

# Three Lives, Two Rivers

## One Marriage and the Narratives of American Colonial History

Philip J. Deloria

### Three Lives

On April 26, 1931, at a roadhouse in the Catskill Mountains of New York, an assailant put a shotgun to the back of notorious gangster Jack “Legs” Diamond and pulled the trigger. New York City began preparing for the official opening, later in the week, of the Empire State Building. The Radio Commission upheld the decision of a radio station owner to cut off Major General Smedley D. Butler, who had used the word “hell” on the air. The *New York Times* reported on the Great Depression, noting that the 1931 deficit would have covered the federal government’s entire budget in 1917. New York Yankees baseball player Lou Gehrig got an out rather than a home run when a teammate ran from first to third base, then simply walked into the dugout, allowing Gehrig to pass him on the base path. The *Times* reported on an airplane stuntman who buzzed New York rooftops, zipping under two bridges before disappearing into the foggy dusk, and on new stances from the Episcopalians on divorce and the Presbyterians on birth control. Daylight savings time returned. And at St. Luke’s Chapel on Hudson Street, my grandmother and grandfather met, on the day he was ordained a deacon of the Episcopal Church.<sup>1</sup>

My grandfather wore formal clerical black to the ordination and his freshly trimmed hair stood on end, with an odd little curl. He was tall,

tan, and handsome, built from the ground up, a former football player with the kind of physical confidence one gets from the frequent experience of knocking people down. The *Times* had written of his ordination the previous day, proclaiming him “a Sioux Indian and a grandnephew of the famous Indian warrior Sitting Bull.” The claim about Sitting Bull was not exactly true, but it marked him as a character, one of the curiosities that made life interesting in one of the early twentieth century’s greatest cities.<sup>2</sup> He was thirty years old and he refused to smile for photographers. His name was Vine Deloria.

My grandmother’s name was Barbara Sloat Eastburn. With her brown hair cut fashionably short and a lifting wave that spilled across her forehead, my grandmother was pretty, with a quick smile and an affable personality. She worked in New York City, but lived at her parents’ home in Sloatsburg, a small village on the Port Jervis commuter rail line, tucked just inside the Ramapo Mountains north of the City. That April morning—like almost every morning—her mother had struggled to get her moving, as my grandmother was perennially slow in waking to her day. During the work week, she often failed to make it to the Sloatsburg train station on time, and her father had to race her down the street in his roadster, hoping to beat the train to Suffern, the next stop on the line. My grandmother was, in all ways,



Vine Deloria Sr.



Barbara Sloat Eastburn Deloria



Ella Cara Deloria

a deliberate and unhurried person.<sup>3</sup>

Twenty-three years old when she met my grandfather, she had come of age during the 1920s, with its revolutions against manner and restriction. She knew how to dress the part. Lunchtime often found her shopping, and her younger sisters remembered her two-tone shoes and her sense of fashion. She had a closet full of beautiful clothes and she wore them well. She was, in many ways, a crystalline example of what some have called “the New Woman,” enjoying a relatively liberated life in the public worlds of work and of leisure and mass culture. My grandmother worked at American Telegraph and Telephone — AT&T — calculating ship-to-shore telephone rates and bills on a fantastic machine called a “comptometer,” a very fast, key-driven calculator that required both skill and training. A white, unmarried, native-born daughter of middle class parents, my grandmother was a perfect candidate for a white-collar office job and she made the most of it. Her income — though always less than a man’s — allowed her a measure of independence from her parents, and she owned a horse and took her best friend on a tour of Europe.

But my grandmother had stayed on the outskirts of the 1920s culture of flaming youth, embracing the new womanhood in style as much as substance. She avoided New York’s theater district, preferring the informal showings of nickel movies in the upstairs room of the community hall in Sloatsburg. No sporting events, speakeasies or hip flasks. No boyfriends in beautiful polished automobiles. She rarely took in the city’s museums and galleries, and clubbing through the Harlem Renaissance would have been completely unimaginable to her. Her friends and her identity remained in her small sheltered town. Restrained, conservative, and devout, she was a perfect minister’s wife, which is exactly what she became.

My grandfather, on the other hand, loved New York. It was football that opened his eyes to the city and to the wider world. Son and

grandson of important Dakota Sioux leaders, he was born in 1901 and raised on the Standing Rock Indian reservation, which straddles North and South Dakota at the spot where the Missouri River crosses the state line. In 1916, following the death of his mother, my grandfather was sent to Nebraska, to a military boarding school run by the Episcopal Church. Though he entered the school scared and speaking scarcely any English, by the time he graduated he had become a highly capable bi-cultural figure, popular and respected among his white classmates. That respect came, in no small part, from his athletic prowess and, somewhat to his surprise, he found himself the recipient of a college football scholarship.<sup>4</sup>

Between 1922 and 1926, Vine Deloria played football for St. Stephens College, a small Episcopalian school in the Hudson River valley that would later change its name to Bard College.<sup>5</sup> Football took him to New York—to Ebbets Field to play St. Johns University, to Ohio Field to play New York University, and to many other cities and college towns around the northeast. In the fall of 1928, he returned to New York, to study for the ministry at the Episcopal Church's General Theological seminary, near Chelsea Square. Taking his dormitory room as his base, my grandfather spent the years between 1928 and 1931 breathing in as much of the city as his limited budget would allow, reveling in New York's dense cosmopolitanism. Under the tutelage of the Reverend Edward Schlueter, he worked at St. Luke's chapel in Greenwich Village, a welcoming station for newcomers situated just three blocks from the Greenwich House music school and social services center. At the chapel, my grandfather lived an ironic history, recapitulating a core American myth: an American Indian waiting on the shore, hand outstretched, to welcome immigrants to the New World, ready to teach them how to survive in one of modernity's great cities. Of course, my grandfather was an immigrant himself, for South Dakota was every bit as distant from New York as the worlds from which his parishioners had fled.

