A Dakota elder teaches children using stories. American Indian artist Oscar Howe painted this watercolor in 1951.

1492
Christopher Columbus sails to the New World.

1519
Spaniards under Hernando Cortez attack the Aztecs in Mexico. These Spaniards bring cattle and horses to North America.

1603
French explorer Samuel de Champlain sails up the St. Lawrence River, the future route of Minnesota's fur trade.

Early 1600s
Ojibwe start migration from near Atlantic coast toward Great Lakes area.

1659–1660
Radisson and Groseilliers are the first known white explorers to winter with Dakota in the Mille Lacs region.

1660s
Ojibwe and Dakota fight in several wars in the upper Great Lakes region.
Of all the people who live in Minnesota, the Dakota have lived here the longest. Their history in this place goes back hundreds, some believe even thousands of years, to the time when wooly mammoths and giant bison roamed the land. Any history of Minnesotans must begin with the Dakota many years ago. But how can we understand what life was like for people who lived so long ago?

We can start by listening to their stories.

For centuries, the Dakota have kept their history alive through a process called **oral tradition**, the purposeful repeating of stories. Sometimes these stories tell of events that actually happened long ago. Sometimes they are legends that teach lessons or explain why things are the way they are. Sometimes the stories tell what will happen in the future if you don’t listen to your elders. They connect the Dakota people to each other and to their past.

All Dakota are familiar with at least some of these oral traditions. A few have a special talent for making

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**LOOK FOR**

- How do the Dakota use oral tradition?
- How does the Dakota story explain what causes storms?
- How did Dakota life change with the seasons?
- What did the Dakota do for food in each season?
- In what ways did the Dakota show respect for one another?
- How do the Dakota view the past?

**KEY TERMS**

oral tradition  
elder  
tipi  
sugar camp  
bark house  
*ohanwaste*  
tiyoʃpaye  
wohoda

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**oral tradition**: the custom of telling stories about the histories and legends of a group in order to teach about that culture.
Although the Dakota traditionally have used the spoken word to keep their history alive, some have written down their oral traditions. They’ve done this mainly to teach other people about the Dakota. Their written accounts provide much of the information included in this chapter. Several of these accounts were written by Ohiyesa (oh-HEE-yay-sah). Born to a Dakota woman in 1858, he spent his childhood among the Dakota. But when he was 15, his father took him to live among white people and gave him a new name: Charles Eastman. Ohiyesa went to college and became a respected doctor. He also wrote 10 books about the Dakota, most of which contain oral traditions that had never been written down before. The stories about the Thunderbird and the Water Spirit and about the North Wind and Star Boy come from his book Indian Boyhood, which was published in 1902.

Ohiyesa’s name means “the victor” in Dakota. He is shown here in 1920.

eldert: an older member of the tribe who is respected for his or her knowledge and wisdom

tipi: a cone-shaped house made by stretching animal skins over a frame of wooden poles

the stories come alive. It is the job of these expert storytellers to make sure the oral traditions of the Dakota do not fade from memory. Storytellers are living books. Their minds are libraries of Dakota traditions and history.

In this chapter we will imagine that we’ve gone back in time about 500 years to visit a Dakota elder in her tipi near the shore of a frozen Minnesota lake. As we do this, we should respect the ways of our host. Everyone remains silent until the storyteller has finished her tale.

A Visit with the Storyteller

It is the middle of winter, the time of year that the Dakota call Witehiwi (wee-TAY-hee-nee) — the Hard Moon. It is very cold. The snow is deep. The ice on the lake shifts, thunders, and echoes. But it’s warm and cozy inside the storyteller’s tipi. A fire of large logs is burning in the middle. It provides warmth and light. The smoke escapes through an opening at the top of the tipi.

Five children in deerskin robes have gathered around the fire. They have brought gifts of food. Now they are eagerly waiting to hear from the storyteller, who is both a teacher and an entertainer. The stories she tells are exciting. On this cold evening, she will treat the children to a warm-weather tale about Wakiinyaj (wah-KEE-yah), the Thunderbird, and Uŋktehi (oonk-TAY-hee), the Water Spirit.

WAKIINYAJ AND UŋKTEHI

Warm yourselves, children, with this story of Wakiinyaj, the great storm-maker who cleans the earth and sky. Sometimes he makes life hard for us. But usually his work is good.

Long ago, Wakiinyaj was always at
war with his enemy, Unktehi, the Water Spirit. All would be calm as Wakiinyan approached. But then he would attack. He breathed the storm wind. On his drum, he beat the rhythm of thunder. He threw tomahawks of lightning. Unktehi responded to these attacks by churning up the surfaces of the lakes and rivers. Line after line of white-capped warriors would roll over the water and crash on the shore. The fish of the water, the birds of the air, and all the creatures of the land would hide to escape the terrible battle.

