

Mary Louise Defender Wilson

NEA National Heritage Fellow, 1999 Master Storyteller and Tradition Keeper



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-Mary Louise Defender Wilson

Mary Louise Defender Wilson is a master storyteller and keeper of tribal language, history, and culture. She is a generous teacher who has shared her knowledge and stories with many people. Learning about her life on the Standing Rock Reservation introduces a vibrant woman and important ideas about how language and landscape are vital to culture.

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Meet the Artist Mary Louise Defender Wilson



Mary Louise Defender Wilson, also known by her Dakotah name, Wagmuhawin (wha' gmoo ha wi'), which means Gourd Woman, was born in 1930 on the Standing Rock (Sioux) Indian Reservation of North Dakota. She has spent a lifetime telling stories and performing songs and dances about the life, land, and legends of the Dakotah and Hidatsa people, who are among the various tribes of the Great Sioux Nation.

Mary Louise first learned the ways of her people at home, where her family told her traditional stories about the world around them. Until she started school at age eight and later during summer vacations, she followed her grandfather, Tall Man See the Bear, while he herded sheep. He knew the land well and took her to many places mentioned in the stories. Mary Louise remembers there were no fences, so they could walk all over the land. Her grandfather told her about the rock formations, streams, and buttes they came across.

Do you know
what your name
means? Do
some research.
Start by asking
who named you
and why.

Mary Louise also accompanied her mother, who was a midwife, on her house calls. The Dakotah believe that The Spirit enters a human being at the first breath and remains with them until death. Since her mother was respected and called on to help The Spirit enter a baby, she was also called on to provide comfort and ease when The Spirit left a person at death. During these trips, Mary Louise saw the countryside and her mother would tell stories about the plants, birds, and animals they saw on their travels.

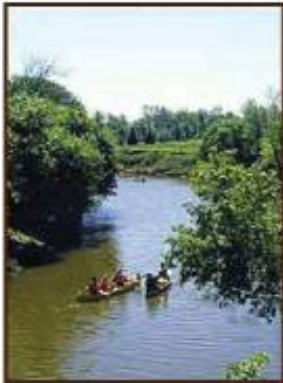
What is the
landscape
of your
neighborhood?
What do you
see on your way
to school?

Through these experiences, Mary Louise realized that everything around her has a history and that language, stories, culture, and learning are connected. She retained so much of her learning and developed such a passion for storytelling that she began repeating stories to her classmates. From fifth grade on, she was known as the class storyteller. She loved to tell her classmates trickster tales and stories about the landscape around them.

Throughout Mary Louise's professional life as a teacher and later as director of cultural, political, and health care organizations, she has continued to share her gift, telling Dakotah and Hidatsa stories to Native people and non-Native people around the country.

Learn more about Mary Louise Defender Wilson by reading the transcript of her [Local Learning Interview](#).

Mary Louise Defender Wilson's Regional Background



Canoeing in the Saniun River
Photo Courtesy of North Dakota Tourism Department
Mary Louise's ancestors lived in the level farmlands near the Saniun River until they were forced to move to Standing Rock Reservation.

Like other American Indian reservations, Standing Rock is a stretch of land reserved for the Sioux people by treaty, or agreement, with the U.S. government. The history of how and why the Sioux were forced off their land and onto the reservation is complicated but important and is part of a larger story about how Europeans took over the North American continent.

Standing Rock Reservation is four million acres and straddles the North Dakota and South Dakota border. Individual Indians and the Sioux Indian people as a group own almost one million acres. The remaining three million are not under Indian ownership. The name comes from the large rock in Fort Yates, North Dakota, reservation headquarters. The rock has the same history as the one in Mary Louise's story, "The Woman Who Turned Herself to Stone." If you are ever at Fort Yates, however, you may see a different version of the stone-woman. Mary Louise says that the Arikara people's version is the one posted. "They are newcomers to the Dakota land," she says, "and told a negative story about the rock [but] that's the one that was used."

Are there
American Indian
reservations
or tribal lands
in your state
or region?

The reservation is divided into districts. Mary Louise grew up in the Porcupine District where there are hills and gumbo buttes that are stark and harsh but also beautiful. When she was growing up, far more families lived in the rural area of the Porcupine District than there are now. There are ten families where she lives now in Shields.



Growing up on the reservation, Mary Louise learned that, like language, land is a very important part of culture, history, and life. She says, "There are many Dakotah stories that tell about the wakan, powerful places where the ancient people learned to become civilized people through experiences."

What is
the name
of your
neighborhood?