Until April 26, 1931, my grandparents had led separate lives, connected only through a single tenuous link: my grandfather's sister, Ella Cara Deloria.<sup>6</sup> Ella Deloria is today recognized as a key figure in the development of Native American ethnographic writing. Her posthumously published novel *Waterlily*, written in the 1940s, is considered far ahead of its time, a reflection not simply of an American Indian ethnographic voice, but as a model of women's writing as well. In 1932, she published *Dakota Texts*, an important collection of Dakota Sioux stories, rendered first in Dakota language orthography, then as a literal translation, and finally, as a free prose translation. It remains one of the most important sources for the study of Dakota language and narrative form.<sup>7</sup> Her 1944 book, *Speaking of Indians* sought to bring her anthropological knowledge of Sioux life to a broad popular audience.

Like my grandparents, Ella too found an unexpectedly congenial, if somewhat intermittent, life in New York City. My great-aunt was intellectually gifted, and her early education had given her good nurture, first at St. Elizabeth's mission school at Standing Rock, and then at the All Saint's Episcopal School for Girls in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. She had attended Oberlin College for two years, and then, between 1913 and 1915 finished her degree at the Teachers College at Columbia University in New York. In 1919, she returned to the city, living on East 52<sup>nd</sup> Street and training to become a fieldworker for the Young Women's Christian Association, a job that had her shuttling between New York and various Indian boarding schools during the early 1920s. After a brief stint teaching at the Haskell Indian Boarding School in Lawrence, Kansas, she returned to New York yet again in January 1928 to work for the Columbia University anthropologist Franz Boas. The position—which would be central to Ella's life throughout the 1930s and which would define her subsequent career—started slowly, for her father's failing health kept her back in South Dakota until the spring of 1931.

How was it that my radically peripatetic great-aunt managed to create a connection between my grandparents? What possible link could there be between the New York Eastburns and the South Dakota Delorias? Close your eyes and imagine: it is a warm summer night in the little town of Sloatsburg, and you are with Carrie Eastburn and three of her four daughters—Barbara, Catherine, and Peggy. Fireflies blink among the trees and a low moon rises over the Ramapo mountains. Dressed in a brown cloth Indian costume, with beads and badges and a single feather tucked upright in her headband, Carrie leads her girls and their friends out of the Eastburn home, across the trimmed yard, past the little vegetable garden and the car barn, out of the middle class and into an Indian wilderness. Lighting the way with her torch, she takes them through tall grass thick with buzzings and chirpings, along a dimly seen footpath, down a winding hill to a stream. Whispers, a giggle, silence, a swallowed gulp. To the right, off in the distance, stand the eerie stones of the Sloat family cemetery. As they make their way, the girls see the shadowy flicker of a distant fire. Stepping carefully on neatly spaced river stones, they cross and ascend a small hill. The fire—closer than it looked—leaps up as a figure stirs it, tosses on another log, and then swiftly disappears. The girls have arrived at the Eastburn Camp Fire ring, where Ella Deloria will teach them the lore of the Dakota Sioux.<sup>8</sup>

According to Barbara and her sisters, their mother Carrie Eastburn met Ella Deloria at a drugstore. No one in the family remembered how, although there was a sense that Carrie Eastburn had heard of Ella and set out to meet her. No one knows quite where, although New York is of course an excellent bet. No one knows exactly when, although it was probably during Ella's second stint in New York City, in the early 1920s. My great-aunt certainly ended up spending a great deal of time with the Eastburn family, frequently journeying out to Sloatsburg to work with the Camp Fire Girls, remaining overnight after the sessions, and sometimes

enjoying Eastburn hospitality for a couple of days. The home became one of the many refuges that Ella cultivated over the course of her life. Ella became to the Eastburn girls a cross between an older sister and an aunt—an experienced friend, a role model, and a mentor of sorts, at least on matters pertaining to the Indian play that lay at the heart of Camp Fire. Like many young people in the Camp Fire Girls, Boy Scouts, and at Indian summer camps, Barbara and her sisters were profoundly and emotionally moved by the ceremonies that took place under the stars, under the tutelage of Ella Deloria. In return, Ella brought the girls within her kinship orbit, treating them almost as if they were Dakota relatives.<sup>9</sup>

On her first stint in New York, my great-aunt had experimented with the giving of Indian lectures and consultations. Her second residence, under the auspices of the YWCA, allowed her to fine tune her skills, with the Eastburns and others. By the time of her third residence in the City, she had become a veteran teacher, pageant coordinator, and administrator, and she knew exactly how to play the situation. Ella found many people in New York attracted to a kind of Indian exoticism, and working with them became something of an economic necessity during the hard years of the Great Depression. She posed for photographs in a beautiful buckskin dress, braided her hair, and wore beaded Indian headbands. Through Church and University, she arranged speeches to women's groups, tutoring sessions with the young anthropologists wishing to learn the Dakota language, and demonstrations for Camp Fire girls and other groups interested in "authentic" Indian ways. She developed a brochure, kept a file of press clippings, bought goods for resale from a curio company, and was sometimes characterized—by others—not as a scholar, but as an entertainer or performer.<sup>10</sup>