But then came the great peacemaker, the Sun.

The Sun held a rainbow in his hand to signal that the war between Wakiinyan and Unktehi should finally come to an end. Gentle winds came down from the sky and played with the tiny waves that danced upon the water.

Even now, the Sun watches over Wakiinyan and Unktehi to make sure that whatever battles they may still have end quickly. This allows all the living creatures to work and play without too much fear in the warmth of spring and summer.

**Spring**

With the first thaw, each Dakota village split up to begin the springtime work. While the men went off to hunt for muskrat, beaver, and ducks, the women and children trekked through the snow and slush to get to the sugar camp where the maple trees grew. This was where the Dakota would begin the annual work of turning sap from the maples into sugar and syrup.

The sugar-makers often returned to the same sugar camp each year. The first few weeks were for making preparations. The women cleaned and repaired the bark houses and the sugarhouse, which was used to store the sugaring equipment during the off-season when they were away. They also made wood and bark containers for holding the maple sap. The children were expected to help with these chores, but often they had plenty of spare time to play in the woods.

By April, when the snow began melting, it was time to see if the maples were ready to give up their sap. In the words of the Dakota writer Ohionya, “The trees, like people, have their individual characters;

**sugar camp:** village location during spring, when Dakota made sugar from maple sap

**bark house:** a rectangular house made with poles and covered with large overlapping strips of bark
some were ready to yield up their life-blood, while others were more reluctant.” The women tested the trees by striking them with an ax. If sap appeared, the harvest could begin.

The women then pounded wood chips into the cuts they had made. The sap trickled drop by drop from the corners of the chips into little birch-bark dishes. Then came the hard part. All the sap was collected and poured into specially prepared wooden troughs or clay pots. The containers were placed over hot fires. The sap boiled down and turned into syrup and sugar.

What different steps of sugaring are shown in this painting? Seth Eastman, a U.S. Army officer stationed at Fort Snelling, painted this scene in the early 1850s.

**OCETI ŠAKOWIN**

Each Dakota belonged to one of seven distinct bands within the Oyate (oh-YAH-tay), or Dakota nation. The Dakota called these bands Oceti Šakowin (oh-CHAY-tee shah-KOH-wee)—the Seven Council Fires. Each council fire was named for the place where its people lived.

Six of the seven council fires still exist today as organized groups. (Only a few Dakota now claim to be Wahpekte.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dakota</th>
<th>Common Usage</th>
<th>Translation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mdewakantonwan</td>
<td>Mdewakanton</td>
<td>Spirit Lake people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wahpetonwan</td>
<td>Wahpeton</td>
<td>Dwellers in the leaves</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wahpekte</td>
<td>Wahpekte</td>
<td>Shooters in the leaves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sissetonwan</td>
<td>Sisseton</td>
<td>Dwellers of the marsh</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ihaŋktonwanŋa</td>
<td>Yanktonai</td>
<td>Little end-village dwellers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ihaŋktonwan</td>
<td>Yankton</td>
<td>End-village dwellers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Titoŋwan</td>
<td>Teton</td>
<td>Prairie dwellers</td>
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</table>

But these days, the members of each council fire live in many different places. The Dakota inhabit four communities in Minnesota and several others in North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Manitoba, Canada. They also live in towns and cities throughout Minnesota and the Upper Midwest. Even though the Dakota have moved, or have been forced to move, frequently over the past 200 years, they have carried the traditions of the council fires with them wherever they have gone.

**Summer**

Summer was a time of planting, cultivating, and harvesting for the Dakota. Families gathered back together at summer villages of bark houses along rivers where the soil was soft and sandy. The women planted and tended crops, such as corn, squash, and beans. The men fished and
hunted small animals. Once the corn was harvested, the Dakota turned their attention to harvesting another important food: wild rice.

Wild rice is a tall grass that grows in the shallow waters of northern ponds and lakes. The seeds, or grain, from wild rice plants were among the Dakota’s favorite foods and the focus of their lives during the days of late summer.

The Dakota prepared for the wild rice harvest by celebrating the bounty that nature had given them. They held feasts of fish, duck, and venison. They made offerings to Unktehi in hopes that there would be no drownings during the harvest. They picked blueberries and cranberries.

Then the rice harvest began.