What are some of
the special places in
your community?
Are they special to
everyone or to some
groups of people?
What is a place that
is special to you?

“The Woman Who Turned Herself to Stone” is also about a Dakotah woman’s love of nature. There are many beautiful places in North Dakota. For example, in eastern North Dakota is the lush Red River Valley, west of the Missouri River there are gumbo hills and grasslands, and in the Saniun (Sheyenne) River there are level farmlands. Mary Louise’s ancestors lived in these level farmlands until they were forced to move to the reservation.

An Audio Story by Mary Louise Defender Wilson

Listen to [“The Woman Who Turned Herself to Stone”](#) This story is provided courtesy of the North Dakota Council on the Arts and Makoche Recording Company for educational purposes only. If you want a copy of this recording, it is featured on “The Elders Speak,”© available through [Makoche](#).

More about This Story

Dakotah stories, like many Native American stories, include “why” tales that explain the origin of a people, their religious beliefs, and natural things in the landscape like boulders or lakes. Mary Louise’s story also teaches respect for nature and the environment.

One of the stones in Mary Louise’s story is near Pyramid Hill where, according to Dakotah belief, their people began. Mary Louise often visits this stone. According to tradition, there were four women who turned themselves to stone, two east of the Missouri River and two west of the Missouri River. Only three have been seen.

Language and Storytelling

Have you ever heard Mary Louise tell a story? If not, you’re in for a treat. She weaves English and Dakotah languages together to create beautiful images, teach lessons, and share history. One reason she weaves the languages together is that she wants people to hear the sounds and tones of the Dakotah and Hidatsa languages. She also hopes that in listening to the languages in her stories you’ll begin to learn the language they way she did, through stories.

Although everyone in Mary Louise’s family told stories, it was her Hidatsa grandmother who left a lasting impression on her about Native languages. While Mary Louise was growing up, her grandmother frequently came to visit. She lived about 45 miles away and Mary Louise remembers that she “would always hire someone to drive her here. As kids, we would see a car pull up and get excited because we never knew who it was going to be at first! But, sure enough, the driver would be bringing our Hidatsa grandmother! Oh, I remember how she’d tell us this

story about a boy who lived with his grandmother and had many adventures.” Listening to her stories, Mary Louise learned Hidatsa words.

How many languages do you speak? What languages do you hear at home? In your neighborhood? At school?

Tell a short story in your native language. What might change if you tried to tell this same story in another language?

Speaking Hidatsa was very important to Mary Louise’s grandmother because she went away to an English-only boarding school. Mary Louise describes, “You know my grandmother went to school in St. Louis. At the time, her father was captain of a freighter that went up and down the Missouri River. He sent her to school in Missouri and my grandmother said she was never so lonely in her whole life. She said she cried every day. Somehow word got to her father to take her back, but by then it was winter and overland travel was difficult. He told the school officials that as soon as the ice melted on the Missouri River, he’d come to St. Louis and get her and he did. I remember when she told us about that time in her life and she said, ‘So I told myself at that time that I would never speak English again.’ And she never did speak English again. She lived among the Dakotah people when she came back and later learned my mother’s language (Dakotah). But she always retained the Hidatsa ways.”

To know a people is to understand their language. Language captures the ideas, feelings, and ways cultures see the world. In short, culture and beliefs are transmitted through language. When Europeans came into contact with Native Americans, more than 100 million spoke more than 850 languages and had a large body of spoken literature. Stories were part of this body of literature and were told both to children and adults to entertain and to teach tribal ways of life.

When the U.S. government took many Native children out of their homes and placed them in English-only boarding schools, the natural transfer of cultural information from adults to children was interrupted. As a result, children lost the ability to express many essential ideas in their native languages. In addition, they had difficulty expressing themselves in English, their second language. Since they didn’t live with their families, it was more difficult for children to relate to stories that drew on parts of the landscape.

Mary Louise says, “I tell stories as a way to teach the language,” she says. “Even if they don’t literally understand what I am saying in Dakotah, they are emotionally able to understand it.”

Interview with Mary Louise Defender Wilson



Students and teachers from two elementary schools (one in North Dakota and one in New York City) read the materials on this site and developed questions for folklorist Troyd Geist to ask Mary Louise. Below are students' questions and Mary Louise's responses.

Questions asked of Mary Louise

Questions 1-25 are from 6th graders at PS 11 in Woodside, Queens (New York City). Questions 26-32 are from a 4th-grade class at Sykeston School, Sykeston, ND. New York City students worked on our Guest Artist residency during their computer literacy class. North Dakota students worked with their classroom teacher. Sometimes the Local

Learning interviewer asked a follow-up question of Mary Louise to clarify an answer.