In April 1931, however, Ella was about to embark on her most productive period of scholarly research. She would work under the tutelage of Franz Boas, a major figure in American anthropology, and, later, of Ruth

Benedict, surely one of the most important and intriguing women of the day. After a decade of struggles—with her father’s ailing health, her sister’s unstable emotional and mental life, a crushing accumulation of debt, and her brother’s need for financial support while at St. Stephens—Ella could now envision a stable future. She came to St. Luke’s Chapel on April 26<sup>th</sup>, then, feeling pride, relief, and hope, anticipating her brother’s ordination and his future employment as a South Dakota missionary.

The freedom Ella saw in her future came at a cost, however, and that cost had everything to do with the ordination, which had been accelerated so that my grandfather Vine might be allowed to return home to South Dakota to be with his dying father, Philip Joseph Deloria—who Ella had been tending for the last two and one half years.<sup>11</sup> His end was near, and with it, the conclusion of Ella’s years of caregiving and self-denial. My great-grandfather’s last request was to see his son stand before him in his clerical uniform. Everyone in the Episcopal Church wanted to make the event happen. Indeed, the Bishop of South Dakota himself, Hugh Latimer Burleson, had come to New York to conduct the ordination. It was a serious business.

My great-grandfather Philip Deloria had been one of the first converts among the Dakota Sioux people to be church-educated and then ordained as a minister. He represented what had become a surprisingly effective effort to create a Dakota native clergy. A powerful orator, the Church had sent him on speaking tours to Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Washington D.C. that had, by all accounts, been extraordinary. Though he is little remembered today, in the early twentieth century, he was widely recognized within Church circles. Indeed, if you visit the National Cathedral in Washington D.C. today, you can still find, near the back of the altar, a small statue of him, surrounded by similar figures—“primitives” from the colonies who had found God and then worked successfully to lead their brethren into the light. Philip Deloria was vehement about my



grandfather's entry into the clergy—he hated the thought of Vine making a career as an athlete, which would have been Vine's preference—and it is quite possible that the old man willed himself to stay alive until he saw the clerical collar that would lock my grandfather up for good. He died in early May, shortly after first seeing Vine in his clericals.

Following the ordination ceremony, Vine sought out his sisters, Ella and Susie. He found them on the front steps of St. Luke's Chapel, waiting with the Eastburn family, who had ventured in from Sloatsburg. I have sometimes wondered how it happened between Vine Deloria, the athletic minister, and Barbara Eastburn, the small-town New Woman. Did their eyes lock and hold, like the lovers at first sight they might have seen at the movie theater (or in the blurry projections at the Sloatsburg town hall)? Did the group spend the rainy afternoon together, with the two of them becoming enamored with one another through casual conversations? After parting, did he find her dogging his thoughts? Was she in his mind as he took the long train ride home to South Dakota for his final meeting with his father? Did my grandmother feel a rush of desire when she contemplated him, a come-to-life character from her Camp Fire Girl past? Or perhaps their meeting was simply a 30-second introduction, a brief instant that left no imprint on the mind or soul of either.

A little over a month later, my grandmother heard from her friend Ella, who reported that her brother had been with their father when he died and had received whatever blessing he had been able to offer. Fresh from the funeral, Vine had rushed back to New York and plunged into preparation for his final exams. Like the other graduates, he had been interviewing for church positions, and had accepted a job back in South Dakota. Now, however, he had some free time and thought it would be nice to get together with the Eastburns again.

On a Thursday in early June, Ella called Barbara at work to say that she and Vine would like to come out to dinner sometime. Would

Barbara talk to her mother about it, and perhaps issue an invitation? She would be delighted to do so. That evening, however, Barbara took her regular commuter train home to find her father waiting impatiently at the station. Time—and the plans not yet made—seemed to have accelerated rapidly over the course of the afternoon. For some reason, Ella and Vine were already at the house, and the contemplated dinner was to be that very evening.

The Eastburns had been hearing about Vine for a long time. “You girls should meet my brother,” Ella often teased. “He’s a great football player, and he’s just up the Hudson Valley a little way. Very handsome!” Ella liked to joke, and she saw the Eastburn girls through the prism of Dakota kinship relations, which allowed exactly this kind of teasing. As for the Eastburns, they had become quite intrigued by my grandfather. The family had invited him to their home on several occasions, and he never seemed to be available. Indeed, at one point, Samuel Eastburn bought tickets for a West Point football game, hoping to lure my grandfather, only to have him beg off at the last minute. The Eastburns began teasing Ella in return, coyly expressing doubt as to whether Vine really existed. And, despite their affection for Ella, they formed an ungenerous opinion of him. “We thought he was kind of a snob,” my grandmother recalled. “Quite standoffish—and we were prepared not to like him.”

