

Layers of a Letter: Lakota History, Language and Voices in the Archives

by Claire Thomson | University of Alberta

This column is a regular feature that explores how historical researchers find, interpret, and deploy a broad range of historical sources in furthering our understanding of ‘the prairies.’

Like many historians, I have sifted through numerous written paper documents and microfilm rolls in archives and libraries, in my case looking to understand Lakota history across the Canada-US border. But for understanding Lakota experiences or perspectives, these kinds of sources can be silent or non-existent. This is often particularly the case in Department of Indian Affairs records, though I still use them frequently for my research based in family and community history. And while these collections are the epitome of colonial archives—heavily consisting of government correspondence, Indian agent reports, and policy memos—I’m always happily surprised when I stumble across sources with even faint traces of Lakota people’s voices. My most exciting archival treasures have come when I least expect it, and particularly when I open boxes

housed in large national repositories for Canadian or American Indian Affairs records to see my family’s names or writing on the pages. These moments of personal connection leave me in awe.

Such was the case when I came across the 1912 letter by Tašunka Ópi/Tħašúnke Ópi’ (Wounded Horse and sometimes known as Alec Wounded Horse) among many fuzzy microfilm copies of Canadian Indian Affairs correspondence in a dim corner of a university library. Tħašúnke Ópi was born in about 1867 and came to what is now Saskatchewan as a child with his father, Kħaŋǵí Tħamáheča/Lean Crow, who was a warrior in the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876.² Tħašúnke Ópi spent many years living seasonally between Moose Jaw and Wood Mountain with his family, and after 1911 moved to the newly created Lakota reserve at Wood

Mountain.³ Like many other men of his generation at Wood Mountain, Tħašúnke Ópi spoke little or no English, a fact that is reinforced by his letter as it is written entirely in the Lakota language. Tħašúnke Ópi was a leader in the Wood Mountain Lakota community and his letter was addressed to the “Wableza Itanca”, chief inspector, The Chief Inspector of Indian Agencies Glen Campbell. His letter asked that issues on the reserve be addressed, particularly relating to white settlers in the area using the land that was set apart as the reserve.⁴ This was an ongoing concern at Wood Mountain as many settlers continued grazing their livestock on the reserve though the Lakota people wanted to do the same. Tħašúnke Ópi brought other matters forward to Indian Affairs and Royal North West Mounted Police (RNWMP) officials, and he did not hesitate to

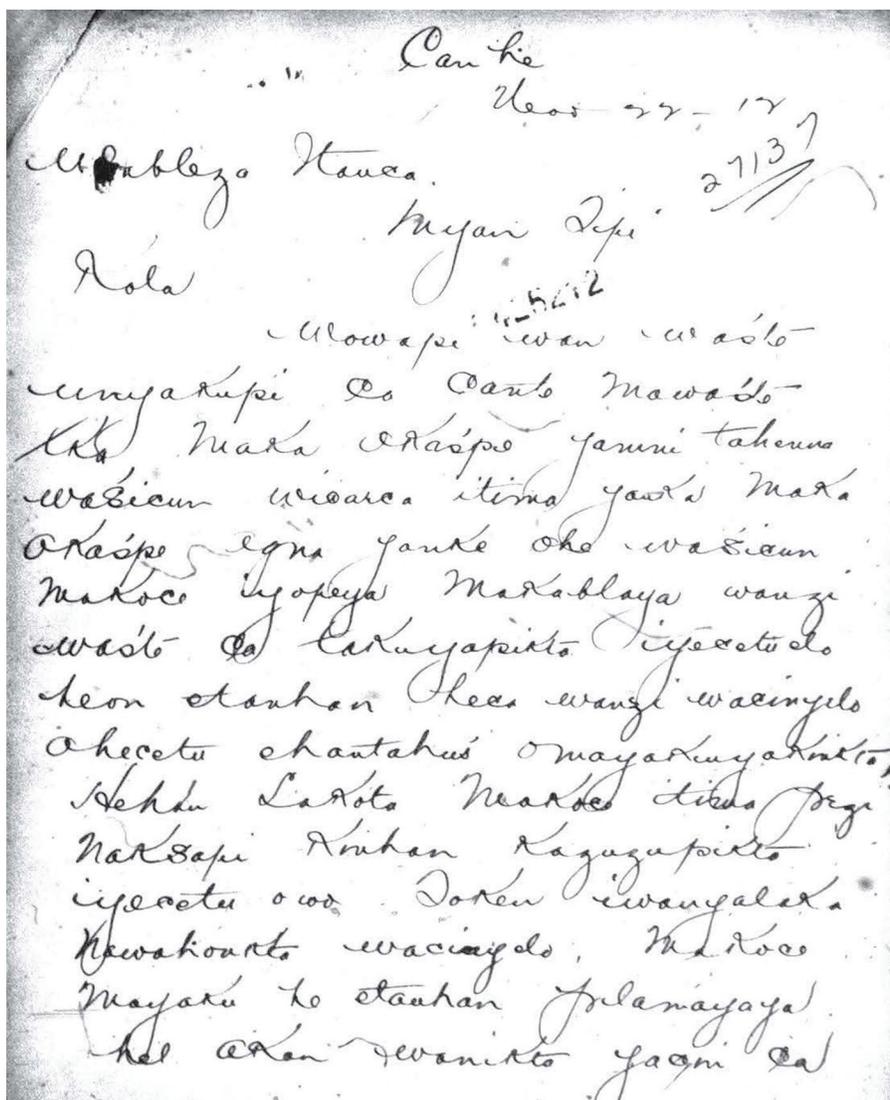
go to higher authorities when his or the community's concerns were not addressed. Among other things, he advocated for a school to be built on the reserve rather than sending their children to the residential schools, for the reserve to be enlarged, and to be able to acquire more livestock.⁵ This letter provides a glimpse into Lakota activism and advocacy in the early reserve period and it demonstrates one man's passion and efforts, a reminder of the humanity