1. What are some of your favorite stories that you have told?
2. What were the titles of the stories you used to tell?
3. Do you like telling stories?
4. How famous are you for your stories?
5. Have you visited other places to tell stories? If so, which ones?
6. Did you enjoy going to the places your grandfather took you?
7. How does it feel to travel to so many places?
8. About how many countries have you traveled to? Can you name some?
9. What kind of culture do you like the most?
10. Do you enjoy your job?
11. What was the biggest audience you ever had?
12. Do you have a good time when you tell your stories to your friends or family?
13. What does storytelling mean to you?
14. Did you want to be a storyteller since you were little or did you have another dream? If you had another dream, how did it change?
15. Does it take a long time to think up a story?
16. Do you think people enjoy your stories?
17. Is there a story that you can relate to?
18. Have you ever forgotten a part in the story when you were telling it?
19. How does it feel to be a storyteller?
20. What types of stories do you tell?
21. What type of genre do your stories mostly contain?
22. Did you make up some of your stories or are they all ancient folktales?
23. What is your favorite topic when telling stories?
24. What is it like thinking about ideas?
25. What inspires you to tell stories?
26. Did 9-11 have anything to do with how you tell your stories?

27. Did you feel that life was more difficult then or now?
28. Please tell me more about the Gumbo Hills.
29. Why did you choose to tell stories and is it sometimes difficult to do so?
30. How old is your dog?
31. Explain how you know what your dog is saying.
32. Is your native language written today?

Mary Louise's Responses:

1. What are some of your favorite stories that you have told?

I have many favorite stories but right now it's "The Woman Who Turned Herself to Stone." When she goes into the countryside all the birds and animals she sees are part of the Dakotah people. The Dakotah learned a lot about so many different birds and animals. Their knowledge helps us appreciate the world around us.

Another story I like is about horses. It comes to mind now because we're experiencing spring and there have been thunder and lightning storms lately. In this story there is a lot told about the Power Lake or Miniwakan. Wakan means powerful. The story goes back to a time when all nature's forces and all living creatures on earth were more fierce and destructive-represented by lightning and thunder. Then all the animals bathed in the great lake and became gentler than they were before.

If you're ever around a horse when it rains, you will see sparks come off the horse's ear. This is a reminder of how fierce and wild they used to be. Now we're going through a lot of warfare and violence, so I find that I am going back to our stories that talk about these things. Like the stone woman story, this one can be looked at as a strictly made-up story. But on the other hand, through the story we realize the power of water and energy such as that generated by lightning. Actually the Dakotah came to be through these two forces!

2. What were the titles of the stories you used to tell?

There are many, many stories that we told and they were teaching tools-mostly my grandmother's lessons. There were no schools when my father's mother was born in 1845, so stories were used like classroom lessons, so there aren't titles, per se.

You know, I always used to marvel at my Dakotah grandfather and how he knew so much. I think that the reason he understood so many things in such complex ways was because the stories he heard taught him to think deeply about things. From my Hidatsa side, there is a story about a boy who did things without thinking. He lived with his grandmother and she would warn him of the dangers of his ways. Perhaps that is how we do things today. Very learned people move into important positions and don't always think deeply before acting.

3. Do you like telling stories?

Yes, I do, but I am always concerned that in my way of telling the message may not be communicated clearly. It's the message that is important. Whether the stone I keep is a real woman isn't the message of the story that I want to share. Sometimes some people will ask if she was really a woman. They focus on this rather than all the experiences that she had. The story is

about what human beings learn from other life forms. The story explains why we're supposed to respect the different life forms around us.

LL: But you still enjoy telling the stories to audiences? Yes, I still do. What I like most about telling stories is that you can almost sense that people are thinking about what you're telling them. And that they are perhaps developing some kind of new or different way of understanding.

4. How famous are you for your stories?

I guess that's something that I don't really know. I know that one of the CDs that I was a part of, "The Elders Speak," won a national award called the Native American Music Award for Best Spoken Word. The other is that in March of this year the National Women's History Project selected me to be one of six women who were on their poster to advertise women's history month. I know that my latest CD, "My Relatives Say," has been played on radio stations throughout the country. So I guess all this does contribute to more people knowing that there are these stories.

5. Have you visited other places to tell stories? If so, which ones?

I have been to Washington, DC, Albuquerque, and Portland, Oregon. I've been to Madison, Wisconsin, and let's see where else, Oh! New Orleans, Louisiana.

