Minnesota Unraveled

Episode 209 - The Power of a Waterfall: A History of Owámniyomni and Fuji-Ya Restaurant

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Chantel Rodríguez: It's a beautiful, sunny day, and I am taking in the spectacular view of St. Anthony Falls in Minneapolis from the Stone Arch Bridge. I have lived in the Twin Cities for over 20 years and the beauty of the waterfall never gets old.

Dotting either side of the Mississippi riverfront are historic mill buildings, harkening back to Minneapolis' industrial era.

As I let this view sink in, one word came to mind—*power*. The waterfall is an undeniable form of *natural* power that has been engineered into controllable energy, but in our previous episode on Eliza Winston, we learned that Southern tourists visited this place for its *healing* power. Clearly, the power of the waterfall exists beyond the physical. **How and why has this waterfall been a site of cultural, spiritual, and economic power over time?**

Chantel: Welcome to Minnesota Unraveled, I'm your host, Dr. Chantel Rodríguez.

The waterfall has held many meanings to many people throughout history. In this episode, we will pull on the threads of two seemingly unrelated stories—one about the Dakota people and the other about Reiko Weston's Fuji-Ya Restaurant—that are in fact woven together, telling the larger story of the waterfall as a site of power.

For the Dakota story, both past and present, I spoke with two members of the Dakota community.

> **Deacon Deboer:**
> Hau Mitakuyepi. Deacon emakiyapi do. Damakota k'a wamasicu. Pezihutazizi kapi hematanhan tka nakun Imníža-Ska Otúŋwe ed wati do. Rouillard Tioṡpáye hemantanhan.
>
> My name is Deacon Deboer I'm from the Rouillard Tioṡpáy, down from Santee and up in Pejuhutazizi, the place where we dig for the yellow medicine over by Granite Falls, present day of course. And I now live in St. Paul, Imníža-Ska

Othúŋwe, the place of the white shale bluffs. And I work for the Minnesota Historic Society and the Native American Initiatives Department.

Shelley Buck:
Haŋ mitakuyapi. I'm Shelley Buck. I am currently the president of Owámniyomni Okhódayapi.

To learn about the Fuji-Ya Restaurant, I spoke with someone who literally grew up there.

Carol Weston Hanson:
My name is Carol Weston Hansen and I am the daughter of Rako Weston who was the founder of Fuji-Ya in 1959.

Chantel: Long before Europeans arrived, Dakota people lived along the waterfall and Ojibwe, Ho-Chunk, and other Indigenous peoples visited and traveled through this place. In the Ojibwe language, the waterfall is called Gakaabikang, meaning "severed rock" or "split rock"; and in Dakota, it is Owámniyomni, meaning "many whirlpools." I asked Deacon to share what this site means to Dakota people.

Deacon Deboer:
It's a sacred area, a landscape that had been used for gathering and trading and visiting for ceremonial peace offerings. And also birthing at Wíta Wanáǧi, which is another site down below. Owámniyomni stands for many whirlpools in translation and Wíta Wanáǧi is a spirit island and that island amongst also being a birthing island for the Dakota women was also a prayer site.

Chantel: Owámniyomni is just one of the countless sites that are part of the Dakota homeland.

Deacon Deboer:
The Dakota people with Mni Sota Makoce, that is our homeland where the waters reflect the skies or the heavens. And you see that reflected in our state language, our state place names, of course within the state name itself, Minnesota, but also Minnesota River.

And when you think about Mni Sota Makoce. You have to think about that outside of state boundaries that we have today. So North Dakota, South Dakota, parts of Nebraska, Iowa, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and then Minnesota and even parts of Wisconsin, that was migrational Oceti Sakowin territory.

Chantel:
So perhaps for some people listening to this, Dakota history is something that's very new to them. And they might be wondering, well who are the Dakota people? Who are they and what's their connection to the land? So would you mind talking a little bit about who are Dakota people and their connection to this land that we now call Minnesota?

Deacon Deboer:
Yeah, thanks for that question because it's important to relay this context to understand that we are a sovereign nation and we've always been sovereign in diplomating ourselves through this Oceti Sakowin, which is the seven council fires, and I'm sure some people have heard of Dakota, Lakota, Nakota. Those are three dialects of the Siouan language. Dakota specifically has four bands or four fires, a part of those seven council fires that is Wahpekute, Wahpetunwan, Bdewakantunwan, and Sissitunwan.

Chantel: For more than 10,000 years, Dakota people witnessed the waterfall travel 15 miles upstream to its location today. It was originally part of the River Warren Falls—a massive waterfall on the Glacial River Warren during the last Ice Age. It is estimated to have been similar in size to Niagara Falls at around 175 feet high. The power of the falls eroded the sandstone layer at the bottom, causing the overlying limestone to collapse. This forced the waterfall to move upstream at a rate of 6.8 feet per year.

Deacon Deboer:
Owámniyomni actually started in downtown St. Paul area over by what used to be a village called Kap'oża and then there was also another village, Sunka Sa Othúŋwe, which was Black Dog's village, and Maga Yute šni, which was a place where they didn't need geese. And those were all down by Fort Snelling area present day.

And going forward, you can imagine when it hit Bdote Mni Sota, and I say Bdote Mni Sota because there are multiple bdotes and bdote is where two rivers meet. So if you go there, you will understand where part of the waterfall actually went up the Minnesota River and eroded away. And we're not seeing it today because of it's gone. We rode it into rapids, and the other part of the waterfall kept on going up into downtown Minneapolis that we see today formed that Mississippi Gorge that is one of the deepest parts in the Mississippi River there, on this area.

Chantel: The waterfall that continued upstream on the Mississippi River is what we know today as St. Anthony Falls. It was given this name in 1680 by Father Louis

Hennepin, a Catholic missionary, who is credited with the first European descriptions of both the St. Anthony and Niagara Falls.