The families launched their canoes and went to work. First they tied the stalks of grain into bundles and let them stand there to dry for a
few days. Then they returned and struck the bundles with a rod so that the rice fell into the bottom of the canoe. The rice was brought to shore and placed on mats to dry in the sun. Then it was roasted over a fire and poured into a pit lined with a hide. There, boys wearing clean moccasins would grind the husks off the grains by stepping lightly on them. Finally, the husks were removed from the grains by shaking the rice so that the wind would blow away the chaff, the outer coverings of the grain.

All the work was done by September, but the Dakota had little time to rest: autumn and winter were coming, and they had to get ready.

**Autumn**

Preparing for winter meant, above all, hunting animals for food, clothing, and shelter. If the hunters did not kill enough large animals—deer, bison, or bear—people might starve or freeze during the long, cold winter.

The autumn hunt began when the rice harvest was done and the weather had begun to cool. The villagers, who had spent most of the summer in one place, now became a community on the move. Each family packed up its belongings and headed to the hunting grounds that the chief had chosen. At each new destination, they built fires and set up tipis. The women worked to prepare, cook, and preserve food for the winter, while the men did the hunting.

All hunters were expected to follow certain rules. In the morning, they gathered at a large bonfire to learn the boundaries for the day’s hunting area. This was important. They knew that if they strayed outside the designated hunting grounds, they and their families would...
be punished, possibly by having their hunting weapons broken. By setting new boundaries each day, the village made sure that no area was overhunted.

Ohanwaste (oh-HAHN-wahsh-tay), or generosity toward everyone, was an important part of the Dakota hunter’s life. The one who killed the first animal of the day would announce the news throughout the forest. He then would share the meat with his fellow hunters. Those who killed the most animals were respected and admired.

Another Visit with the Storyteller

The harsh winds of Witeliwi are howling outside as the children gather again in the storyteller’s tipi. It’s the perfect time to retell one of the many stories about the Dakota hero Wicáŋȟpi Hoksídan (wee-CHAHNK-pee hohk-SHEE-dah)—Star Boy. The children all know about Wicáŋȟpi Hoksídan, who is the son of a woman and a star. He travels the earth, protecting the weak from the strong. This evening’s story tells of his struggle with one of the Dakota’s strongest enemies—Tate Waziyata (tah-TAY wah-ZEE-yah-tah), the North Wind.

TATE WAZIYATA AND WICÁNĦPI HOKSİDAN

One day, when the earth was still young, Wicáŋȟpi Hoksídan traveled far to the north—to a cold land where the snow was deep, and the ice sounded like thunder when it moved. There he found a nation of people in great distress. They were hungry and cold and afraid. Tate Waziyata, the North Wind, had driven away the bison that provided the meat these people needed to survive. Wicáŋȟpi Hoksídan offered to help the people.

“Come,” he said. “Let’s hunt some bison.”

Wicáŋȟpi Hoksídan led a small group of men to the open plain where the bison had fled. And it was there that Tate Waziyata appeared, howling in anger at the small band of hunters. The men were afraid, but Wicáŋȟpi Hoksídan was not. Tate Waziyata saw this and challenged Wicáŋȟpi Hoksídan to a fight.

It was a great battle. At first, Wicáŋȟpi Hoksídan seemed to be winning. Then Tate Waziyata slammed him to the ground and left him for dead. But Wicáŋȟpi Hoksídan did not give up. He rose to his feet and continued to fight. The battle went on for some time until both Wicáŋȟpi Hoksídan and Tate Waziyata were too tired to continue. They sat down on a snowbank to rest.
Wicanŋpi Hoksiyata began fanning himself with a large plume of eagle feathers. This created a warm breeze that quickly melted the snow.ไท Tàte Waziyata saw this and knew he was defeated. He made a treaty with Wicanŋpi Hoksiyata. From then on, Tàte Waziyata and the cold weather he brought would visit the earth for only half of the year. The other half of the year would be a time of warm weather.

This is how the seasons came to be. Wicanŋpi Hoksiyata’s fan of eagle feathers ushers in the warmth of spring and summer. Tàte Waziyata arrives in the autumn and gives the people enough time to prepare for the hard days of winter that are to come.

**Winter**

The autumn hunt often lasted until January. Then it was time to settle down for the cold season. The Dakota set up tipi villages deep in the sheltering woods, near rivers or lakes. At the center of each village stood the council tipi. This was where village leaders discussed issues and made decisions. Men were free to come and go as they pleased. Women usually entered only to bring the men food. Forming a circle around the large council tipi were many smaller tipis in which the village families lived.

