaks I got was when I came across a story that was written by him in his handwriting; he was very fluent in English and Dakota. In fact he was the first Dakota person to learn to speak and read and write English. And he was also the first citizen of Minnesota. And that was based on the fact that he was...he could speak both English and Dakota. But anyway his story of his rescue mission that he led, in which he rescued 13 children and 3 women by taking

them down from the Upper Sioux Agency to Ft. Ridgely by canoe at night. A trip which took 5 days and 5 nights to get down there. That told me a lot about him and his character. And after that I started to pick up more and more bits and pieces of his life, and one of the things that always evaded me was to know what he looked like; what did he really look like, and I could never find a picture of him. there was a fellow that came to a conference in which I was a part of and he had picked up a photo at an antique shop, but he e-mailed me and told me that he had this picture and he didn't tell me that it was of Lorenzo, he just said he had a picture and someone said I was a relative and so he sent it to me in the mail. It says right on it that it was a picture of Lorenzo and his mother, so that was a bonus, and right on the picture on the photograph it says: Lorenzo and his Mother, full-blooded Sioux Indians. So that was clear evidence that this was an actual picture of him, and it identified him and his mother and the incident that he was noted for at the time. So I had that, and I went ahead and got the picture blown-up and a better picture made of it out of that. And this is the picture that shows him up close that was done from this one here, which is a remake of that picture. [question] Yeah I was surprised, although my dad looks pretty much like him, and my uncle. And the reason why I don't probably resemble him as much as people would think is that people have told me I look more like my mother and her side of the family.

Words on black screen: What does it all mean?

Elden Lawrence: Sometime you need that strength that comes only from the roots of your ancestors. You can't get it out of schools, you can't get it out of books, and you can't get it out of your counselors. It has to come from that knowledge and connection that you have to roots.

I was afraid that my children might grow up like I did. Being kind of ashamed or not having anything, any role models or anything. And then our history being the way it was, and the way it was written, we never come out good on anything. And I remember telling my son one time about this certain battle and how we lost this and lost that, and he came right out once and said, "Dad, don't we ever win one?" And I said, "Yeah, we - we're gonna win one. We're going to win the biggest one. We're going to win the last one."