Instead, Vine charmed the entire family. The dinner was a fabulous success. “He seemed like real good company,” my grandmother remembered, “cheerful and fun to be with.”<sup>12</sup> He was also in a hurry. The next day, Friday, Vine called Barbara at work and asked if he might take her home. Borrowing Ella’s car, he met her at the office. That night he stayed as the Eastburn’s guest before dropping her back at work the following morning. That afternoon—it was by now Saturday—he brought her home once again and that night they attended a dance at Tuxedo High School, her alma mater. Afterward, they drove around aimlessly on the twisty roads of

Rockland County, and he told her what he thought his work would be like, serving as an Indian missionary in South Dakota. And Barbara, a devote Episcopalian herself, must have thought it sounded more interesting than commuting back and forth to New York.

That night, he proposed marriage. “As he was leaving the next day,” she remembered, “there was no way I could say ‘let’s wait.’” She accepted his proposal, allowing his haste, perhaps, to rush her judgment. They promised to write. On Sunday, he returned to New York City to gather his things and board a train for Pine Ridge, South Dakota, where he would serve as a deacon before being promoted to the clergy the following November. Together, they had completed a full courtship in the space of three days. It had barely been six weeks since Ella had introduced the two.

## Two Rivers

And so my grandparents, in what seems to me a rush of temporary insanity, agreed to join their lives together. To say that they “came from different backgrounds” is an understatement. In fact, their family histories had been screaming headlong in opposite directions for a very long time. For one peering back into time, years piling upon years until they mass together as centuries, it can be hard to believe that my grandparents could share the same universe, much less six decades of marriage. From their earliest appearances in the colonial record, the Deloria and Sloat families embodied distinct visions of America itself, of the possibilities of the New World, and of the ways in which one might create a good and just life for one’s self and family. Those visions took their first shape—as they often do—through encounters with the aboriginal people who held closely the soul and form of the continent.

Here, then, is an Indian story (though it arrives in French clothing): The founder of the South Dakota branch of my family was Francois Des

Lauriers, possibly born in 1761 at Fort Vincennes, Indiana, the grandson of a French immigrant to Quebec. Or perhaps he was a schoolteacher from St. Louis? Both are possible. He was surely a member of one of the substantial number of Des Lauriers families scattered about the old French colonies. (One finds significant pockets of Delorians, for example, in upstate New York, northern Michigan, and the Mississippi valley.) The first Des Lauriers generations had haunted the borderlands of the eighteenth century, living in territory sometimes French, sometimes British, sometimes American, and always Indian. Francois Des Lauriers seems to have headed up the Missouri River in the 1780s, finding a place for himself among the Ihanktonwon or Yankton Sioux. Like so many Frenchmen moving into the continent's interior, he likely worked as a trader or trapper. Like so many trappers and traders, that meant taking an Indian wife and opening himself up to an Indian world. Such a marriage immediately tied a French stranger into a kinship group and a community. By becoming "kin," Des Lauriers the trader would have an immediate network of Yankton trading partners, and those connections would spread outward, as the Yanktons linked to broader exchange networks to the East and West, and up and down the Missouri. As a hunter and trapper, Des Lauriers would have relied upon his wife for the hard work of processing meat, robes, and fur—the butchering, drying, scraping, cooking, softening, cutting, sewing, and bundling all belonged to her.

And why would she and her family have considered him worth their while? Des Lauriers would have opened them up to an equally desirable set of connections, one that funneled goods from St. Louis up the Missouri into Indian Country. And while the Yanktons surely recognized that Des Lauriers was different, they did not think in terms of "race," as we understand it today. They were part of one of the largest Indian social collectives on the continent, interlocked groups that warred, traded, and intermarried across the interior, from the Great Lakes to the Rockies and from the Canadian lakes and bays to the Great Plains. They were well

accustomed to bringing strangers into *their* world and making it stick.<sup>13</sup>

Francois Des Lauriers and his Yankton wife set about creating a mixed-blood family that would, in the next generations, go largely native. “Des Lauriers” would be “Dakota-cized” into “Deloria” (though variant French spellings continued to crop up for several decades), while the name “Francois” softened towards a Sioux pronunciation: “Saswe.” This first Francois Des Lauriers was probably the grandfather (yes, there is the tiniest touch of uncertainty: he might have been the father) of Saswe, my great-great grandfather, who was also known as Frank, Francis, and Francois Deloria. If one were counting blood quantum (a problematic category, but one that remains visible and important in Native America) this first Francois’s son, Francis Xavier Des Lauriers, would have been half Indian and half French. And thus Saswe (whose mother, Mazaicuwini, was from the northern parts of the Missouri) would have been three quarters Sioux. His son, Philip Joseph—my grandfather’s father—would have been seven eighths. The genealogy is confusing, for everyone in the family seems to be named Francois, Philip, or Vine.

1. Francois Des Lauriers
2. Francois Xavier Des Lauriers
3. Francois Deloria [1816-1876] (also Saswe, E-ha-we-cha-sha)
4. Philip Joseph Deloria [1853-1931] (also Tipi Sapa)
5. Vine Deloria Sr. [1901-1990] — Barbara Eastburn [1908-1990]
6. Vine Deloria Jr. [1933-2005]
7. Philip J. Deloria [1959-]

Fig. 1. Framework Deloria Genealogy: seven generations, primarily oldest sons.