Life in the winter village often seemed relaxed compared to the busy activity at other times of the year. The men rested, went ice fishing, and visited with each other. The women tanned hides and sewed clothing. For food, they dug up their stores of corn and rice and relied on dried meat from the autumn hunts. The children played in the snow and ice

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**THE CIRCLE OF HISTORY**

The Dakota believe that time and events occur in a circle, and for a reason. Elden Lawrence, a Dakota elder and the president of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Community College in Sisseton, South Dakota, explains:

“The way we look at history is different from the way that non-Indians look at history. We think of history as a circle, not a line. Some people say about Indians, 'Just get on with life. When are you Indians ever going to forget that and get on with life?' But the Dakota view history as a circle—things keep coming back. If you don't heal that wound, it's going to come back again. A few years down the road, maybe twenty years down the road, it's going to happen again because it was never corrected. In Indian society, we know that if we did something wrong, sooner or later, it's going to come back on us. What happened once will happen again.

"An elder once told me, 'We don't have a history.' Our way is we take a young person and we say to them, 'I am the past. You are the present. We are the future.' So you're bringing the living past up to the present. That young person is learning from you and together you're going to move into the future. That's the way the history continues. That's the way your past life continues.

"When you look at history in a linear fashion, you're just going along the line. You're preserving things as you go along, preserving memories and stuff, but that's not enough to change the course of life. But when events keep coming back around, there's a reason for that. You can do something about it. You can change. You can do something that could change the course of the future without blindly repeating the past."
on sleds made of bison ribs. They skated on moccasins with tree-bark soles. And they learned stories from elders.

But winter was not just a time for resting and playing. It was a hard season, full of dangers. Deep snow and bitter cold often made it difficult to gather firewood and hunt for food. Blizzards blew down tipis. In the worst winters, hundreds of people died. Many others suffered frostbite.

Family life was especially important during the hard winter months. Mothers, fathers, children, and members of their tiyospaye (tee-YOHSH-pah-yay), or extended family, all lived together in the family tipi. It was often crowded inside, and family members were expected to show each other wohoda (WOH-hoh-dah)—respect and courtesy. They learned to honor each other’s privacy by keeping their eyes lowered. When children talked to their elders, they knew they should speak with respect. If their uncle’s name was Swift Cloud, they would always call him “my uncle Swift Cloud”—never “Swift Cloud.”

But this emphasis on family life extended well beyond the family tipi. Most Dakota believed that it was important to include everyone in what they called a great “ring of relatives.” One saying, passed down through generations, put it this way: “Be related, somehow, to everyone you know. Make him important to you. He is also a man.”

Eventually the snow would begin melting, the sap from the maple trees would begin running, and the Dakota would begin a new year. They knew that some things would stay the same from year to year. Spring meant sugaring. Summer meant planting and harvesting. Autumn meant the big hunt and preparations for the long winter. But that didn’t mean everything stayed the same. Babies were born. People got older and died. New ways of doing things were discovered. And sometimes, new people—strangers—would enter their lives. Some of these strangers would come and go without leaving much of a trace. But others would eventually bring changes that would forever alter the lives of Dakota people.

**tiyospaye**: Dakota word meaning extended families, including cousins, aunts, and uncles

**wohoda**: Dakota word meaning respect and courtesy

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**Dakota Neighbors in 1650**

By 1650, the Dakota controlled a large area in what is now Minnesota. Through trade and other contacts, the Dakota met many other Indian groups living near them.
INVESTIGATION 3

People on the Move

...Life was well organized there [in the tipi], with a definite place for everybody. The members of the family had their own spaces where they habitually sat, ate, slept, and worked. Everyone kept his personal things in skin containers, which were always ornamented, sometimes handsomely. These were secured only as far as tying strings could make them so. There were no locks and keys, but they were not missed. A good relative did not open another's things. Even small children were gently but firmly warned to leave things alone.

These words were written in 1944 by Ella Deloria, a Yankton Dakota, in her book Speaking of Indians.

The Dakota were a people on the move. In springtime they went to sugar camps to tap maple trees and make sugar. They returned to permanent villages in the summer to grow crops. At the summer's end they traveled to lakes to harvest rice, and throughout the fall they were on the move hunting deer and bison. Even in the deepest snows of winter, the Dakota sometimes moved camp to be closer to the wild animals they hunted in order to survive.

So what was it like to live a life on the move? How did the Dakota move camp and bring home heavy loads of meat? What did they use to store and carry things?

