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The cover image is a view of the Chixoy River, Guatemala. Image courtesy of Brent K. S. Woodfill.

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CONTENTS

Introductions

Introduction to Issue Fourteen By Patrick Nunnally, Editor	4
Guest Editor's Introduction to Issue Fourteen: Climate, Change & People By Lewis C. Messenger Jr. and Brent K. S. Woodfill	6

Features

Multiple Ways of Understanding Peru's Changing Climate By Rebecca Bria and Doris Walter	11
Uncovering Amazonia By Lewis C. Messenger Jr.	26
What's in My Backyard? Empowering Indigenous Voices on Firefly Creek at Blue's Bottom By Tianna M. Odegard	57
Ethnography and Archaeology of Water in the Maya Lowlands By Alexander E. Rivas and William G. B. Odum	93

Geographies

Libraries Burning By Phyllis Mauch Messenger	111
---	-----

In Review

Desert River Sea is a Vibrant, Compelling Tour of the Kimberley By Ted Snell	132
---	-----

Perspectives

An Archaeologist Writes against the Anthropocene By Brent K. S. Woodfill	139
---	-----

Primary Sources

Water and the Preclassic Maya at El Tintal, Petén, Guatemala By Mary Jane Acuña and Carlos R. Chiriboga	147
--	-----

Teaching And Practice

The Perils and Promise of Using Short-Term Media to Teach Long-Term Climate Patterns By Patrick Nunnally	167
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FEATURE

WHAT'S IN MY BACKYARD? EMPOWERING INDIGENOUS VOICES ON FIREFLY CREEK AT BLUE'S BOTTOM

By Tianna M. Odegard

Introduction

All of us, regardless if we are Native or non-native, hold a specific location near and dear to our hearts. In this article, I focus on a place near and dear to my heart, exploring the history of my

family's cul-de-sac area known to my family, and much of the surrounding community, as Blue's Bottom. To do this, I share oral accountings from two Elders and my cousin from the Blue family. I



Firefly Creek. Image courtesy of Tracy Blue.

also explore water resources in the area by presenting an oral accounting from a tribal member that holds an impressive and dedicated passion for teaching history to the Native American youth at Upper Sioux Community. Many readers here may be reminded of a water dwelling toward which they hold unwavering love and to which they devote a warm memory; I hope these memories reinvigorate how we view the landscape and areas near us and open up the question of “what’s in your backyard?”

What’s in my backyard? Since I was a child, growing up in the 1990s and 2000s, I have spent the majority of my life surrounded by family, by members of Upper Sioux Community, by the City of Granite Falls community, by agriculture, and by various bodies of water in Minnesota. While physical access to these resources has not been a barrier, there have been, and continue to be, times when the extent of our use of the creek is limited due to the pollution in the water; sometimes the water could still be used but with



The sump pump that was pumping water out of my basement during the spring 2010 flooding. Firefly Creek, shown in the background, had risen approximately seven feet from the usual water level. I recall our household having to leave the sump pump going 24-7 for about two weeks. Image courtesy of Tianna M. Odegard.

extreme caution, or at our own risk, as communicated to us by the Environmental Department at Upper Sioux Community. I distinctly recall being told by my mother, aunts, and uncles that my cousins and I should not go into the creek on certain days because the *E. coli* levels were too high. We also had consistent Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) reports cautioning that we could not eat many fish out of the creek nor the Minnesota River. Now the act of fishing has become a sport rather than a practice of subsistence intended to feed a family, and fish are practically eliminated from our diets. I have also experienced the terror and devastation of floods, and the indigenous plants that once

flourished in these watersheds are significantly reduced or gone.

In the absence of obvious physical indications to teach us how to live here, my family and I rely on stories and oral histories. These stories have been challenged throughout time by Western ideology but more Indigenous authors and scholars, such as presented in this article, practice recovering story as a form of learning. A significant number of stories and oral historical accountings have been lost just between my grandparents' generation and my mother's generation in part because it was particularly challenging to be Native American from 1900 into the 1970s. During that



An agricultural field on the Blue's Bottom property that is surrounded by wooded areas in addition to the residential landscape. Image courtesy of Tianna M. Odegard.

time, drawing attention to yourself or your family as a Native American or your traditional practices was ill advised and survival was key. One of the most repeated quotes my mother heard from her father, Larry Blue, was, “It’s a white man’s world; we better get used to living in it.” This simple, straightforward quote set the tone for the conditions in which my mother and her siblings grew up. They grew up in a time when their parents were trying to get food on the table and practicing their culture as Native American people was illegal. To me, it is therefore clear why I am

without vital information about how to use the land like we did over one hundred years ago, why I am not fluent in my language, and why it took me until my midtwenties to begin researching, reclaiming, and revitalizing lost or locked away narratives. I am not alone in this situation, which means my generation of Native people have a lot of work ahead of us; reaching into the past to understand the present and to change the future is a difficult task to ask of anyone. So where do we even begin?

Background

Pejuhutazizi Kapi (the place where they dig for yellow medicine) has been the homeland of the Dakota *Oyate* (people) for thousands of years.

The Dakota people originally resided throughout Minnesota and parts of neighboring states throughout the 1700s (Savariego 2018). All the



'Okizu Wakpa' (Where the Waters Gather and the Rivers Meet: An Atlas of the Eastern Sioux) by Paul Durand. Red circle indicates the specific area discussed here. (CC BY-NC-SA).