> **Deacon Deboer:**
> He essentially lays out a vision of it being this most beautiful place of many different falls. It wasn't just one waterfall cascading, it was multiple waterfalls that were cascading over. And he notes Dakota people in the region using it as a gathering space. Going forward, he also is marking the movement of the waterfalls, its erosion upstream.

Chantel: What Hennepin did not document was Dakota people's physical and spiritual connection to both Owámniyomni and the stars, which was something we learned about in our star knowledge episode.

> **Deacon Deboer:**
> it's related to our cosmological relationship with the land. There's a concept that deksi Jim Rock has talked to me a lot about, and it's kapemni – as above, so below – or a mirror of these two worlds. And when I say two worlds, we are Wicahpi Oyate, we are star people and we came down from Canku Wanagi or the Spirit Road which connects to the Big Dipper. And in these constellations that cosmological relationship is reflected on the earth itself and within our sacred sites. So Owámniyomni is one of those. Wakáŋ Tipi is another Taku Wakáŋ Tipi is actually essentially the water aquifer that is a dwelling of Uŋktehi underneath Mní Ówe Sní. And that is a part of what we know as Coldwater Spring. I'm trying to build a map for people to understand on the river here, these sites are connected into that cosmological relationship with the constellations.

Chantel: Bringing us back to Owámniyomni and thinking about how for a lot of people who see this place as St. Anthony Falls and they think about water power as being important to this site, does this site in terms of water power have a similar meaning to Dakota people? Is water power not really, does it not really translate to Dakota people in this space, or does it mean something entirely different?

> **Deacon Deboer:**
> That's a good question. Mni has a lot of Wakaŋ. And Wakáŋ, I've heard elders interpret it as well – I'll backtrack and say that it was interpreted and translated by missionaries initially as Holy Spirit and sacred in that sense, which has this religious context and also a Christian relationship, which does get away from what I've heard, translated with Wakaŋ being more of this power that has both positive and negative.

And mni has a lot of Wakaŋ, and specifically Owámniyomni, with it being the only waterfall on the Mississippi River, the Ȟaȟa Wakpá. And Ȟaȟa Wakpá actually gets at those turbulent waters in the name itself as well, with its thinking about the many whirlpools of Owámniyomni, that place represents Wakaŋ and power, both spiritually and physically.

Chantel:
if you wouldn't mind, you've mentioned it several times without translating it or explaining it a little bit further Uŋktehi. You've mentioned that a few times. Can you explain what that is?

Deacon Deboer:
Uŋktehi is translated as this horned water serpent, and he comes up in a lot of different stories. He dwells in the river, but in many different sites along the river, Wakaŋ Tipi, Taku Wakaŋ Tipi, Owámniyomni, and Uŋktehi in stories has had fights with Wakíŋyaŋ, which are thunder beings. And that was one of the reasons why or how these bluffs were created and how they were pushed up. Imníža-Ska, white shell bluffs, you see them all around in St. Paul. Many of our burial sites are located there in the closest spot to the crater as well in that cosmological relationship in line with constellations at certain points of the year. And Uŋktehi with his dwelling, he brings Wakaŋ to these different areas, and that comes out within our ceremony when we visit and we gather there.

Chantel:
I wanted to just touch on the fact that a lot of our conversation has been around stories, right? Traditions or oral histories, and it just seems as though stories are so important to Dakota people in a way that seems different to how stories function in the western tradition. And because you've shared a lot of stories about the landscape and the sky, and Uŋktehi. Can you tell me a little bit more about the importance of stories to Dakota people and how that connects to landscape?

Deacon Deboer:
Stories are lessons, stories are teachings, and without story, we don't have history. Without story, us Dakota people, wouldn't know where we came from in a sense of our ancestors passing down that oral history. And that is a big difference between western culture being primarily a written history and ours being oral. But I think that comes out within our Dakota, our seven Dakota values that starts with silence and deksi Waŋbdi Wapaha talked about silence being pivotal to understand listening because without silence, you're not opening up your ears to listen to the story that your elders are telling you. And

when I say story again, I want to say that those are teachings. There's always a lesson to take out of a story.

Chantel:
When you think about these sites as places of storytelling, do these stories and teachings, do they live in place or do they live in people? The way I heard you talking about it makes it seem like even though stories can be transmitted by elders and amongst people, there's something about place there that makes it seem like perhaps those stories can be held there too.

Deacon Deboer:
That's really important to think about. The energy comes from the land and the land tells the story, and that story will never leave. But this is the more important part about oral history, is continuing that conversation with our relatives to pass down the value system with the story and the lesson to steward the land in a reciprocal relationship. And capitalism has really got us in a tough place in terms of extractive land practices.

Chantel: In the 1830s, capitalism in the Upper Midwest was evolving from the fur trade to logging and milling. Driving this shift was not only the decimation of the beaver population, but also Native land dispossession.

Capitalism is an economic system that requires businesses and private individuals to *own* and *control* the resources used to produce goods and services. Owámniyomni and the surrounding land was the resource needed for profitable lumber and milling industries. They wanted to take advantage of the kinetic energy produced by the falls' 50-foot drop to power the mills. Entrepreneurs worked with the United States government to pressure Native people into selling their land.

Deacon Deboer:
In 1803, you had an agreement or rather idea with William Henry Harrison and Thomas Jefferson to push their fur trading houses in the upper Mississippi River. And I will quote a letter that he sent to William Henry Harrison. He says, "we shall push our fur trading houses and be glad to see the good and influential individuals among them run in debt. Because we observed that when these debts become more than they're willing to pay, we'll lop off cessions of lands."

And two years later, Lieutenant Zebulon Pike, when he was sent up here.

He signs this treaty with two signing out of seven Dakota leaders who were not representing the whole of the Oceti Sakowin, those seven council fires.

And then the fact of the matter is it wasn't paid to its amount that was listed and stipulated in his journal, Lieutenant Pike's, but it was also not ratified, formally by the government.