On the next few pages are examples of containers, bags, and carrying packs made by Dakota within the last 200 years. You will also find accounts written by Dakota people and people who witnessed the traditional Dakota way of life. As you investigate these primary source objects, paintings, and descriptions, try to imagine what it would be like to live among the Dakota centuries ago.
If you had to carry everything you owned from place to place, what would you keep? What would you give up? Study the containers and bags on the next few pages, and think about something that you own that is important enough to carry from one home to another. What size and shape of container would best protect your most valuable possession?
The Dakota used the travois (trah-VOY) to carry their possessions. They made the travois by stretching an animal skin between long poles, often the same poles used to support their tipi.

MOVING CAMP

In order to live close to food resources such as maple forests or ricing lakes, the Dakota had to pack and move their whole household. Since Dakota women owned the tipis and everything in them, packing and moving was usually women’s work. Moving camp was hard, especially during the winter. Starting at daybreak, women and children packed and carried heavy bundles through snow and icy water, if the streams were not frozen. The missionary Samuel Pond, who traveled with the Dakota in the early 1800s, never forgot what it was like to set up camp in winter after a long day of moving:

Fourteen tepee poles were to be found and dragged often a considerable distance through the snow, making two or three heavy loads for a strong woman. The tent was then erected, and dry grass cut up from some swamp was brought and put all around the tent or tepee on the outside, for the Indian women would not bank their tents with snow lest it should melt and injure the tent. Hay was also strewn inside to spread the beds on, for the frozen ground was hard and cold. Then wood was brought for the fire, very dry for they burn no other. Last of all water was brought and hung over the fire to warm or cook the supper, which by this time was well earned if ever suppers are.
AFTER THE HUNT

While carrying the tipi was women's work, hunting was men's work. Dakota men traveled great distances to find game, and wounded animals frequently led hunters even farther. But it was after the hunt that the heavy work began. Once game was killed it was cut up and carried back to camp, often many miles. Hunters sometimes slipped and fell while carrying their heavy loads through forests or swamps. If a hunter was injured or killed while hunting, his companions carried him home, no matter how far.

Ohiyesa (oh-HEE-yay-sah), or Charles Eastman, was raised in a traditional Dakota manner in the 1870s and 1880s. He recalled the extra challenges that hunters faced during the winter. After the village men hunted bison in the snow, they cut them up and carried the meat home on sleds pulled by dogs:

No ponies could be used [to hunt the bison]. ... Sleds were made of [bison] ribs and hickory saplings, the runners bound with rawhide with the hard side down. These slipped smoothly over the icy crust. Only the small men rode on the sleds.... The men had their bows and arrows, and a few had guns. The huge animals could not run fast in the deep snow. [The bison] all followed a leader, trampling out a narrow path. The dogs with their drivers soon caught up with [the bison] on each side, and the hunters brought many of them down. I remember when the party returned, late in the night. The men came in single file, well loaded, and each dog followed his master with an equally heavy load. Both men and animals were white with frost.

This Dakota quiver held arrows for hunting.

This painting shows only part of the story. If a hunter was lucky and killed an animal, he had to transport it back to camp. How do you think Dakota hunters carried a bison back to camp?
PRECIOUS CARGO

Of all the things the Dakota carried, the most precious cargo were their babies. "Infants were very tenderly cared for," recalled missionary Samuel Pond.

Dakota infants were kept on a wooden cradleboard for most of their first year. They were wrapped in blankets and secured to their upright cradles by strips of cloth or hide. A wooden bow protected the infant's face in case of an accidental fall and was also used to hang toys and small objects to entertain the baby. According to Pond, "Nothing better than this cradle could have been contrived for the comfort and safety of the infants. There was no other way in which they could be carried on the frequent journeys with safety."

DAKOTA CONTAINERS

The Dakota made many specialized containers, like the cradleboard, to make packing and travel easier. Storage containers were made from materials available in the natural world, and different materials had different benefits. Bark containers were lightweight and held up well in wet and humid weather. Bags woven from reeds were easy to pack and could be dyed beautiful colors. Animal hides were readily available and made strong, waterproof containers.

One special kind of hide container was called a parfleche (PAHR-flesh). Parfleche containers were made from folded and painted rawhide, which was stiff and very strong. Parfleches were made in four basic shapes: an envelope style, a flat case, a cylinder, and a box.
To make a parfleche, a Dakota woman began with a fresh hide from a bison, elk, or moose. She removed the fur and then scraped or “fleshed” the inside of the skin to remove the tissue and fat. The skin was then washed, staked down, and painted in geometric designs using colors such as red, black, yellow, and green.

Now it’s your turn. What important possession would you carry with you everywhere? Follow the instructions in the Investigation Guide to make a Dakota parfleche for your valuable item. Look at the containers in this investigation for ideas on how to decorate your parfleche with traditional Dakota designs.