Dakota people are part of a larger network of tribes called the *Oceti Sakowin* (oh-che-tee sha-ko-ween, or “Seven Council Fires”). As the name implies, there are seven council fires in total that include the Nakota, Lakota, and Dakota. The Dakota make up four of the fires with the Nakota and Lakota making up the other three. The Dakota council fires are *Bdewakatonwan* (bdeh-wah-khaṅ-too-wahṅ, “Dwellers by Mystic Lake”), *Wahpekute* (wah’-peh-koo-the, “Shooters of the Leaves”), *Wahpetunwan* (wah’-peh-too-wahṅ, “Dwellers Among the Leaves”), and lastly *Sisituwan* (seh-see-too-wahṅ, “Dwellers by the Fish Campground”). The description that coincides with each of the council fires is not the focus of this paper. However, this brief background demonstrates how oral history and oral traditions are applied and connected to the land.

Pezihutazizi Kapi Oyate (pejuh-hoota-zeezee ka-pee ohya-tay) was founded under unique circumstances under the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 (also known as the Wheeler-Howard Act). This act was part of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal attempt to revitalize the American Indian. Today the formal government name for Pezihutazizi Kapi is Upper Sioux Community (Savariago 2018). Through this act, in 1938, 746 acres of original Dakota Lands were returned and Upper Sioux Community was established.

Since 746 acres is a considerable amount of land, I have decided to focus on a section of that acreage that is known in the community as Blue’s Bottom. Blue’s Bottom, as it stands today, is just a little over 30 acres. The land originally started out closer to about 80 acres and was a resource for the community because Firefly Creek and the Minnesota River run through it. However,

over the past half century, these resources have become problematic politically as well as environmentally. Due to the attractiveness of the land, the governing Tribal Council at Upper Sioux decided to repurpose portions of it to accommodate the *Wacipi* (powwow) grounds in 2009 as well as parceling and allocating land for another family to own.

Firefly Creek flows about twenty-one miles from west to east with a few branches and hundreds of miles of field tile lines joining it. Only a couple miles upstream of the reservation does the creek resume flow within the natural meandering channel. The creek covers a significant distance across the cultural landscape and runs through county property, private property, and tribal community property so it should be no surprise that many people with cultural differences call the same creek by a different name. The names depend on who is using the land and creek, so the farmers and the county refer to the creek as County Ditch 9; to them it is seen almost as a burden to the land because it takes away agricultural space and farmers have to be considerate of the pollution level in the watershed. Many private landowners and the general public call it Hazel Creek because of where the creek passes and based on their personal naming of the land. The Indigenous people of the land refer to the creek in Dakota as *Wanyeca* (won-yet-cha) which can be translated to Firefly Creek. Dakota people describe places with physical attributes, traditional stories, or how the land is utilized and, as the name implies, there is an extraordinary number of fireflies in the area during the warm months. Firefly Creek is so important to the community at Upper Sioux that the first casino built on the reservation was called Firefly Creek Casino.

Framework

I hold my home close to my heart. Because of that, I wanted to do research and produce work that connected to my home. This work thus provided me with personal growth while also educating me about areas of concern in Minnesota. I wanted to demonstrate that we do not need to look far and wide to see the challenges of climate change that need to be addressed; instead, we can find many environmental issues within miles of where we live.

This article contains eyewitness accounts that reflect environmental change from people who have lived on the Upper Sioux Community tribal lands. I gathered oral history accountings from my mother, my uncle, my aunt, my cousin, and a young adult community member who I grew up with. The reason I have decided to focus on my family is quite simple; I want to further my own knowledge about my family, to document their experiences and stories, and to continue educating the next generation of our family. To be clear, the perspectives I present here are not representative of the community at Upper Sioux or Dakota people as a whole. The perspectives presented are from individuals and reflect their own experiences. Every community member at Upper Sioux has valuable oral histories and knowledge to share.

I have been told that a good interview should feel like a conversation rather than feeling so formal and I agree with this. Thus, the interviews I have

completed are in an organic, conversational style with questions that prompt discussion instead of leading it. This style of interviewing makes the voices of the people who utilize and are knowledgeable about the land the primary voices of this article. As such, I use direct quotes and I transcribed the conversations with all of the people I interviewed for this article so that their views are at the forefront. However, since the interviews are quite extensive only select topics are covered here. This methodology highlights two qualities of central importance: first, it means to bring the value of everyday actions and lifestyle choices to light to aid the continuation of cultural practices and environmentally conscious views; and second, it also presents the idea that Indigenous people have unique, thoughtful, critical, and valid views that may not always be recognized by academia. As a result, this work aims to demonstrate that Native people and non-native people have more in common than we may sometimes be led to believe. Given the history of hiding discussed earlier, of whispering our traditions in the shadows, this article demonstrates a resilience that allows us to define ourselves in a multitude of ways in the contemporary era. The next sections share the rich perspectives of my collaborators and their definitions of people and place.

Adam Savariego Interview and Perspective

Adam Savariego [AS] is an Upper Sioux tribal community member. He currently works as a Community Cultural Liaison at Yellow Medicine East High School in Granite Falls, Minnesota. He obtained his B.A. in history from Southwest Minnesota State University where his undergraduate thesis focused on Upper Sioux history with the title *Pezihutazizi Kapi Oyate: The Founding of Upper Sioux Community from the Beginning of Minnesota to the Indian Reorganization*

Act. He also obtained his M.Ed. in youth development leadership from the University of Minnesota School of Social Work. He has called Upper Sioux Community and Granite Falls, Minnesota home for 25 years—his entire life—and holds many areas at Upper Sioux Community and Granite Falls, as well as Minnesota as a whole, in high regard. Adam has led educational programs for elementary school students to high school students during the summer months and school



Adam catching a 38-pound flathead catfish (“Howasapa”—Dakota translation) caught at the Public Access mentioned in his interview. Image courtesy of Adam Savariego.

months, which aim to teach the youth treaty rights, sacred sites, and telling history through an Indigenous lens. Adam has also given presentations in the local Granite Falls area school district for faculty members.