Chantel: The 1805 Pike Treaty gave the United States the right to construct a military post anywhere between the falls and the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers. Hoping to secure a foothold in the fur trade and the region, the United States began building a military site at the confluence in 1820 and named it Fort St. Anthony after the waterfall. Upon its completion in 1825, it was renamed Fort Snelling in honor of Colonel Josiah Snelling. The 1805 treaty continues to impact Dakota people today.

Deacon Deboer:
When you're thinking about Land Back initiatives, this is a prime example of a treaty that was never formally ratified and land that if it was formally ratified, the usufructary rights should be intact today.

Chantel: Under the third provision of the 1805 treaty, Dakota people retained usufructuary rights, or the right to maintain hunting access and land use. For Deacon, these rights are not only about use, but about their relationship with the land and being part of land stewardship or management decisions.

Deacon Deboer:
Are Dakota people able to go to St. Anthony Falls, Owámniyomni, and fish in the river without a license? No. Are we able to go hunt? No. Are we able to harvest and forage as we please without a permit? No. And that's a part of that reciprocal relationship, a way of life that was really stripped from us as well as the land itself.

Chantel: After the 1837 land cession treaties opened the land to settlement, the first person to stake an *unofficial* claim on the east bank of the falls was Fort Snelling's civilian shopkeeper and postmaster, Franklin Steele, in the winter of 1838. Ten years later, his claim was approved and he secured financing to build a dam above the falls and open a lumber mill. The first commercial flour mill opened in 1854 and more soon followed. Logs cascading down the river often clogged and choked the falls.

These industries established Minneapolis as a major city, but it came at a cost to Owámniyomni. In September 1868, William Eastman started building a 2,000 foot tunnel underneath the Mississippi River to harness the waterpower for nearby mills. A few weeks later on October 5th, the tunnel–still under construction–collapsed.

Deacon Deboer:
This was not the only tunnel that they were excavating underneath the falls themselves. And this was during the time period of introducing hydroelectric water power into the falls. And they wanted to essentially serve as a tail race for new mills and industry up river. But what happened was that thin limestone layer on the top that we talked about earlier, and the sandstone on the bottom, that limestone layer gave away. So when the river broke through, you had a tunnel that went from a tunnel to a whirlpool. And the city just started, residents started throwing whatever they could into it to essentially stop the whirlpool from forming.

And of course that didn't do much. There was serious concern about the waterfall collapsing completely. And going into rapids, which if you go over there today, if that waterfall was to turn into rapids, it would take out multiple bridges and it would be catastrophic. The US Army Corps of Engineers came in, they built that apron and they established what we are seeing today. Originally it was a wooden apron and then it was developed into a concrete apron.

Chantel: The Eastman Tunnel collapse, alongside ongoing industrialization of the falls, negatively impacted Dakota people and their relationships with Owámniyomni and Wíta Wanáǧi, or Spirit Island, located just below the falls.

Deacon Deboer:
It now looks completely different. And that's a form of spiritual pollution that you see for the Dakota Oyate to come back to this site. And they're not seeing what our ancestors saw, they're seeing what the Army Corps of Engineers has built for industry purposes, capitalist purposes. And that goes against also our reciprocal ways of knowing, our reciprocal relationships that we have with the landscape.

And I'll bring this to Wíta Wanáǧi, not only the apron being built, but Wíta Wanáǧi and the logs that were coming over the waterfalls, they destroyed the island's womanhood as a birthing site, and they're desecrating Unci Maka. You're desecrating our mother, our grandmother. And when they were done with the logging, then they quarried the rest of it for limestone extraction. And that's the really hard part about approaching sites that don't look anything like they used to, but that's the important part about prayer. And those spirits are still there. Wíta Wanáǧi's spirit is still there in the water, and we honor that still.

Chantel: Between 1880 and 1930, St. Anthony Falls helped make Minneapolis the flour milling capitol of the world, producing 11 million barrels of flour annually. But by

1930, the flour industry was changing. It was more profitable to operate mills near their source of Canadian wheat. From the 1930s to the 1960s, Minneapolis milling companies closed their doors, leaving behind their mills, many of which were torn down.

The abandoned West Side Milling District experienced a spark of new life in 1968 when Reiko Weston moved her restaurant Fuji-Ya to a site just above the waterfall, near present-day Mill Ruins Park. Reiko passed away in May 1988, but her daughter Carol Hanson carries on her legacy. I spoke with Carol about her mom's life and decision to open Fuji-Ya near St. Anthony Falls.

> **Carol Weston Hanson:**
> My mom always told me that her first baby was the restaurant and I was her first child.
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> So I was basically born and raised in that restaurant. The original restaurant was started on LaSalle Avenue in the basement of a building. The original restaurant was made for my grandma and grandpa, my mother's mother and father. My grandfather was a rear admiral in the Japanese Navy. And he, right after World War II, they were starving because at that time when the war was finished, military couldn't work. So here's my mom. My mom grew up having chauffeurs and tutors and maids, and by the end of the war, she had nothing. She was starving. And so when my dad asked for my mom's hand in marriage in Japan, he didn't know that my grandfather was a rear admiral. And he asked for her hand in marriage and my grandfather who spoke very good English, British English, because that's where he learned, said, "Yes, take her away. There's nothing left for her here." And that was in 1954.
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> **Chantel:**
> Okay. 1954 in Japan.
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> **Carol Weston Hanson:**
> In Japan, and that's when she moved here in 1954. And then in 1959, they started the restaurant and they brought my grandma and grandpa over. And that restaurant was really started for them, for something for them to do. And so a lot of people would come to me and say, "Yes, I remember your grandfather." He would only seat us. He was very humble.
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> **Chantel:**
> Why did your mom and her new husband, at the time, come specifically to Minnesota?

Carol Weston Hanson:
My dad was born and raised in Mountain Lake, Minnesota. Okay. So my dad's parents are in Mountain Lake. Most of his siblings were in Madelia and Mankato.