of historical subjects as real people with complex realities.

Often Lakota 20th-century history has been overlooked because many histories conclude with the Massacre of Wounded Knee in 1890 as the “end” or “fall” of the Lakota nation. This letter helps show that Lakota people were not “subdued” or “fallen” and brings to light the continuation, resistance and connections of Lakota people. T̄hasúnke Ópi's words can help remind us of the long history of

Lakota political and community action beyond the 19th century and contribute to similar efforts important to Lakota survival today. However, it is important to remember that Indigenous perspectives are not necessarily archival “discoveries,” as Indigenous people's experiences, histories, and viewpoints are known and existent within families and communities themselves. Indigenous histories and perspectives do not need to be “found” in textual documents to be “legitimate”. Using settler colonial archives necessitates a way of reading through the record to bring to light different narratives since Indigenous people in the early-20th century were not typically in positions to decide what constituted the documentary record or to make the written sources that these archives are so heavily based upon. Some well-known Lakota leaders had their voices recorded in print records in the early reserve/reservation period, usually through a filter of settler understandings and translation. These records were also typically created and preserved due to certain leaders' notoriety (positive or negative) to settler governments and in the public's imagination. However, this was not the case with T̄hasúnke Ópi and his letter is therefore an exceptional example of a Lakota person's own words and language making it into the settler colonial archive.

Beyond the subject matter, the fact that T̄hasúnke Ópi's letter is written in Lakota is particularly noteworthy. Written Lakota language documents from Wood Mountain are not exceedingly common and any that I do get to see, I treasure. To see the particular spelling and wording at that



Letter from Tašunka Ópi/T̄hasúnke Ópi to Chief Inspector of Indian Agencies Glen Campbell, 1912. Library and Archives Canada, Department of Indian Affairs, RG10, v.7779, file 27137-1.



A full moon rising over the author's durum fields at Wood Mountain, Saskatchewan, September 2020. Claire Thomson

time sheds light on linguistic and historical aspects about language usage and change. Even for the simple fact that this letter has “Can he” (Čhánĥe/Wood Mountain) at the top was an exciting addition to me because it is a clear example of the common usage of Lakota place names. Why Tǎšúŋke Ópi thought Campbell would be able to read his letter in Lakota is not entirely clear. But Campbell could speak Cree and Anishinaabemowin and he was married to a Saulteaux/Anishinaabe woman,⁶ so he may have had some Lakota/Dakota language skills or he knew someone who could translate it. Campbell did reply, briefly telling Tǎšúŋke Ópi that the matters of the reserve land were being taken up with the appointed chief and council.⁷

Another remarkable part of this letter is who penned it for Tǎšúŋke Ópi: my great-great-grandfather, James Harkin Thomson. I immediately recognized the handwriting. He often wrote letters for Lakota

people as he was the postmaster at Wood Mountain until his death in 1923 and was a Lakota speaker. Although he was a white man and formerly came to Wood Mountain in the North West Mounted Police (NWMP), he was married to a Lakota woman who also spoke next to no English. After the reserve was created, he worked for a few years as the overseer, relaying decisions and requests from the reserve Lakota people to the government and submitting annual reports to Indian Affairs. The extent to which James paraphrased Tǎšúŋke Ópi's words is impossible to know, but the fact that it was written in Lakota may suggest it was verbatim (or close to) since in other instances James did paraphrase Lakota people's words into English in correspondence with government officials on their behalf (the second letter below is an example of this as well).