The personal interview conducted with Adam occurred on October 18, 2018.

[Tianna M. Odegard – TMO] What kinds of activities did you do on the land and with the water resources close to you?

[AS] A lot of fishing and swimming even though I probably shouldn't have. I actually spent a lot of time in the woods by the Dyke Road [which runs along the Minnesota River inside the city limits of Granite Falls], making rafts with my friends of course by the [Minnesota] river.

[TMO] Were you ever cautioned about the conditions of the water, like "you can't go in there because it's polluted"?

[AS] Not particularly. As I grew older and more aware, I saw DNR reports and that's when I started questioning the water, eating [only] one fish a month out of the Minnesota River.

[TMO] Were family teachings taught to you? Or were you just curious and started asking questions?

[AS] Didn't really come much from my family, more outer family and other community members and my interest grew as I got older, that's for sure. Especially interest for the stories in the places of how our community was before [it was] an official Community in 1938.

[TMO] Did you think education and how we were brought up in the public school system at Granite Falls kind of aided in that questioning of who we were?

[AS] Oh yeah definitely, I think the education system as a whole is like that.

[TMO] When we were growing up, we were taught in general that polluting and littering is bad but yet we had fellow classmates that were farmers. We weren't specifically told about how runoff from these agricultural system practices and other contributing attributes impact the land and resources around us. What are your thoughts or ideas on this?

[AS] I like to bring up Governor Dayton's buffer law that is meant to prevent runoff, whether it helps or not. Truth is, it is a patch in a boat full of holes because it is a systemic problem, the runoff, that started as soon as we got colonized with three main things I point to.

[First,] they drained all the wetlands. The wetlands were our natural buffers. So they start draining them, right? This also ties into *Sistuwān*—that word means people from the marshy grounds because we are in the upper Minnesota River valley where it was mostly sloughs. I just heard the other day that between Monte [Montevideo, Minnesota] and Granite [Granite Falls, Minnesota] used to be straight slough. You could barely travel Monte to Granite before they started irrigating all the wetlands out. Where the school (both high school and elementary school) is right now there used to be a slough. To give you an exact date, I am not sure, but that is why they built the Dyke Road—to protect that side of Granite. So our Dakota people already knew where we lived was a marshy place and *Sistuwān* people of the fish or marsh campground, whatever interpretation, it points to mushy ground and I think that is the part that is missed. Now what wetlands are there, besides random wetlands that are preserved ones here and there?

[TMO] And for what? So more people could populate that area?

[AS] Yes.

[TMO] And people think the land was like this for forever and forever.

[AS] I believe this occurred just around a hundred years ago.

[TMO] People that live here now, in this contemporary era, identify with that area being their home and [it] was created for all of us to occupy but simultaneously impacted *Sisituwan* stories and places of identity as they were forced out.

[AS] Identity and stories are tied to place.

[TMO] Exactly, so we have current identity stories at the expense of somebody else's.

[AS] It's like if your friend's grandparents stole your grandparents' house, remodeled it, and now you want it back. Well, it's not even your house anymore; it's a remodeled house. It's not even home.

[The] second piece is about rivers running into the Minnesota River, all the little creeks. Water has a natural curvature to it and so part of that

Expanding on Fishing

[AS] This is like five or six years ago they took out the dam below Granite Falls for better fish flow, for better fishing. It's kind of like a neopositivism idea, to maximize economic benefit. It is not inherently good, rather is economically based. I won the fishing contest because the purpose was for better fish flow into Granite more. Before that dam was taken down, you couldn't catch a flathead catfish above that dam. I was catching baby catfish by the walking bridge which is about two, three miles up from where they took the dam out meaning flatheads went up and spawned and went back down.

curvature prevents sediment runoff 'cause when it turns on the banks, the sediments will run up on the banks but part of what farmers did was straighten them out, made canals, irrigation. So now when it rains of course it's going to flood, it's going to run, too, because there is no buffer, no natural buffer anymore. Second, there is no wetlands to the extent of [what they] used to be because they acted as sponges. When it flooded, wetlands would fill up and when it was drought, it would seep out the water slowly. Now you take that away and now you have what your mom references back in the '60s and '70s. Yeah, this is still a new phenomenon, floods weren't a normal thing; now it's normal because wetlands are gone for the most part so now when it floods it really floods and when it droughts we have extreme drought.

[Third] now you have tiling, which creates more runoff not particularly from farm sites but from the manure, PCBs. [PCBs are polychlorinated biphenyls—a group of artificial chemicals historically used in paints, plastics, rubbers, dyes, and electrical equipment and now found in fish in polluted waters; PCBs are harmful to humans if consumed.]

[TMO] You believe this was a good thing?

[AS] Yes, it's a good thing for better fish life. Just a couple years ago behind city hall someone caught a paddlefish which is extremely rare in the Minnesota River in general, but apparently before the dams they were pretty common from what I've heard other people say. If they wouldn't have taken out that dam he would have never caught that fish there.

[TMO] You currently work with the youth and are active in the community. So what is your teaching style? How are you teaching kids now? We are seeing people with educational backgrounds with an ability to teach at a much younger age and be respected at a much younger age so how do you influence and relate to them now to teach them these things early and get them on the right track? Because that is something we didn't have.