Chantel:
And at what point did it end up moving to this new site, sort of overlooking what we now know as St. Anthony Falls?

Carol Weston Hanson:
Well, my dad was kind of a, not a go-getter, but he was very curious. And he had heard about this building from a guy named Art Johnson. And Art Johnson was a historian. I don't remember what he did exactly, but he had told my dad about this building, and so they went to go explore. And actually, I think they broke into the building, to tell you the truth, and went to go explore the building, but my dad was really intrigued by the building because it was on the river. It had everything that my mom was looking for, which was the good luck signs.

We had running water. We had a waterfall. We had a bridge. Those are some things that are very – symbols of good luck in Japan. So she really liked that idea.

Chantel: Reiko had a specific vision in mind. She wanted the restaurant to be in the style of a traditional Japanese home, while also honoring the milling history of the site.

Carol Weston Hanson:
So she contacted her brother in Japan which got him involved with an architect that was going to grad school here at the University of Minnesota. And so my mom commissioned him to go and put a Japanese restaurant here in that building. And because she knew it was a historic site, she said, "We have to incorporate the walls. We have to incorporate whatever we can from the original building into it."

Chantel: Reiko worked with graduate student architect Shinichi Okada, as well as local architect Newton Griffith. The trio designed a 3,000 square-foot version of a Japanese home. The building was in the shape of a square box that sat on top of, and incorporated, a portion of the original mill ruins. The wall facing the river was floor-to-ceiling glass to give diners a view of the waterfall.

Carol Weston Hanson:
It was really beautiful because you looked out the windows and you saw this roaring waterfall and all of that. It was just a beautiful, serene, very contemplative place to sit and just enjoy the river because there wasn't anything really going on at that time. There was nothing even on the West Bank either and the East Bank because Riverplace wasn't there yet. St. Anthony Main wasn't there yet. There was barely anything anywhere there. It was very desolate.

We purposely made the front door squeak really loud because we could hear people come in and we left the door open most of the time when we were there, when we were open. And you'd hear the door squeak and then if they didn't come up the stairs, then you went to investigate.

Chantel: As diners entered Fuji-Ya from the southeast, the sound of the falls drowned out the city noise. Diners climbed up the staircase to the first floor that was subdivided by dark wood structural posts. Large timber beams in the ceiling ran predominately toward the river with the ends protruding through the wall to the exterior.

Carol Weston Hanson:
When we first built the building, we didn't have the teppanayaki. That was an add-on later on. The first floor was up on top where we had the tatami floors and the seating on the floor, which was great fun by the way. And there was only six rooms at that time and no sushi bar, nothing. We had six rooms of tatami with three tables in each, and then we had nine booths for those people that just could not get down on the floor. And then of course we had to make everybody take their shoes off to go on the tatami and that was great fun. We had one customer call us one day and said, "You know, I'm sure these shoes aren't mine." And I go, "Okay, what did they look like? " And he goes, "They're red loafers, the exact same ones that I had, but these are better." And no one really complained or called on the second set of loafers. And so we said, "Well, I guess you're keeping those."

Chantel: Tatami are three-by-six foot straw mats covered with woven rush grass on which people traditionally sat or slept. The six rooms of tatami were separated from one another by fusuma screens made from gilded rice paper mounted in wood-framed panels. Servers wore kimonos, colorful full-length Japanese robes.

In the early years of the restaurant, the menu was mostly variations of sukiyaki, a one-pot dish of thinly sliced meat and vegetables cooked table side in a soy sauce-based broth.

Carol Weston Hanson:
We actually cooked on the table sometimes. There was a couple of dishes we did. We brought in a little electric, and then we would cook like sukiyaki. Sukiyaki on top of that, it's a beef and vegetable dish, and we would literally bring the raw beef out and cook it right there in front of you. Or we did something called okonomiyaki, which are our savory pancakes, and we'd bring out a big electric lefse pan, and then we would cook it right there on that too. And we did a couple other dishes like that too. So you could have your food right there. It's nice and hot and just sip a nice cup of green tea and it was just wonderful just to sit there.

Another one we did was shabu-shabu, which means literally swish, swish. And so we'd bring a big hot pot out. So we had hot pots. And then we'd bring this beautiful plate of very thinly sliced beef. And then you would actually go and take your chopsticks and swish it in there. And then until you get to the medium rare or whatever you want. And then you would dip it in a sauce and then eat it over your rice. And then you put your vegetables in and cook them, just like what we do with hot pot nowadays. And then after that is you take the soup out, you take the broth out and then you put it in the leftover sauce. And then you would sip that at the very end of the meal.

One of our luncheon specials was something called the Reiko special.

Chantel:
Oh, tell me about that one.

Carol Weston Hanson:
Reiko special was invented because of my brother and I. Whenever we were at the restaurant, my mom said, "What do you want for lunch?" And we would say Yakitori or Kushiyaki, which would be for chicken and skewers with a teriyaki sauce, tempura and fried rice. And that was the reiko special. She said, "If my American kids would eat this, I know the American public will." And it was a big seller.

Chantel: In 1973, Reiko expanded the restaurant, adding a teppanyaki dining area on the floor beneath the tatami rooms. Teppanyaki is a post-World War II Japanese style of cuisine cooked on an iron griddle. Diners at Fuji-Ya sat at a table around a large rectangular hotplate, while a chef cooked their food. In 1981, Reiko added a sushi bar—the first ever in Minnesota—on the same level as the teppanyaki dining.

Even as Fuji-Ya expanded over the years, Reiko faced the challenge of sourcing the right ingredients and goods for the restaurant.

Carol Weston Hanson:
She would try and find the correct ingredients as far as she could, but then she would substitute what she could find. That was the hardest part is trying to figure out something that worked that we could find in an abundance. Even our tea, we actually shipped from Japan in the beginning. I actually have the big shipping crates that say "Fuji-Ya Green Tea" on it.

