

## The Dakota Prisoner of War Letters: Dakota Kaskapi Okicize Wowapi

Clifford Canku, Michael Simon

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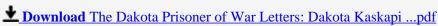
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The Dakota Prisoner of War Letters: Dakota Kaskapi Okicize Wowapi Clifford Canku, Michael Simon In April 1863—after the Dakota War of 1862, after the hanging of thirty-eight Dakota men in the largest mass execution in U.S. history—some 270 Dakota men were moved from Mankato, Minnesota, to a prison at Camp McClellan in Davenport, Iowa. Separated from their wives, children, and elder relatives, with inadequate shelter, they lived there for three long, wretched years. More than 120 men died. Desperate to connect with their families, many of these prisoners of war learned to write. Their letters, mostly addressed to the missionaries Stephen R. Riggs and Thomas S. Williamson, asked for information, for assistance, and for help sending and receiving news of their loved ones.

Dakota elders Clifford Canku and Michael Simon, fluent Dakota speakers, provide both the transcription and the first published translation of fifty of these letters, culled from Riggs's papers at the Minnesota Historical Society. They are a precious resource for Dakota people learning about the travails their ancestors faced, important primary source documents for historians, and a vital tool for Dakota language learners and linguists.

These haunting documents present a history that has long been unrecognized in this country, in the words of the Dakota people who lived it. The dedication written by the authors, both of whom are descendents of Dakota prisoners of war, declares: "Our relatives are watching over us. / We are humbled as we honor our ancestors. / Woecon kin de unyakupi do / We accept this responsibility you gave us."

Dr. Clifford Canku is an assistant professor of Dakota Studies at North Dakota State University. Michael Simon is an instructor of Dakota language for the Moorhead (Minnesota) Public Schools. Both are retired Presbyterian ministers and enrolled members of the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate.





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