[AS] I think this relates to my summer program a lot. I can't dictate what someone wants to be or who they want to be, but at the very minimum what I can do is provide them with opportunity to learn about a side of themselves they had no chance to learn of because of colonization; that history is lost in their own family, and that history is not in school particularly, so they don't even have access to it. I had this realization in Croatia that, for example, when I was teaching my summer program about Dakota

history in Granite Falls, particularly when I bring up *Bdote* which is our Garden of Eden if you will, I had to use the Garden of Eden to conceptualize what *Bdote* means for the kids because they already knew [about that] for the embeddedness of Christianity in the institutions we go to, like school, work, or whatever you want to call it, for them to understand what it meant for Dakota spiritual people. So even with Dakota language we are learning it from English to Dakota not Dakota to English so these words have no meaning other than a rigid straight definition of the word. So these place names, these words to describe everything, are spiritual meanings from our ancestors of how they felt and what they saw at these places. It is spiritual people having spiritual expression of the place they are connected to. So I get perpetually sad that we won't ever get that back—in pieces, but not in a holistic way like it used to be.



The Minnesota River running along the left side of the hilltop and the Yellow Medicine River running along the right side of the hilltop. Image courtesy of Adam Savariego.

[TMO] Now it's just history, but for me I am like, "No it can't be because that is who I am!" I just can't close that door; it just can't be shut for me. I still want to get some of those things back.

[AS] This all connects to kids. My point of view, whether it is right or wrong, is to teach them the story of their own people and they can attribute themselves to that. It's up to them to do the rest because I at least provided the opportunity to learn about themselves; it's not my job to tell them, "Oh you are Dakota and that is all you are," because we live a very conflicted identity thing now. That is kind of my point of view. Me working with them is like working with myself when I was their age, as I went through the same thing they are. Maybe they don't think as deeply as I did or not, but at the very least I didn't have the opportunity except pieces here and there. I had to search [for] these things, like the whole paper I wrote is me search[ing for] it. The paper for me was piec[ing] together the story particularly because I didn't have grandparents growing up.

[TMO] Do you feel this burden or pressure because we are in a different time now? What do you believe are the responsibilities of our generation?

[AS] If you decided to do this, then yeah, you have an ethical responsibility to do something with the knowledge you obtain. If you are just collecting knowledge for the sake of collect[ing] knowledge then what are you really doing? You better act on it. I shouldn't say someone should be coerced into doing something, like coming from a certain community, but if you are going to put your position on behalf of your community, your people, or your family in general, yeah, then you do have a responsibility. Like everyone has a choice to see or not see and when you do see, well, then you better act on that too.

TMO: So you are acting on your responsibility everyday right now?

[AS] It's a struggle everyday though, but yeah. Between being selfish, what do I give back and how do I try to be reciprocal and how does that push back.

[TMO] When you are teaching do you like to go to these physical places?

[AS] Yes, you have to. That was the premise of my summer program: discuss it for a day or two, then on the third or fourth day take the trip out there to apply what we learned in the classroom.

[TMO] Is this something that you would like to turn into something more permanent for teaching?

[AS] I am working on that now. I am working with a grant [and] the premise of it is revitalizing culture and stories while canoeing on the water with the Upper Sioux Community, Lower Sioux Community, and Micronesian communities in Milan, Minnesota. For me this is my next step; I want to take a two-day camping trip to share the stories on the river, specifically the Minnesota River. Stop at each community campground, hear stories and songs, eat; that creates an experience that then becomes reality. Then when you are on the river, hopefully kids and community members are able to attach themselves to that and feel more empowered about who they are and not just [feel] ashamed anymore. Learning all these stories needs to be made real through experiential learning. That way it's whole: mind, body, spirit, physical place are connected. It is just not words in a text or words coming out of my mouth. It's the individual being in that place, being connected to these places with the stories and the knowledge that we would all experience in a holistic approach, in my opinion.

Like I say, the Western view is to make lines and boxes. Dakota views make circles because that is more holistic and includes everything. Now this is where I am: how do I recreate the circle based off pieces we still have to create a new circle, to recreate what we feel Dakota is now?

[TMO] Have you been told how your family utilized the area?

[AS] Well my mom said back in the day—she was born in 1972 so when she was a child— they were still able to swim in the river and there wasn't warnings. That is about the extent of what I am familiar with as far as my family, but I can relay other stories from other community members and elders that have been told to me. The PA (Public Access) is by the old church grounds. So from all the stories I hear, that was the gathering place for Dakota kids because it wasn't too far from both the village sites. I reference these village sites in my paper as one being above the hill and the other is around the riverbend—*Gahmita* (gah-mee-ta) and *He Kute*

Water Treatment Facility

[AS] What I have heard from [tribal leadership] is that what we have is a state-of-the-art water treatment facility on the Minnesota River. Each community along the Minnesota River is given wastewater credits and what happened is these credits turned into a commodity where Upper Sioux would have to buy the leftover credits from Granite just so we could use our wastewater. These credits are for leakage that naturally occurs; no system is flawless. Upper Sioux felt this was unfair because we were basically being disenfranchised. Practicing our tribal sovereignty, we went to the federal level and asked to apply for a grant or for a permit for our own water treatment facility. Now when the Minnesota River runs through us at Upper Sioux it isn't getting any dirtier. At the very least, we can be proud that Dakota people are taking care of the land we have still; this is on the federal level, which means the standards are held higher for us than at the state level.

[TMO] What do you believe the differences and similarities are between the way Native people view the land versus non-native people?

Gahmita (heh-koo-tay gah-mee-ta). I would imagine that the PA served as a good middle point for gathering. *Kunsi* (grandma in Dakota language) Carrie, everybody has stories about this place; someone has even died at this place. In this place specifically—[I know] because I fish there—the water is shallow and you walk up and then it gets deep. Swimming to the deep end was kind of like a dare back in the day. On the left-hand side, there is a little creek that comes in from the hillside and as *Kunsi* Carrie used to describe to me, they used to drink from that because that was like literally spring water, but not now. They would swim there, fish there, and play ice hockey on the river there. This remained the gathering spot throughout the '50s, '60s, and '70s for the rez kids because what else is there to do?