How James came to write the Lakota language, or really become literate in any language, is still a

mystery as his life before coming to Wood Mountain is almost completely unknown. His fine penmanship suggests he had some kind of education earlier in his life though his Lakota language fluency was only acquired after he arrived in the West with the NWMP. He wrote in Lakota phonetically (written as it is spoken) but with some linguistic aspects that have stayed consistent to the present and not necessarily as someone who was using only English as a reference would have spelled phonetically. He used at least one diacritic (ś as he used in wašte/good) and the conventions of an *i* as in *me* and *c* as the *ch* sound are still used in current orthographies with little change. Others writing in Lakota in the past without this kind of familiarity might use *ee* in place of *i*, for example. His understanding and writing of the difference between the sounds of ś as in *shut* and *s* as in *still* and to mark the difference with a diacritic instead of the use of *sh* like other

English speakers/writers may do, especially suggests he had knowledge of Lakota writing conventions. There are a few other examples of James's Lakota language literacy that survive, for example the census that he enumerated which recorded Lakota people's names only in Lakota.⁸

However, where he would have gotten the knowledge of these conventions is unclear. More clues to this might be found later in research or it might remain a mystery altogether—part of the exciting and alluring work as a historian. Privileging the language and the names they were known by in their lifetimes in their community, particularly for a generation that were “given” or assigned English names (and sometimes poor English translations of their Lakota names), is something I appreciate deeply from these sources and something I strive to emulate in my own work.

Though this letter has mysteries, it does demonstrate the interconnectedness of community, land, language, and advocacy. This letter may prove to be the start of a fruitful examination of historical Lakota connections and language that has not been taken up in Canada yet. One short letter can be part of many avenues of research and relationship, a reminder about history I am always pleasantly surprised to receive in the archives. ■

Notes

1. The difference in spelling is how his name appears in the letter compared to a newer orthography spelling. There is no standardized orthography for the Lakota language,



Thomson house where the post/telegraph office was located at Wood Mountain. Left to right: Jules Haggai, Ińá Waštéwiń (Mary Thomson), Howard Thomson, Willie Thomson, and J. H. Thomson, circa 1920. Wood Mountain Historical Society, Historical Photograph Collection, #1005.

- but I will use the Lakota Language Consortium (LLC) orthography which is based on Ella Deloria's method for writing in the Lakota/Dakota languages.
- Wood Mountain Historical Society, “Notes on the Wood Mountain Sioux – compiled by T. Poirier,” from conversations between William (Bill) Lethbridge and Thelma Poirier, RG14. F3.2–5.
- At first the Wood Mountain reserve no. 160 was only temporary and was later made permanent in 1930 by Order in Council no. 1775, though at this time the reserve was half the original size. The reserve is now named Wood Mountain Lakota First Nation.
- Library and Archives Canada (LAC), RG 10, Indian Affairs, Vol. 7779, File 27137-1, Reel C12061, Letter from Tasunka Opi to Glen Campbell, 22 November 1912.
- LAC, RG 10, Indian Affairs, Vol. 7779, File 27137-1, Reel C12061, “Memo of Pow-Wow of Sioux Indians at Wood Mountain, July 8th, 1912.”
- John Boileau, “107th Timber Wolf Battalion,” *The Canadian*

Encyclopedia, 9 December 2019, www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/107th-timber-wolf-battalion

- LAC, RG 10, Indian Affairs, Vol. 7779, File 27137-1, Reel C12061, Campbell to Wounded Horse, 6 December 1912.
- LAC, RG 31 Statistics Canada, *Sixth Census of Canada, 1921*, Saskatchewan, District No. 220, Sub-District No. 79, Wood Mountain, pp. 1–2.



Claire Thomson is writing her PhD dissertation in History, studying Wood Mountain Lakota connections within Lakǰóta Ȯamákǰoče/Lakota Country from 1881 to 1930, land which overlays the US-Canada border. She ranches with her parents in the Wood Mountain Uplands of southwestern Saskatchewan and has her own small but growing herd of horses and cattle. In her spare time, Claire enjoys riding her horses, sewing, and volunteering as the secretary for the Wood Mountain Historical Society.