What matters as much as blood quantum is that the Delorias gave themselves up to the Sioux world. Though always recognized as mixed bloods and boundary crossers, they fought, parleyed, married,

and vision quested as Indian people. Saswe occupied a subtle terrain, rich with social complication.<sup>14</sup> For years, he lived on “Deloria’s Island” in the Missouri River, cutting and selling firewood to passing American steamships. He was at the same time a spiritual leader, ordained through the power flowing from a medicine vision, with his spiritual gifts demonstrated repeatedly to the people who recognized his authority. Yet Saswe also accepted the appointments of various Indian agents to serve as the government-designated leader of the “half breed” band of the Yankton. Though these appointments meshed with the political and spiritual leadership he already exercised, some Sioux people today might well view him as a collaborator. When, in 1858, he traveled to Washington with Struck-by-the-Ree and the Yankton delegation, Saswe found himself helping to negotiate—and then signing—an enormous land cession treaty, in which the Yanktons gave up over 11 million acres and agreed to live on a reservation 1/26th that size.<sup>15</sup> Did Saswe “resist” the imposition of federal power? Was he a realist concerning the future? A collaborator? Whose interests did he have at heart? It is impossible to know what he was thinking, and this impossibility is, in fact, quite maddening.

When he signed the treaty, though, he did not use the French-Dakota name Saswe, but rather *E-ha-we-cha-sha*, (*The Owl Man*), a name that came from his vision. I like to think of it as a gesture affirming his Yankton allegiances and his Dakota Sioux identity. Saswe was a Yuwipi man, which meant that he could be tied up tightly, wrapped in robes and blankets, bound again, then left in a darkened room. Spirit lights would dance around him, and only instants later, with the help of the spirits, he would walk out of the room knowing the location of lost objects, while leaving behind precisely folded blankets and coiled ropes. Saswe wore red moccasins, with a hawk beaded on one foot and an owl on the other; when he was in the middle of a ceremony, he could move his foot and onlookers would hear each bird call in a spirit voice. When he looked into his coffee,

he saw the faces of four men he had killed.

This was the world of my grandfather's grandfather. It was powerful, real, and mysterious. My grandfather understood it far better than I. My own father, speeding along a back road in South Dakota, once crested a hill to find a gauntlet of owls sitting on the fences on both sides of the road, staring at him. Hundreds of owls, he said. My grandfather experienced equally curious things. Beneath his sincere Christianity, he knew this Dakota world as an ongoing possibility, transcending the time and space of the church and the city.

Here then is an Indian story that arcs across time and generations. Nor is it simply an "Indian" (or a French) story. My grandfather's history is one of countless North American stories—big and surprisingly frequent stories about crossing over, becoming (mostly, but perhaps not completely) Native, occupying the same social and cultural space as Indian people, on Indian terms, and in the process creating something new. My grandfather was the distilled product of a whole way of moving complexly through the world, with all manner of openings into complication and possibility that came to a fine point in his person. As with Saswe and the 1858 treaty negotiations, the Indianness at the heart of that world meant that when it came to social, political, and economic issues, my grandfather's family was usually on the losing side of things.

The 1858 Yankton accord, it turns out, is not the only Indian treaty in my family's archive. Vine and Ella Deloria were not the only Indian people gracing my grandmother's past and present. The Indian ceremonies of Camp Fire were not the only fantasies upon which Barbara Sloat Eastburn might work her imagination. And Mazaicuwin and E-ha-we-cha-sha were not the only Indian names to be carried into the future as emblems of the past. There were also Manis and Sewes, Wacken, Ayro, and others, members of the Minsi band of the Leni Lenape, the people who had once

owned the land that came to bear the name Sloatsburg, and who put their names to a different document of dispossession. Here, then, is another kind of Indian story.

The Sloat family's "Indian deed" dates to 1737, when the Dutch settler Wynnant Van Gelder purchased a piece of property in the Ramapo River valley from the "natural proprietors, Manis, Wacken, Sewes, Ayro, and Nakama." Passed with care down through my grandmother's line, first as handwritten copies, then as the typescript that survives today, the deed reflects another kind of American story as well. The parcel of land is first described in the vague, impermanent language of "metes and bounds" surveying (I have tidied up the language, which is phonetically spelled, Dutch-inflected, and devoid of punctuation):

"Beginning at a rock, so along the mountain to a white oak tree marked on four sides. From there, all along the line of John (?) to a black oak tree marked. From there, cross the river to a brook by an austree standing on the East side of the brook. From there all along the brook against the stream to a white pine tree marked on four sides. From there to a brook; so along the brook against the stream to a hakkerre tree marked on four sides."<sup>16</sup>

It is a cozy kind of language, overflowing with the local knowledge of people existing—or hoping to exist—in their landscape so fully that they understood *which* white oak tree, which rock, which mountain, which brook were to mark the boundaries. It was of course a language disastrous in its imprecision, particularly when it was asked to function outside local understandings. And yet it almost suggests gentleness, a reciprocity between Manis and Van Gelder based upon a shared experience of the land.

But not all the words are so intimate. As the deed turns to the question of possession, the language shifts. It becomes the language of law, a frightening precision of words guaranteed to claim land until rivers stop



running and grass stops growing. The Indians, the deed says,

“have from generation to generation held the same in peaceable and quiet possession without the molestation of any prince or potentate whatsoever. Now be it known to all people and nations unto whom this present writing shall or may come that I, the said Manis, by and with the consent of my friends and relations, as our manner is (*viz* Wacken, Sewes, Ayro, Nakama) have given, granted, and freely conveyed and for diverse valuable considerations thereunto give, grant, and make over unto Wynnant Van Gelder and all his heirs and assigns for ever all that piece or parcel.”