[AS] I would say the differences right away are almost purely economic. The City of Granite Falls wants to clean the water to make nice trails and commercial place so more people will come. I would say that Upper Sioux's perspective very generally in my point of view is [we] should preserve nature, raise nature, whatever you want to call it, for its inherent value, not to give value because it has all the value it needs; we just destroy that value as people. Farmers will say they are stewards of the land, but if you look at a farm field, how many animals do you see on a farm field? If this was a natural area of the woods, there would be animals and bugs everywhere, but these are literally poison zones so farm fields become our constructed reality.

[TMO] Any more comments about the past, present, or future?

[AS] Whenever Dakota people do something they have the past and future in mind. That is another European point of view that you're old, you're old or you're young, you're young but Dakota view is like no, we are all in this together because us, right now, we are in the middle between our

Elders who are connected in past far more than us, and we have learned from them, that is our connection to the past. Then our age or kids younger than us, all that knowledge transposes down and then we are connected to the future

to the seven generations as well. We are in the middle of that. We don't see the past, the future; we see what's now is the future of now. It is all relevant.

Blue Family Interview and Perspective

I sat down with my uncle, Alex Blue [AB], and his wife, Tracy Blue [TB], my mother, Laurie Blue-Pooler [LBP], and my first cousin (Alex's daughter), Sophia Blue [SB], on October 20, 2018. I decided to do a group interview with these members of my family. I have arranged the conversations we had into main topic areas and provide direct quotes. Alex and Tracy are exemplary stewards of the land for they care for their garden, orchard, chickens, geese, bees, and other wildlife that come to thrive off their land. They are eager to share their story of how they got to be where they are and why they do what they do.

Laurie Blue-Pooler and Alex Blue are siblings and they were raised on the same area of Blue's Bottom. The oldest currently standing house at Blue's Bottom is one of my childhood homes that my older brother currently owns. Laurie has lived and called the area at Blue's Bottom home for over fifty years. She has countless childhood stories about doing chores and about the recreational activities she did when she was younger as well as into her adult years. She has lived through many floods and raised a family in the same house her son owns today. Laurie and her husband just recently moved into a home in



Laurie Blue-Pooler (left), Tracy Blue (center), and Alex Blue (right). Image courtesy of Cody Odegard.

the city of Granite Falls. She currently works as a Native American liaison at the local elementary school in Granite Falls.

Sophia Blue currently works as a youth specialist for the Social Services Department at Upper Sioux Community Tribal Operations. Sophia and I are close in age and grew up together at

Blue's Bottom. After our grandmother, Sara Blue, passed away, Sophia was awarded the home and land. Sophia's home continues to serve as my grandmother's did—as the main gathering spot for family holiday get-togethers because the home is big enough to accommodate our large family. She holds fond memories of the home and the areas that surround her.

Life Growing Up and Activities Done Today at Blue's Bottom

[AB] Well, the creek is named Firefly Creek because of all the fireflies that hangout down there; we used to catch fireflies down there all the time.

We, my family, used to use the creek and water the garden when we were kids. Literally, we had a wagon and two five-gallon pails. We all basically learned how to swim in there.

[LBP] And skate.

[AB] I used to fish minnows in there and get frogs from the creek then go fish at the mouth of the creek; I thought there was more game because of that mouth of the creek than just being part of the river.

[TB] But then prior to that you grew up with stories from your dad who literally grew up right on the Minnesota River. So when the flood came in '97, your dad couldn't believe the water would come up that high due to the fact of living on the river, because their natural wetlands [used to exist] and the drain tiles didn't exist.

[SB] I remember walking around and taking pictures together. It was fun to just hop on a tube in the creek and go exploring down the creek and stop at your house on our way or just keep going. We could be outside for hours.

[TMO] I remember Charles, Sophia, and I would go into the woods here and take picnics sometimes and just walk around the area. Our only

words of caution were basically don't drown and wear something bright so you don't get shot.

[TMO] Where did the nickname for this land—Blue's Bottom—come from?

[AB] I think it just started out as a place where everybody came down to swim at the river or [have] a party at Blue's. Blue's Bottom kind of came about in the '70s. The majority of the people that came down here came down here to swim; there were people that came here to fish, but mostly to swim.

[LBP] And before that was volleyball by the Roundhouse at the Community Center that is now used as the courthouse.

[AB] Yeah Laurie, that was when day camp was there.

We used to play hockey on that creek growing up. We used to build bonfires along the creek with the LaBatte boys. We wouldn't shovel; the banks would be full of snow and the creek was too, until we would go up to the beaver dam. One year, we figured this out that hey, we knock a hole in the beaver dam and shove a piece of wood in there, water would come shooting out onto the creek. So we just flooded the creek and let the water run all night. Next day, we would pull that piece of wood out and it would stop; then we would let it freeze and by the next day, it would be glare ice all the way down the river. We used to build fires along the creek—Roy, Reggie, Arlen and James and I—we would light those fires all along

the creek and they'd stay lit half the night. Then you could see almost all the way down the creek because it was so lit up. We were either sledding or skating all winter. That's what we did. There was no video games, and sometimes on weekends we would come home at three in the morning from Cavender Hill and the LaBatte's.

We used to go tubing in the summertime. The whole family would be down there hanging out. The year before I went to work we were in the creek literally four, five days a week.

[LBP] The thing I remember when I was younger with my mom and family was we would go back

in the creek with our lawn chairs and sit in there to cool off.

[LBP] Say, we used to get a good-sized fish here once in a while. Does that still happen?

[AB] We see minnows. We used to eat them when we were young if we got hungry while we were out fishing.

[TB] Yes, we still see fish. We see snapping turtles—they come up here to lay their eggs in our gardens.