Chantel:
Wow.

Carol Weston Hanson:
So there was things that she did bring and then dishes were so hard to find. So she would have to go on buying trips and chip the dishes back. Because in Japan, they do little, small little dishes like a tapas or where there's just a little bit here, a little bit there. And then they would bring that. We call those bentos. So the box lunches, and then we'd put a little bit of everything in there. Tempura was a big one for us at that time because no one knew what tempura was. And then of course sukiyaki were our two biggest sellers.

It was very hard. So she would have to substitute things that we could find here, like parsley, like onion rings. And that's something we don't usually do onion rings in Japan. The shrimp, we had to, gosh, I to this day hate cleaning shrimp. We would do probably 35 to 40 pounds of shrimp a day and we'd have to butterfly them, clean them, shell them, clean them and butterfly them. And we'd have to do that because we sold so much tempura that way.

My mom's main goal was not quantity of food, but quality of food. So she made sure that she had always made sure she had the best vegetables or best meat or best fish.

Chantel:
And so since clearly you went from being a little kid, running around on the lower floors, eating the Reiko special, to clearly eventually being involved in the business. Can you tell me when you started being more involved or even took on an official paid position?

Carol Weston Hanson:
Oh, okay. There was no child labor laws at that time.

Chantel:
It's a family business.

Carol Weston Hanson:
I was eight years old when I first started dishes, doing dishes and all of that. And being at the restaurant constantly, because there were times when it was just easier for my mom to pick us up from school and take us to the restaurant so she could work. And of course then that's when my brother and I played around a lot, but we also did work. And then I started busboy dishwasher and moved myself up to a prep cook, worked as a bartender and I did cooking. I basically did everything. I mean, even when I was younger, my mom would set me up in the office and say, "Here, count the coins. Tell me how much they are. " So yeah, I think it's always been in my blood.

Chantel: When Reiko suffered a stroke in 1978, Carol set aside her studies at the University of Minnesota to take on more responsibility in the business. She leaned on the main lesson her mom taught her—work hard.

Carol Weston Hanson:
She worked so hard and she had a vision, and to work toward that vision. I still try to do that. And the integrity to have your children too do the same. I think that was one thing that she really ingrained into me.

Chantel: Over the next decade, Reiko's ambitions continued to grow. She hoped to develop a Japanese hotel with shops and a spa on her riverfront property near Fuji-Ya, as well as a Japanese garden between the restaurant and the river. Unfortunately, the success of Fuji-Ya had rekindled the community's interest in the Mill District and Reiko's property was now highly coveted.

New businesses popped up and various groups worked to preserve the historic buildings in the area. The Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board needed Fuji-Ya's parking lot to develop West River Parkway, so in 1987 they exercised eminent domain.

Carol Weston Hanson:
They wanted the land that my mom had for the River road, and they basically left us like 0.7 acres of land left. We had all the land all the way to Portland Avenue, and when the trains finally didn't go in front of us, that was fun though, wave at the trains and they honk at us. They offered my mom to buy the 10 foot piece of land that the rails were on, all the way to Hennepin, and my mom jumped on it. So she owned all the land that they needed from Hennepin all the way to Portland for the River road. And so they went after her

for that. And again, like I said, we were the smallest land tract that they needed to get to finish that project.

And so they wanted to make an example of us. And so when they took that away, we were only left with like the building and a little tiny 25 car parking lot and you're talking a 400 seat restaurant, you can't survive. And then they made it even worse by putting no parking signs on the cobblestone street, so no one could even park there for our restaurant. And so in one year, so this was 1986 they did that. And then 1987, we countersued and said, "You're going to do not a partial condemnation. You're going to do a full condemnation, take the building, because we can't survive here the way it was.

Chantel: Shortly thereafter, Reiko died of a heart attack at age 59 and Fuji-Ya closed in 1990, but the memories and the cultural resonance endured. The Weston family donated some of the fusuma screens and tatami mats to the Japanese Garden at Como Park in St. Paul, where they were used in the Japanese teahouse. Carol would honor her mother's legacy, resurrecting the name Fuji-Ya for restaurants in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

For the next two decades, Fuji-Ya sat vacant along the riverfront. It slowly deteriorated to the point that it had to be partially demolished in 2017. The original mill ruin walls were retained, but the Japanese-style architecture was gone. In July 2021, Sean Sherman, also known as "The Sioux Chef," renovated the building and opened Owamni, a restaurant to honor Native American cuisine, cultures, and the river. In spring 2026, his restaurant is moving to the Guthrie Theatre, about a half-mile down river just below the falls.

Meanwhile, various groups sought to re-purpose the area surrounding the falls. One of those organizations, Owámniyomni Okhódayapi, recently signed an agreement to revitalize the West Bank along the waterfall. The 5-acre project sits on three parcels of land that span approximately from the St. Anthony Visitor Center eastward just past the Guthrie Theatre. I spoke with the president of the organization, Shelley Buck, to learn more about the project.

Shelley Buck:
I work for Owámniyomni Okhódayapi. It's a Dakota-led nonprofit that is working to bring life back to Minneapolis's riverfront. Probably one of the most iconic locations in Minnesota. We're working on a five acre site to restore – a 100% restoration of this site – as well as bring back Dakota stories, Dakota history and Dakota people. We want to make sure that Dakota values such as Mní Wičóni. Water is life is embedded in our common and shared community.

Chantel:
For folks who have no idea where this location is that you're talking about, would you mind just sort of describing geographically for folks where it's located?

Shelley Buck:
Yeah. The location of the site we're working on is in Minneapolis. It's at a Owámniyomni or what most people nowadays know as St. Anthony Falls. There's a lock and dam at the location. We aren't taking possession or working with the Lock and Dam itself. The dam belongs to Xcel and the lock walls need to remain the property of the federal government. We are looking at the five acres of land around that. There's a parking lot below there, a trail that goes down. We're working on those five acres, trying to restore them back to what they once were, at least as close as we can to what they once were. We're working in a couple of phases, so the second phase will be working on water restoration and bringing water back to where it once flowed. So we're just really excited with the ability to do that, but it's literally central Minneapolis Riverfront. It's a beautiful location and right under the Stone Arch Bridge.