My fright at the language comes on behalf of Manis and his people, and it springs from my knowledge of how the subsequent centuries unfolded, as a continental dispossession that passes straight through the Yankton treaty bearing the name of the Owl Man. (Like the Yanktons, it is quite possible that Manis and his people signed the deed under duress, and quite likely that they did not take the same meanings as did Wynnant Van Gelder. All too often, Indians—particularly in the early years of treaty-making—understood that they were agreeing to share use of the land, not to convey ownership.) With a set of personal marks at the end of the document, however, Manis and his people had given up for all time the tract of land that was to become Sloatsburg, New York.

My grandfather’s people went native and found themselves on the wrong end of such a treaty; my grandmother’s ancestors enjoyed the fruits of colonization. Here is how the land and the family came together. A man named Jan Pieterse Slot arrived in the New World sometime around 1650, and settled at Corleer’s Hook, near what is today the Brooklyn Bridge. These were the Dutch New Amsterdam colony’s most turbulent years, and Slot was probably asked (as most Dutch colonists were) to raid against Indian people along the Hudson River. Throughout the seventeenth century, the Dutch had been wrangling with the large number of native



When Wynnant Van Gelder transferred the title of the Minsi parcel to his neighbor and son-in-law Isaac Van Duesen in 1747, he signed (like Manis and his people) only with a personal mark. And so too did Van Duesen when he turned the land over again in 1763 to his son-in-law, Steven Slott (or sometimes Sloat). The son of Pieter Janson Slot, Steven Slott had married Van Duesen's daughter Maretja in 1753 and moved to his father-in-law's holdings in the Ramapo Valley. Ten years later, the Van Gelder land passed to him. Instead of putting the land on the block or passing it along as a dowry, Slott gave it his own name (upon which time had worked changes in the form of an additional letter "t" or, occasionally, an additional "o"; the transformation to Sloat followed closely thereafter). He sought to create a small village—Sloatsburg—at a place where Stony Brook gave itself up to the Ramapo River.<sup>17</sup>

I wonder if my grandmother ever recounted the history of Sloatsburg to my grandfather, or if he ever discussed the Yankton treaties with her. I wonder if they compared notes, and marveled at the way the Delorians became well known among a dispossessed people, while the Sloats receded into anonymity even as they appeared in almost every single chapter of the most familiar American stories ever told.

The Ramapo is a hilly country, with rounded stony peaks—Bald Mountain, High Torne, Table Rock, Raccoon Brook Hill—looming over the carved valleys. Below the rocky summits, groves of pine, oak, maple, and other hardwoods swept the hills. And at the bottom of the valleys, the Mahwah, Saddle, and Ramapo Rivers collected the clear-water streams and brooks that flowed from mountain lakes. Long Swamp, Delany Swamp, Cranberry Pond, and numerous other bogs testified to the poorly-drained basins that dotted the rocky landscape. The Ramapos are not quite as mysteriously gloomy as Washington Irving's Catskills, but they are not

far removed. There is little about the landscape, with its angular terrain, shallow soils, and rocky promontories that says, “farm me!”

And yet, that is exactly what the first Europeans—including the Sloats—set out to do. They made farms, clearing fields of stones and stumps, and stacking the former up into short stone walls. Steven Sloat built a tavern, which served as the nucleus of his community. He and his descendants made the shallow soil bring forth sustenance—or at least they tried. They came to know and to love the place in intimate ways, for it was on this land that they became Americans. Here is a pleasing story that my grandmother loved, a familiar tale of agrarian virtue arising from the physical experience of agricultural labor on the land.

But the household records of the first U.S. census of 1790 suggest a less sanguine understanding of the Sloats’ acquaintance with the Ramapo landscape. In addition to the strength of his sons John and Isaac, Steven Sloat drew upon the labor of five slaves. I don’t know when he bought these people or whether, in the 1750s and 60s, they were around to build houses and walls and taverns, and to clear and plow the fields of Sloatsburg.<sup>18</sup> By 1790, though, and in the wake of American liberty, we can imagine that these owned people were themselves the ones who had, through their toil, come to the deeper, more intimate understanding of the land itself.

Liberty, of course. The Sloats were there too. During the American Revolution, the winding notch between High Torne and High Mountain defined the strategic route from New York City to the upper reaches of the state. The Ramapo River cut through this pass, Sloatsburg sitting on the west side of the notch, the town of Suffern on the east side. Steven Sloat served as an informal quartermaster, collecting and storing goods, and keeping horses at his Sloatsburg home. His son, Captain John Sloat, had been assigned to defend the pass against a British advance out of New York City. George Washington moved through the Ramapo country, and Sloatsburg, at least once during the Revolution.

Although John Sloat died an ignominious death—shot by his own sentry as he stepped out to relieve himself one night—his commission (and that of his father) stand proudly on my grandmother’s application to the Daughters of the American Revolution.<sup>19</sup> The two Sloat soldiers remain important figures in the family history, not for their deeds—which were minimal—but for their combination of utter typicality brushed by greatness. They fought for liberty and to be Americans. And as for the Sloat Tavern, well, George Washington really did sleep there, on June 6, 1779.