[AB] I'm sure the older Indians would watch for that and get the eggs for food or the turtles



*Alex Blue in Firefly Creek.
Image courtesy of Tracy Blue.*



*Snapping turtle at Blue's Bottom.
Image courtesy of Tracy Blue.*

themselves. I remember my great-grandmother making turtle soup several times. But I remember the first snapper I ever got was with Grandpa Alec. We were just beyond our old barn here and we had a trap for it there. Of course we had sticks so it couldn't get at us. Grandpa Alec had a little fatter stick and stuck it into the turtle's mouth and it snapped onto it. He basically picked it up like that and took off walking. We got back to the house and put it on the table. He said if it ever snaps onto you it will never let go unless you take something like this straw here and put it up his nose and it'll let go. They will snap you so don't think you're going to be fast enough.

[AB] I used to catch fish with minnows and a willow stick; then I started buying hooks. When I first started doing that, I used frog tongue to catch the minnows because grandpa told us that's how we used to do it. So you would slap the frog tongue in the water and all the minnows would come up and grab it; well the frog tongue has those little burs in it so you could snag them out of there but you could never get the big ones. So for the big ones I would get a little hook and put frog guts on them and that's how I'd get them.

Water Quality and Flooding

[TB] Drain tiles in all these farm fields rush water off the fields instead of letting the water seep down into the soil. Eventually, it's going to rush into a river or a creek. The Minnesota River has filled up with silt because of all this erosion from fields that are bare. The earth wants to be covered, Mother Earth wants to be covered. If you have a bare spot of dirt, weeds are going to grow there; it needs to be covered. It is frightening to have to live with the consequences of what others are doing around you and watching these waters rise like they do now.

Grandpa Bud used to take me fishing and told me that when he was a kid, his grandpa would take him fishing. His grandpa would make them take their shoes off about a quarter mile down from the river and [he] couldn't be noisy, otherwise he couldn't go with. His grandpa wanted to catch the big ones.

We used to catch fish out of the creek. Some of the Indian women wanted a big carp. I used to catch for Harriet and some other Indian women and they would ask for as big a carp as I could get.

[SB] Remember we used to hangout in the creek with Sabrina and Kailey? We used to sit in the sun with our chairs. Then all our friends would come down here and we would have bonfires. We'd just hang out by the creek for hours and do things like skip rocks.

[TMO] I want to show everyone that water isn't just for ceremonial use or just sacred, that these waters are also used daily for everyday life as a way of being.

[AB] I have also done prayers down there too.

[TB] I think anyone who lives down here feels like everything is sacred.

We have an *E. coli* bacteria problem in the creek due to large numbers of livestock upstream and also agricultural field runoff. We pump that same water to water our gardens. Because of the bacteria, we have to be careful to never splash this water on our plants. We can only set the hose on the soil. We can take our poisoned water that is full of *E. coli* and put it into Mother Earth to water our plants, and the soil Mother Earth has provided will filter out the poison. I can grow healthy food that doesn't make us sick as long as I don't splash any of that poisoned water on my plants themselves, but she can only take so

ISSUE FOURTEEN : SUMMER 2019

much. Recreationally, we use Firefly Creek in the summer and we have to be very careful to not get water near our mouths, eyes, and ears.

[AB] We try to just water the roots so we don't get sick.

[LBP] Why are farmers doing this? For money?

[AB] The more yield the more dollars.

[TB] This is the first time I have lived this close to a river, so it was scary to watch how fast the water rises. Now, like this fall having water being this high going into winter, it makes you nervous because if you get a lot of snow and the grounds are still saturated come spring from this fall, yeah, so hopefully we have a lot of dry weather.

[SB] This summer didn't we get, what, ten inches of rain in one night?

[TB] Yeah we did.

[SB] Then just a couple of years ago the water crept up a couple of inches to this parking lot and Tracy told me to tell your mom to move her car because the water was rising.

[AB] The only story we remember of a flood was in the '60s [and it] was a flash flood. Now, we have experienced severe flooding in '97 and 2001. We have also experienced less severe [floods] over the years as well. This is why the hundred-year flood numbers from FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] can pretty much be thrown out the window. We believe the farmers have changed the way we are able to live comfortably and safely.



Sara Blue's house before flooding in 1997. Image courtesy of Alex Blue.

ISSUE FOURTEEN : SUMMER 2019

[LBP] We were told after that '60s flood hit that we weren't supposed to receive any flooding for the next fifty years. Then the '97 came.

[In order for Alex and Tracy to build a home at Blue's Bottom they had to build their dirt foundation high enough to be up to code because they were building in a floodplain. They were required to use FEMA flood levels recorded in the past for the area for the required height.]

[TB] So with Alex growing up here and knowing what it's like to be this close to the water to then the '90's and now when we built here ten years ago he knew what happened in '97 and we needed the number from FEMA which was 887 [feet above sea level] because we live in a floodplain.

With global warming and these rain events seriously these 100-year flood levels can literally be thrown out the window. Now we feel like we need to mitigate even more even though we are built up high.

[AB] I believe that the chemicals produced by runoff with herbicides, pesticides, and some of the animal waste is being deposited into the creek, is deforming some of the wildlife that lives along the creek.

The creek has just gotten more polluted over time. The chemical use is what concerns us. This chemical that is considered "safe" to the government doesn't seem safe to us because we have seen deformed frogs. And thinking about



Sara Blue's house during the flood of 1997. Image courtesy of Alex Blue.

the increase in learning disorder behaviors like autism in our community—that is growing.