Chantel: Shelley began her tenure as president in 2023, and has overseen several big changes in the organization, starting with its name.

Shelley Buck:
The organization before, when I first came on, it was called Friends of the Falls. It's had several name changes from its inception. It started out in 2016 as St. Anthony Falls Lock and Dam Conservancy. It was created to stop further industrialization at the site when the site was decommissioned to commercial navigation. And then it was changed to Friends of the Lock and Dam. Then through community engagement, they realized, wait, it's not the Lock and Dam we care about. It's the falls we care about. So maybe we should be Friends of the Falls. And when I came on, again, like I said, we needed to change it. And Owámniyomni Okhódayapi basically translates loosely into Friends of the Falls in Dakota.

Chantel:
Yeah. And you mentioned that it was very important for this organization to be Dakota led. Can you tell me why that is so important?

Shelley Buck:
This organization had to be Dakota led because the site we're working on is a sacred Dakota site. The entire state of Minnesota is the homelands of the Dakota people. Our creation story has us coming from Minnesota, the waters

here in Minnesota. So Minnesota is our birthplace. And so yeah, it was really important that we had that Dakota focus and that Dakota lead. And so often projects like this are led by either non-native people or a non-Dakota person, and it just doesn't always come out the way it should or the correct stories aren't told, the correct people aren't involved in it. And it's important that this being one of our sacred sites in such a populated area, it had to be Dakota led, and we have to continue to keep Dakota focused and work off of Dakota values.

Chantel: Owámniyomni Okhódayapi has been diligently negotiating the terms of the agreement regarding the 5 acres of land for several years. The process has been complicated by the issue of jurisdiction.

Shelley Buck:
In the city of Minneapolis, they have a funny jurisdictional divide. They have the city of Minneapolis and then they have the Minneapolis Park and Rec Board. And the Park and Rec Board has a lot of authority and a lot of jurisdiction. They're their own elected body and they own all of the public lands in the city. So technically this would be land that they would own, but the city and the park board worked with us to allow OO – Owámniyomni Okhódayapi – to be the owners of the land. Our original goal, and it's still a goal that will continue and tell the tribes if and when the tribes decide to, the goal is to have the Four Dakota tribes in the state take ownership of the land.

They didn't want it. I understood because why should the tribes pay to restore stolen land? So it was actually their idea that Owámniyomni Okhódayapi take ownership of that land. So we worked with the city and with the park board and they agreed under certain circumstances or certain terms that we have to meet that we could take ownership of that land. And that's historic and that's really something that's very important to be able to know that that land is going to be in Dakota hands, maybe not necessarily Dakota tribal hands, but it will be in Dakota hands. And we have been working side by side with the four Dakota tribes on what happens with the land. And we will continue to work with them and other Dakota from the diaspora on programming and other things that happen on the site.

Chantel: While Shelley hopes the land title will be finalized at the end of 2026, the concept of “ownership” has been an important part of the conversation for the Dakota community.

Shelley Buck:
While ownership is a foreign concept to our people, we know we live in the Western world, we're minority in numbers when it comes to this world, and we know ownership is an important piece in this world. So we know ownership is something that is necessary legally for us to be able to do what we need to do, but for us, we don't like to use the term “Land Back.” A lot of times when you use the term Land Back, there might be some negative condemnation from other people. And honestly, to me, when I think of Land Back, I think of the land going back to the original inhabitants. That would be the Dakota people. So in this case, yeah, it would be technically a land back, but Land Back also a lot of times refers to ownership. And for us, while we are working to get ownership, the important piece of that is to be able to take care of the land and practice our culture on the land and the way that our ancestors did.

That's the important piece. Having that relationship with the land is what we need and we need to be able to do it without being harassed or ticketed or whatever it may be. So for us, it's more of a land restoration or land rematriation. It's about reconnecting our people to that land and the ownership piece just happens to be an unfortunate piece that we have to deal with.

Chantel: A main goal of the project is to restore Dakota culture and environment to the area. Every aspect of the design is grounded in the Indigenous value of Mitákuye Owas'iŋ, meaning We Are All Relatives. This value informs their cultural sovereignty, or their inherent right to protect sacred sites and steward their lands.

Shelley Buck:
Sovereignty is important on so many different levels in so many different worlds. Speaking about land or natural relatives, we as not only Dakota, but Native people have a worldview where we view the land, the water, the plants and the animals as our relatives. We feel that when you view them in that way, you tend to treat them better. And so viewing them as a relative, they have a life force, they have a spirit, they have a force about them, and they deserve just like us two-leggeds to have sovereignty over themselves. I mean, if you look at different areas, plants can grow anywhere. That's why there are plants that grow in concrete. They're able to find a way to grow through concrete. The same with water. If water wants to get somewhere, water's going to go where it wants to go. That's why right now at the site, there's water that seeps through the concrete above the mill race.

So they have their own sovereignty that needs to be recognized. And during this project, in the design and engineering phase, we do, we sat and we

listened. We needed to listen to the land and the water to hear and feel what they wanted. And that's what we saw. We saw plants growing. We saw water coming out of the concrete. So they told us what they want. And I think that's important that they have their own sovereignty and we're doing what we can to work with them and the two-leggeds here to really make this a project that everybody can be happy with.

Chantel:
Yeah and at the beginning of our conversation, you mentioned the importance of water restoration to this project and just talking about the importance of that relative relationship with nature and that these different elements of nature as relatives have sovereignty. Can you speak more about water restoration and why water itself is so important to Dakota people and Native people generally as coming to this site?

