

West Central MN We Are Water  
Minnesota Humanities Center 2020

Walter "Super" LaBatte:

I'm Walter LaBatte Junior, aka Super, because my dad was known as Walter, and if you asked for Walter, often you got my dad. You didn't get me.

This creek that runs by my house, here, the Dakota word for it is Waåyeça Wakpadaå. Waåyeça means "firefly," and Wakpadaå means "creek," or "little river. And they call it Firefly Creek because, at this time of the year, you go outside and, oh, there's just fireflies, lighting bugs, all over.

Some years ago, I was reading a journal of Joseph Nicollet. Joseph Nicollet, back in the 1830s, was hired by the government to go up the Minnesota River and find the place names... in Dakota... what these tributaries were known as.

But anyway, I was reading that survey, and some of the stuff I didn't recognize, because I'm not familiar with that part of the river. But as he was coming up from the source at Fort Snelling, all the way up through to South Dakota, but he got as far as the Yellow Medicine River, which is down-river, I don't know, five, six, seven miles. And from then I started to pay attention, because I know that part of the river. I know that part of the river from the confluence of the Yellow Medicine River, all the way to the falls of Granite Falls. I know that river. I know the tributaries.

And so, he was naming these tributaries by the Dakota names. And he came to our creek. I recognized that was our creek, because there's no other creek between here and the Yellow Medicine coming in from the south to the river. And he called it Čanśaśa Wakpadaå. Čanśaśa means Red Willow, so it translates as Red Willow Creek. That name had predated our name of it, the Firefly Creek. That caught my attention right away, because, why did they call it Čanśaśa Wakpadaå?

And I knew right away, why. The Dakotas did, so his guide would tell him. And when I was a youngster, I remember, with my brother, going down to the creek and getting Indian tobacco, or Čanśaśa, and that creek had a lot of Red Willow there. I knew the connection right there, why they called it that.

I've asked of one elder if he had ever heard the word Čanśaśa Wakpadaå in relationship to our creek, and he said, no, he hadn't. He hadn't, but Dakotas were gone from this river valley after the war of 1862, for many years. So I understand that that name could have gotten lost, and then when we returned, they called it Firefly Creek.