[TB] Don't rely on technology to fix everything; to us it's like it has ill effects. We think nature can take care of itself and us if we let it. We can't just ignore the effects we are having on the earth and water. We all have to be aware of our part. Technology includes those drain tiles and Monsanto's seeds and Roundup herbicides. I can rely on the soil to filter the bacteria out and yet children's cereal has Roundup herbicides in it. I trust nature; I don't trust technology.

[LBP] The worst flood I experienced was the flood in April of '97 because we lost everything. Our clothing, furniture, sentimental items. My mom, Sara Blue, lost her piano. We had that piano since we were kids, and we had to throw it away. We cried for that piano because that piano was a fixture in our home and held so many memories for us. Yes, it was a material item and we still had each other, but those kinds of losses matter too. I don't know how many artificial Christmas trees I've had to replace—they are just trees for a holiday but that means something when you lose these items to flooding. Items you imagined you would hold onto forever, make memories with, and then pass those memories on to the next generation, then just like that, it's all gone. We weren't prepared because we never imagined a flood like this would happen. Don't mess with nature because this impacts real people—those people that change the landscape or try to mold the land to be something it's not supposed to be—these types of tragedies and devastation happen to people.

[AB] Another thing that I never got over was when the water was rising in the city of Lac qui Parle [Minnesota], they released the locks on the dam, and in one night, the water in the areas rose eight feet. I'll never understand why they did that.

[LBP] It happened overnight basically. One minute the water is flowing fine and then it was coming.

[TB] I have been told by Alex that when you see the creek rise, there is concern but you don't have to worry about a disastrous flood unless the current of the creek stops flowing. When the creek stops running, that is when we all have to worry.

[LBP] Yes, we were taught this because when it stops flowing that means it is backing up and can't flow into the Minnesota River. So for the night that the flood of '97 came, they opened up the Lac qui Parle river dam and the water rushed into the Minnesota River, and all of us living at Blue's Bottom at the time watched the creek stop running because it was backing up. The water came up through our backyard and mom's (Sara Blue's) field. After the flood, everyone devastated by the flood was required to mitigate and raise our houses six feet to be in an accordance with hundred-year floodplain levels. Since then, we have been prepared for future flooding that has occurred [in] 2010 and 2012. The 2001 [flood] wasn't as disastrous as the '97 flood but it lingered for weeks. Unlike the '97 flood that came and went in a matter of a day or so. Now, instead of catastrophic flooding that would have us out of our houses for a year, we are able to sump pump and wait it out instead of losing everything.

[TMO] Did you struggle that year in '97 when we had to be relocated until we were able to go back home?

[LBP] We, those that were impacted by the flood, were offered \$25,000 for our home because our community did not like us living in the floodplain. We all declined the offer from Tribal Council because this area is our home and the flood wouldn't last forever. What I am saying is no amount of money or natural disasters could have

made me turn away from this area down here. We called this place home. I always have. I am an air force veteran and I traveled many places but

I always felt the need to go home. I could have lived a different life elsewhere but this place is my home.



The Blue siblings James Blue (left), Alex Blue (center), and Laurie Blue (right, playing the piano). The piano in question was one of many sentimental items lost in the flood as described in Laurie's interview. Image courtesy of Alex Blue.

More Photos of the 1997 Flood Taken at Blue's Bottom



The flooded driveway to get to Blue's Bottom. Image courtesy of Alex Blue.



Flooding of Laurie's home—the oldest house at this location—as well as a vehicle that was not able to be taken out before the flooding. Image courtesy of Alex Blue.



Close-up photo of the flood waters in the vehicle. Image courtesy of Alex Blue.



Chicken coop in floodwaters. The chicken coop was torn down a few years after this. The ice on the trees indicates where the floodwaters were just a day before. Image courtesy of Alex Blue.

Wildlife, Plant Life, Habitat, and Cultural Implications

[AB] I don't think people know how much wildlife and habitat thrive off that creek, I mean all these bird species, squirrels, our chickens, all these little rodents around here. When everything drinks from Firefly Creek, all sorts of life are connected to the water. I believe these habitats have really been affected by the agricultural methods. The tiling of all the farm fields just runs off the field, as well as the animals' waste being too close to the water like our creek, which just pollutes the waters more. The water belongs to all of us.

[AB] You know we used to watch the wildlife when we were growing up down there. There was beaver, mink, deer; once in a while you would see a [raccoon].

[LBP] And woodchucks

[AB] Oh yeah, that's right Laurie. What else is there?

[TB] Pheasants, cranes.



A hawk at Blue's Bottom. Image courtesy of Tracy Blue.



*The songbirds that have become accustomed to the nourishment Tracy and Alex Blue provide.
Image courtesy of Tracy Blue.*

ISSUE FOURTEEN : SUMMER 2019

[AB] Blue heron, cranes, coyotes.

[SB] Frogs.

[LBP] Turtles.

[AB] Opossums, skunk, hawks, eagles, all sorts of bird life here.

[TB] So when we are talking about the toxic water, *E. coli* is toxic. We still go in there and have to be worried about [the toxins] but if this keeps up, we've got chickens, geese, dogs, us, all the songbirds that come to our yard, the honey bees are in the gravel drinking out of the creek all the time. I mean when you are talking about what lives off that creek it's frightening to think of it getting worse and possibly deadly.

[AB] This includes all of those species of wildlife that we have named in that list and many more rely on that creek.

[TB] And of course we use that water from the Firefly Creek to water our garden.

[AB] Like we did forty-nine years ago.

[TB] And we have to be very careful to never sprinkle our yard or splash onto the plants themselves. We have to just take the hose and set it on the ground without having the water splash up. The soil filters the garden so we are able to eat from our garden.

[AB] Everything we planted up here has been watered by that creek. You name it, from all the grass, garden, orchards, and perennials.