Shelley Buck:
Yeah. I think in general, everybody views water as important and for different reasons. As a Mdewákhaŋthuŋwaŋ Dakota, it's important to me because it's literally life for us. Our creation story has us coming into human form from the waters here in Minnesota. So without that water, we would not be here as human beings. So literally life for us. I think for other people, obviously they're in Minneapolis, they use that water as their source of drinking water. So for the city of Minneapolis, they need it for drinking. And then just in general, water is so healing. Like I said, she has a power, she has an energy and you could feel her.

Chantel:
Can you tell me about what the process has been like for what I imagine are a lot of different interest groups, whether it be local government, various folks in the Native community and others who have a lot of different ideas about what they want to see. What are some of the expectations that you've heard of and how are you dealing with all these folks with their ideas?

Shelley Buck:
I think starting with the residents and the community as a whole, the organization when it first started had multiple community engagement sessions and at the beginning, they had decided they wanted to see a big welcoming center on the site and they really wanted to make this a prominent location with this big welcome center. But then once they started doing even more community engagement, they realized and were told that this is a sacred Dakota site, you should be talking to Dakota people. And most people, if not all, seem to be really open to that idea and everybody is loving the

change in direction for the project. There will be no buildings constructed on this site. So we're actually taking down some buildings instead of putting a building up and that's what the tribes wanted. That's what the community wanted. They wanted to see 100% land restoration, so that's what we're going to do.

Now, when you're working with governments, regardless of which level of government it is, it can be a struggle, and it has been a struggle from time to time with the Army Corps. We read different regulations differently than they do, but we work together, we have conversations, we have meetings, we talk it through, and we've been able to, to this date, been able to get to the other side of those. We don't always agree even after it's said and done, but we get through it and we do what we have to do to make sure this project gets done.

Chantel:
Can you share more with me or maybe describe the sort of general design for that space?

Shelley Buck:
Definitely. If you take Portland Avenue down under the Stonearch Bridge, the road itself is going to go away as a open, public, drivable road. It will be a multi-use road. So the only cars that will be able to go down there will be maintenance cars.

So it's going to be a multipurpose underneath Portland Avenue, and then it's going to go into a limestone switchback path that gradually meanders down the hill. Right now, it's a really steep decline, and we're using that limestone switchback to really make it a more gradual decline. So it's an ADA, it'll be an ADA accessible path, which currently it is not. And then the top part will be a mother garden of our traditional medicines and plants like sage, sweetgrass, things like that. There'll be an area of oak savanna and then down by the shoreline, we'll be restoring the shoreline so you can actually physically touch the water and then there will be lowland forest down there.

So it's bringing back the key components that were originally there and we're excited about that.

Chantel: The second phase will focus on water, and is guided by the Indigenous value Mní Wičóni, or water is life. It will restore the shoreline and clean up the contaminated water in the mill race – a man-made channel built to carry water to and from the water wheel that powers a mill. The hope is to have a 25 foot cascade of water flowing into the mill race.

Shelley Buck:
So it's just a perfect location to bring actual flowing water back again at a higher rate. So it'll just be like a beautiful place where you can sit. There'll be places you can sit and just kind of reflect. There'll be little gathering places where you can gather, or we can gather and have classes on how to harvest plants, what significance the different plants have to Dakota people, how to be good relatives to the natural world, and you'll have those different locations all throughout. And then as you get down to the water, like I said, there'll be a shoreline, like a little beach area for people to actually connect to the water, give offerings and prayers at the water.

Chantel: While the lock and dam, completed by the US Army Corps of Engineers in 1963, is not part of the revitalization project, Owámniyomni Okhódayapi's design is keeping it in mind.

Shelley Buck:
In the restoration of these five acres, we do have to take into account that at some point in the future, those lock walls may come down. There's always a possibility that they may come down. So we don't want to make the land restoration in a way that's going to 10 years from now, completely destroy a large part of that restoration because the lock walls have come down and then we have to redo everything on that side. So we really have tried to be very thoughtful in how we can restore the land now up to the lock wall area that's going to do the least damage later on in the event that the lock walls might come down at some point in the future.

Chantel: The organization will support the land restoration with engagement and programming nearby.

Shelley Buck:
The really exciting thing too, we signed a lease for office space or an engagement space actually right across the street from the opening of the Stone Arch Bridge on River Road. It's right on the sidewalk so people can look in and see what we're doing in there, but it gives us a place to really expand our engagement and our programming. It gives us a place where people can come in and actually learn more about us. So it's an educational piece as well. It's a place that we can promote different artists, Native artists and different Dakota tribes and just a place that people can come to learn and feel in community. And we'll be able to expand our interpretive walks year round because we'll have that engagement space to start with and get warm in and

then go out on the site and do the interpretive walk, come back and warm up and learn more inside.

Chantel: The revitalization plan will transform the 5-acres of the West Bank along the waterfall into a place of healing, restoration, education, and connection for everyone, not just Dakota people.

Shelley Buck:
Of course, for Dakota people, this place is going to be refreshing and amazing and we're excited about it, but it's also a place that everyone, whoever comes and visits the site will benefit from it. We want everyone to feel a connection. We want everyone to change the way they view the world, the way they go about living the world or their lives in a day-to-day world. So we really want everyone to have the same experience and to have a newfound love and respect for our natural relatives and to learn about the original inhabitants that took care of this land before it was destroyed or desecrated.

And it's going to have something different for everybody, obviously. And I think that's the special thing too about a project like this. It has a different meaning on different levels for different people, depending on their life experiences and their family history. So I'm excited about the stories that we're going to hear from the different people. I'm going to be excited to see our Dakota people come back to the site and the emotions that are going to come with that for them.

Chantel:
You said you want everyone to have the same experiences when they come to the site, while also acknowledging that this site in particular is sacred to many Native people, especially Dakota, but many Native people. And so for Native communities who are going to be coming to this space, maybe don't live in this area, but will be traveling here, what do you hope they're going to experience as folks who have been away from this place for so long and what they're going to feel? Because it is a spiritual place as I understand you talking about it.