John Sloat died in April 1781, just a few months before the birth of his only son John Drake Sloat, who would become the most celebrated military figure in the family gallery. John Drake enlisted in the Navy, and served as the helmsman on the frigate *United States* during the War of 1812. In 1814, he participated in the capture of the British ship *Macedonia* in one of the great naval battles of the War. He chased pirates from the Caribbean and rose to the rank of Rear Admiral. In 1846 he found himself commanding the *Savannah*, in charge of the Pacific squadron off the coast of California. Sloat held his final command at exactly the moment that President James K. Polk manufactured a war with Mexico that would allow the United States to claim what we know today as California and the Southwest. The first move against Mexico came at Monterey on July 7<sup>th</sup>, when Commodore Sloat and a flotilla of three warships landed sailors and marines and demanded the surrender of Alta California. Joined by John C. Fremont and Robert Stockton, Sloat and the Americans quickly took California.

My great-aunt Peggy had an aging oil portrait of this particular Sloat (along with a boarding pistol and a copy of his ship’s logbooks) and he cut a dashing military figure indeed. (There would be others in the family too, including an obligatory captain in the Civil War.) But John Drake Sloat was really a cousin in my grandmother’s line. Steven Sloat’s grandsons through his other son, Isaac, have more to say about the Sloats

and Sloatsburg itself—and it is Isaac’s family that leads directly to my grandmother.

Unlike John Drake Sloat, Isaac continued to live in Sloatsburg. He was born there in 1758, well before the crisis of the American Revolution, and he died there in 1821, well after its conclusion. He watched the Post Road to Albany snake its way through Sloatsburg, and in 1814, he built the Sloat family’s house nearby. An impressive structure named “Harmony Hall,” it became a frequent meeting place for officials and politicians from both Orange and Rockland counties in New York. The old maps of the area reveal that in America’s early years, Isaac and his sons, Stephen (1789-1857) and Jacob (1792-1858) helped change Sloatsburg from a would-be agrarian village to a small industrial center.

In the early nineteenth century, industrialization meant water power, and the Sloats transformed the water ecology of their town. The Ramapo River was diverted into a collection of canals that channeled the power of falling water into waterwheels which, in turn, wound the belts and pulled the pulleys that allowed people to make things quickly and efficiently. In 1792, Isaac opened the Ramapo Works, a successful industrial tannery. His sons grew up in a new Sloatsburg, a place that had started to trade farming for industrial manufacturing. In 1815, Jacob and Stephen built a three-story plant that made mill screws and vises, then later cotton cloth, then still later cotton twine. Twine proved to be the brothers’ ticket to success and by 1840, the Sloats owned a large piece of New York City’s twine market, which they dominated for the next twenty years, while expanding their factories and inventing new kinds of industrial machinery. Cotton from the South made its way to Sloatsburg and then returned again as twine, and each exchange put money in the pockets of the Sloat brothers.

In the period between the Revolution and the Civil War, the Sloats established themselves as a local dynasty. Stephen had eight children, Jacob nine. Their factories thrived. They built workers’ quarters for their help and

a new house for Jacob—later called “The Nest”—at the south end of town. One imagines that they pointed proudly to their cousin the admiral, but their own work probably called forth some pride as well. If John Drake was protecting the nation, the brothers were actually building it in Sloatsburg. Jacob’s son Henry Ransom Sloat would take over most of the family business. Among his children was Carrie Sloat Eastburn, my grandmother’s mother.

My grandmother would not have thought of her family history as anything other than a quintessential American story—adventurous immigration to the New World, virtuous agrarian labor, settlement and town-building, participation in the War for Independence and two or three others, business leadership at the dawn of the American industrial age, dynastic success. She saw it as the story of a job well done, a history deserving of oil portraits in gilt frames, a place at the table of the Daughters of the American Revolution, and a pair of small-town mansions overlooking the Ramapo River. A family had grown up with a nation, as families were supposed to do.

My grandfather’s account could not have but called hers into question. For his history bespoke a more complicated relation, rich with pragmatic decisions taken in the Indian backcountry of the Missouri River, framing a willingness to join an Indian world, on Indian terms. In that sense, his story inevitably was about being colonized, and about surfacing into the present as a wounded survivor, bearing the cuts and scars of the past. My grandmother’s family lived firmly in the narratives of the victorious and successful, and her people could have no part in my grandfather’s story, other than as conquerors and colonizers. After all, in making their history, the Sloats had amassed quite a balance sheet: they had dispossessed Indian people, enslaved Africans and African Americans, and inaugurated an aggressive imperial war that captured the northern half of Mexico. And though I doubt that my grandfather thought it, we might

add that the Sloats created and then dominated an industrial working class, radically transformed the environment in damaging ways, and continued to profit from the labor of southern slaves.

The stories that define this contrary, critical view of the Sloat history emanate not from the colonized Ramapo, but from the mixed colonial world of the Missouri River, a place where Indian power held sway for a long time and where social and cultural worlds worked very differently. They were the stories that my grandfather's people, when called to recite history, would tell about my grandmother, her family, her narratives, and her people. My grandparents, it will not surprise you to learn, needed more than three days of courtship to understand these things. Their decision to marry—hasty by my lights—became a decades-long exploration of the relation between two radically different families, of the ways those families reflected distinct cultural traditions and of the ways individuals were both shaped by their pasts and able to transcend them. In that sense, the marriage itself became yet another kind of new American story, one full of possibility and pain—and more, of the intertwined relation between the two.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *New York Times*, April 27, 1931, p. 1 (Diamond, birth control, divorce, deficit); p. 26 (Butler); p. 29 (Gehrig); p. RE 1 (Empire State). April 26, 1931, p. 2 (Stunt flier, daylight savings).