[TB] Remember those little green frogs? The banks of the creek would just be solid; now you hardly see frogs anymore, just within ten years.

[AB] All these beekeepers from across the world were losing their bee colonies. This happened in the 2000s due to pesticides. We need the bees.



Hamline archaeology field school as invited guests at Blue's Bottom in 2015. Image courtesy of Tianna Odegard.

[TB] Right now, people are selling trees that are systematically treated with pesticides, which means if we plant this tree with this toxin, the bees don't know that tree is poison to them.

[AB] I think a lot of things in nature try to tell us what's wrong, like the bees. We need to pay attention. We don't pay attention to them. We, as beekeepers, have learned to respect and open our eyes to live a more natural life.

Education about the Water and Lands and Continuation of Restoration

[TMO] You have collaborated with many people and have hosted many groups on your property to educate and show how you use the land and creek. Could you tell me how those experiences were?

[AB] Those were great. We really enjoyed having them and we learned a lot from of them too. We learned a lot about the rocks and fossils we have found in Firefly Creek.

[LBP] I think any person that comes down here finds something uplifting or something they take interest in, like a cool-looking rock.

[TB] We have planted as much native plants, animal food, medicine for us, medicine for the animals. We have a bunch of elderberry, black currant bushes, aronias, chokecherries, red willow, plum trees, and apple trees. These plants are perennial and are going to be here year after year to come. Long after we are gone.

Everything we have planted here has attracted a lot of wildlife like the birds, hummingbirds, and butterflies.



Hamline faculty members and students as invited guests at Blue's Bottom in 2016. Image courtesy of Tianna M. Odegard.

Cultural Implications to Consider in Closing

To help move forward, I am now trying to bring awareness to the current state of urgency at Blue's Bottom and to keep these stories alive even if the creek is not safe to use. As long as the creek exists, the stories of its importance will carry on. Once those narratives about Firefly Creek are gone, there will be no meaning and there will just be a creek in my backyard. The Upper Sioux Community Tribal Reservation runs along Highway 67 in Granite Falls, Minnesota for about a fifteen-mile stretch. This land holds countless place-identity memories for me as well as the generations of relatives that came before me. This

land is considered sacred, environmentally rich, and home. It should be no surprise, then, that when I entered into the academic realm, I held my home close to my heart and continue to place it at the forefront of everything I do. The creek is brought to life by the collective narratives and place-identity of my family and fellow community members.

There are strong oral historical accountings of creation stories at the confluence of the Minnesota River and Mississippi River, known to Dakota people as *Bdote*, as well as sacred



Changing fall leaves in Firefly Creek. Image courtesy of Tianna Odegard.

teachings at other water locations across Minnesota. These places are vital to Dakota identity and there are revitalization efforts to reclaim the narratives in these crucial areas, to bring awareness of the importance of continued historical accountings, and to demonstrate honor and care. To strengthen the conversation surrounding important areas of Minnesota, I wanted to bring forward another view of a body of water that is not as known to many, but holds a significance to my family and others within the community. I bring these stories to light with the intention that these, at first sight smaller, stories are a part of overarching ideas about place, identity, and water protection as well as cleaner, healthier water.

We share many of these areas and lands today, but we often overlook or undervalue the nature that surrounds us. Colonialism has altered many aspects of the Dakota peoples' way of living and caring for the land. However, the unbreakable bond that has guided people back to nature is still very much alive in Native American teachings

today. Time can only tell what lies next for the generations that follow us, which compels me to ask the question: What is in *your* backyard? Taking the time to answer this question may provide you with a deeper understanding of your identity in the particular area you are in, regardless of whether you are in a rural area or a city. Attempting to answer this question for me is a lifelong journey. Learning about Dakota values and teachings takes time and reciprocity with those you love and care for, so one article cannot begin to undercover the multitude of stories and connections to water that we all share. Listening to the stories and experiences of others has provided me with the opportunity to add meaning to the physical landscapes around me, why they are the way they are, and how they came to be that way. I believe each individual person—Native American and non-native alike—can explore the everyday wonder of nature and can physically see the importance of continuing the stories that go along with a place, no matter how difficult the history is to tell.

Epilogue: Flooding at Blue's Bottom, Spring 2019

In spring 2019, Minnesota experienced extraordinary flooding again, including at Blue's Bottom which once again affected the people who live there.

All images this section courtesy of the author unless otherwise noted.







In contrast to the previous image taken in the exact same spot (see Adam's interview), this image shows flooding in late March, 2019. Adam tells us that the flooding didn't recede until the end of May and that this is unprecedented in his experience. The Minnesota River runs along the left side of the hilltop and the Yellow Medicine River runs along the right side of the hilltop. Image courtesy of Adam Savariego.

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About the Author

Tianna M. Odegard is a member of Upper Sioux Community, one of four federally recognized Dakota tribal nations in Minnesota. Tianna was raised in the area known in the Dakota language as *Pe-juhutazizi Kapi* or "the place where they dig for yellow medicine." Tianna descends from Indigenous peoples on her mother's side and from European peoples from both her parents. On her father's side, she has relatives in Georgia that she cherishes and enjoys visiting when she can. She embraces and loves all of the history and heritage that make up her family tree. She has lived on and off the reservation in Granite Falls, Minnesota, which has provided her with different perspectives for the use and respect for the land around her.

Tianna earned a bachelor's degree at Hamline University majoring in anthropology with a specialized interest in archaeology and is currently a graduate student in the archaeological heritage track of the Heritage Studies and Public History program at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities. As she moves forward in her professional endeavors in cultural resource management, she hopes to continue engaging the public with a range of diverse backgrounds to take note of the history of the people and the lands we are surrounded by, privileging the life experiences and knowledge sets that are not traditionally validated by academic settings.