Shelley Buck:
It definitely is a spiritual place. We want people, Native people when they come here to be able to feel welcome, to feel at home, especially our Dakota people. We want them to be able to come home and feel welcome in their own homelands. Right now, we don't feel welcomed in our homelands. We're forgotten in our homelands. We're erased in our homelands. You don't hear a lot of our stories. You don't see a lot of our language. We've been pushed out

literally and figuratively. So we want Dakota people to feel like they're seen and they're heard and that their stories are told and their histories are told. And just feel a place of connection. And I think that feeling a connection will happen for all Native people as well as all people in general. But we really just want Native people to feel like they can come to this site. They can pray however their ancestors prayed. And with Dakota people do ceremonies like our ancestors did without fear of getting ticketed. We want them to be able to harvest the traditional medicines in a respectful way without being ticketed.

Chantel: The falls have been a powerful way for each of my guests to connect to their own culture, identity, and community. For Carol, her mother's decision to open Fuji-Ya on the riverfront and incorporate the falls into the building design was a way for her to connect diners to Japanese culture.

Carol Weston Hanson:
Having that traditional Japanese, like you didn't have to go to Japan for feeling. And that was on something that my mom really tried to do. She loved to teach Japanese tradition, wearing a kimono or the food, or not so much a dance, but music. We always had koto. My mom played beautiful koto, which is a 13 string instrument in Japan and then she loved music like that too. So she would bring koto players into the restaurant to give that feel, the ambiance that she wanted to give as a Japanese restaurant, to say, "Hey, you're stepping into Japan a little bit." And that was something that she really loved to do.

My mom was an amazing person. I really wish that she would have been able to live a little bit longer. I think she would have done some amazing things. I miss her terribly, and it's been almost 40 years that I haven't seen her. So for me, I wanted to still touch base with my culture because of her it was the way I felt and still feel to this day.

Shelley Buck:
For me, this project means everything. I didn't grow up in my Dakota culture. I grew up with my white mother in a small town in Indiana. Obviously, I knew I was Dakota, I knew where my people were. I did my own research and knew bits and pieces about our history, but I decided that when I had children, I wanted them to grow up in the culture and the language and be able to teach me things. And so when they were, I think the oldest was in sixth grade, we moved up here and I really delved into the culture and I learned a lot. And my deksi Art Owen, my uncle Art Owen, his goal was to bring our people back to our homelands, really assert ourselves in the Twin Cities, which is our homelands, protect our sacred sites, build bridges and connect people and

communities together because that's the only way we're going to survive is to stand together in these kind of works and really begin that healing process for all of us. And he was taken from us unexpectedly.

And so for me to be able to continue even a small part of the kind of work that he did and that he was working towards just makes me happy. The work I do, whether it's this project or other things that I do, I want to honor those that came before me because they sacrificed so much so I could be who I am today and have what I have today, as well as look out for the next seven generations so they don't have to work as hard and struggle as much with these things as we have. So that's what I try to come to a project or something, some kind of work with, is that mindset. So being able to do this and to know that we're not only helping bring our Dakota people back to the site and our stories back to the site and bring that life back, but we're also able to help our natural relatives be restored at the site and come home again too.

Deacon Deboer:
I hope that our relatives see this as a comfortable place to come and to do that prayer and give offerings. Minneapolis and St. Paul - Bdeóta Othúŋwe, we call Minneapolis and Imnižaska Othúŋwe – for a lot of our relatives that lives outside of the metro, this place isn't always welcoming. And coming from Granite Falls, Minnesota, I would really like to see our community feel welcomed at Owámniyomni and comfortable to be able to do that prayer with all the busyness that surrounds you. That's one of the most important things. So in revitalization work, those plants can do that. Bringing back species that maybe haven't been in that river corridor for 50, 60, 70 years and maybe longer than that. So that's what I'm hopeful for, the habitat restoration and revitalization, but also interpretation of the area. And that goes not only for Dakota people, but for non-native communities to understand this place, not as just industry, and where sawmill and log mills and flour mills. It's great to know that about your city and about Minneapolis itself, but there's 10,000, 12,000 years of history here right in front of you.

Chantel: Whether known as Owámniyomni or St. Anthony Falls, the waterfall has been a site of power in many ways. The natural, physical power of the falls continues to fuel industries and the Minneapolis economy, but as I learned from my guests the falls also hold cultural and spiritual power as a place for healing, reflection, prayer, and good fortune.

The various cultural meanings of the waterfall have, at times, led to power struggles over the ownership and control of the site. The consequences of those power struggles can be seen in the waterfall itself. Owámniyomni was once 1,250 feet wide.

Today, it is approximately a third of the size and is held in place by a concrete apron and dam. Owámniyomni Okódayapi's project is the most recent in a long series of negotiations over the purpose of the site. When the project is completed it will have restored Dakota culture and environment to Owámniyomni.

At first glance, the stories of Dakota people and Reiko Weston's Fuji-Ya Restaurant appear to be separate threads of history, but my guests have shown that they are woven together by the power of the waterfall to create a rich tapestry of Owámniyomni's history.

You've been listening to *Minnesota Unraveled: pulling on the threads of Minnesota history*. I'm your host Dr. Chantel Rodríguez.

You can find more information on this episode, including transcripts, bibliographic resources and MNopedia articles at our website mnhs.org/unraveled

Minnesota Unraveled is produced by the Minnesota Historical Society in partnership with Rose Productions. Our research team is Ari Fields, Alex Magnolia, Hayden Nelson and me, Chantel Rodriguez. Our production team is Brett Baldwin, Meghan Buttner and Emilee Dehmer, with recording, sound design and editing by Chris Heagle and Zack Rose.

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Thank you for listening. Until next time, stay curious, and remember, the tapestries of history are all around you, just waiting to be unraveled.