<sup>2</sup> *New York Times*, April 25, 1931, p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> Details concerning the personality and life of my grandmother are distilled from four primary sources. The first is a pair of short handwritten memoirs composed by my grandmother during the period 1987-1989. The second is a set of oral history interviews I conducted with her on multiple occasions in 1988 and 1989. The third is a set of oral history interviews I conducted with her younger sister Margaret (Peggy Rednour) in January 1997. And finally, a set of oral history interviews conducted with her younger sister Catherine (Boswell) in September 1999. My grandmother's older sister, Louise, died in 1979.



<sup>4</sup> My treatment of my grandfather's history stems from a number of sources, including my own informal memories and conversations, a series of tape recordings (not interviews, but rather his own recollections and stories) I made during the course of the early 1970s, an extended oral history interview with my father that took place in December 1998, a series of autobiographical fragments composed by my father during the winter, summer, and fall of 1999, and a reading of my grandfather's correspondence with his Bishops in the Episcopal Church. That correspondence is located in the records of the Niobrara Missionary District of the Episcopal Church, Center for Western Studies, Augustana College, Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

<sup>5</sup> See Reamer Kline, *Education for the Common Good: A History of Bard College—the First Hundred Years (1860-1960)* (Annandale-on-Hudson: Bard College, 1982).

<sup>6</sup> On Ella Deloria, see (among many treatments) María Eugenia Cotera: *Native Speakers: Ella Deloria, Zora Neale Hurston, Jovita González, and the Poetics of Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008): esp. 1-70, 145-170; Susan Gardner, *A Vision of Double Woman: Ella Deloria's Formative Years* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, forthcoming); Raymond DeMallie "Introduction," *Dakota Texts* by Ella Deloria (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006): v-xix; Raymond DeMallie, "Afterword," and Agnes Picotte, "Biographical Sketch," *Waterlily* by Ella Deloria (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988); Vine Deloria Jr. "Introduction," *Speaking of Indians* by Ella Deloria (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998): ix-xix; Janette K. Murray, "Ella Deloria: A Biographical Sketch and Literary Analysis," Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Dakota, 1974; Julian Rice, *Deer Women and Elk Men: The Lakota Narratives of Ella Deloria* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992). My account is informed by a reading of her correspondence, which has been assembled by Dr. Agnes Picotte and is located at the Dakota Indian Foundation, Chamberlain, South Dakota. That record includes correspondence with Bishop Hugh Latimer Burleson (drawn from the Records of the Niobrara Missionary District of the Episcopal Church) and anthropologist Franz Boas (drawn from the Boas papers at the American Philosophical Society), among others.

<sup>7</sup> See DeMallie, "Introduction" to *Dakota Texts*, v.

<sup>8</sup> On Camp Fire Girls and Indianness, see Philip Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998): 95-122. My account is drawn from my interview with Peggy Rednour, January 8, 1997.

<sup>9</sup> Kinship relations were absolutely central to Ella's conception of herself and her world. The subject permeates her writing and her ethnographic work. See, for example, Ella Deloria, *Speaking of Indians*, 24-74.

<sup>10</sup> On curios, see letter from Mohonk Lodge Indian Beadwork and Curio company, June 9, 1933. On entertaining, see, for example, "Concerning Ella Cara Deloria, '11-13," in "Ella Deloria" file, Oberlin College Library Special Collections, which notes the curiosity of Oberlin President about "a circular concerning an Indian woman entertainer, Ella C. Deloria."

<sup>11</sup> As I will suggest below, the Deloria family has a confusing genealogy, since men tend to be named Francois, Vine, and Philip, and women are often named Barbara. I simply want to note

that the Philip J. Deloria being referred to in this instance is my great-grandfather, for who I (the writer) am named. See genealogy chart below.

<sup>12</sup> The quotation, and the time line for the courtship, are drawn from my grandmother's handwritten memoir (in author's possession).

<sup>13</sup> On the question of indigenous social formation in the continental interior, I owe much to Michael Witgen, whose forthcoming book, *An Infinity of Nations* (University of Pennsylvania Press) makes this argument in detailed and compelling terms.

<sup>14</sup> On Saswe, see Vine Deloria Jr., *Singing For a Spirit: A Portrait of the Dakota Sioux* (Santa Fe: Clear Light, 1999): 6-37; Vine Deloria, Sr. "The Establishment of Christianity Among the Sioux," in *Sioux Indian Religion: Tradition and Innovation* eds. Raymond DeMallie and Douglas Parks (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987): 91-106.

<sup>15</sup> Saswe signed the treaty using yet another name, E-ha-we-cha-sha (the Owl Man). See Treaty with the Yankton Sioux, 1858 11 Stat. 743.

<sup>16</sup> Several copies of this deed are in possession of various Sloat, Eastburn, and Deloria family members. My copy originates with my great-aunt Peggy Eastburn Rednour.

<sup>17</sup> "The Sloat Family," genealogical manuscript in author's possession. See also David Cole, *History of Rockland County, New York* (New York: J.B. Beers, 1884): 262-295.

<sup>18</sup> 1790 Census, Series M637, Roll 6, Page 384 lists Steven Sloat as the holder of five slaves.

<sup>19</sup> Daughters of the American Revolution application and related correspondence are in author's possession.