6. Did you enjoy going to the places your grandfather took you?

Yes, I did, and of course we still have the property my grandfather and I used to herd sheep on. I was out there about a week ago and walked on the hill where he used to sit while the sheep would be grazing around, with the dogs herding them, of course. All of the area where we lived and where I was born, that was his land. I enjoyed it then and I still enjoy going out there.

7. How does it feel to travel to so many places?

I kind of looked at this question as a way to think about place. I think that whenever one goes to another place, you're very curious about what it is like. Such as when I went to New Orleans I thought about it. I asked myself, "What is this place going to be like?" You hear about it and you really think about it. I guess anticipation is what one would call it.

I felt the same way when I was going to Portland, Oregon. I'd never been there. On my way there, I thought about what it was going to be like; it's always interesting to go to a new place. Sometimes you have these concerns about traveling to places like Washington, DC. There's always that little worry when you travel to places that you hear about in not a good way.

8. About how many countries have you traveled to? Can you name some?

Actually, other than living in Canada and traveling to Mexico and Bermuda I've always traveled in this country.

9. What kind of culture do you like the most?

I guess I like a culture where I can feel at ease and where the food is somewhat plain-not too many things mixed with it. And where the air is fresh and clean. I guess that is all part of the kind of culture I like.

10. Do you enjoy your job?

If you could look at my job as storytelling, yes. Most of the time I do enjoy knowing that I have somewhere to go to tell stories. I think about it before I go and usually I think about the audience that I'm going to be talking to. I ask myself what kind of a story I think would be most beneficial to them. Then I think about making a new dress for the occasion-I make all the clothes I wear.

11. What was the biggest audience you have had?

I suppose that it was maybe around five or six hundred people.

12. Do you have a good time when you tell stories to your friends or family?

Yes, I think when I tell stories to my friends I do have a good time because when you're with your friends you're more relaxed and you pick out stories that they can laugh about. [With my friends] we very often will tell stories about some experience we had that may have been very unusual or very funny.

And of course the best time for me is when I can hear a story in my own language. I like to listen to stories other people tell in their own language. The stories are very different then because our language has preposition-type words that are so very different from English. The other week I had this experience-there was a man who came and joined us at dinner and he told some stories in Lakota about his family that were very funny. Because he told these stories, I could tell stories like that too. Our languages are very similar but some of the words are said differently, like they don't use a 'd' in their language at all, just like we don't use an 'l' in our language.

13. What does storytelling mean to you?

Storytelling means giving a message about a way to live. And it also tells about the aspirations of a people. What did the people think about themselves? What were their goals in terms of civilization? I think that's what our old stories tell. Our newer stories about events of today sometime tell how we are and sometimes that's not too good. But the old stories, I think, tell about what people's aspirations were for themselves. They thought about what the future should be like for the world.

14. Did you want to be a storyteller since you were little or did you have another dream? If you had another dream, how did it change?

I don't think that I thought about being a storyteller. I always had a dream of wanting to do different things. I guess one of the main things I wanted to do was to be helpful. For all my work I never went to college, I just finished the 12th grade. But I've been very fortunate in having employment where I could help people who were having a difficult time.

As far as storytelling, I heard the stories when I was little and it was always a wonderful experience to hear our old people tell them. But when I was a teenager, you weren't with it or "in" if you did Dakotah/Sioux things, so stories and those things were sort of set aside. But all those years my mother and her friends spoke in our language and told stories. Then, one day they were all gone-all the people I was close to who told these stories. But the stories stayed present in my life. Sometimes, at the different places I worked, I would sometimes meet a Dakotah-Sioux person and they would tell a story. Then I'd always share with them too.

Then when I got married I went down to the Navajo Reservation and learned how important stories were to me and to a culture. You see, stories are a very important part of Navajo culture. The Navajo people have many ceremonies, one of these is a nine-day ceremony that my husband used to be part of. He was part of a team that put on regalia and then became like the people from the creation times. Throughout this night time ceremony, they would sit in the hogan (which is what they call the Navajo dwelling) and chant these creation legends.

I didn't know the Navajo language, but I would listen to those stories and then come back and see if anyone translated it into English so I could understand. I was so impressed with how wonderful it was that those people told their legends like that because from what I gathered there was no one around here (North Dakota) that was doing that. So when I came back to this reservation in '76, I became close to four people who still told stories and still told them in our language. Three of those people are gone now. One of them is still alive, he is my clan grandfather, he's 100 years old, but I don't think that he tells those stories anymore.

Then, in the late '80s, I worked at the community college to teach our language. While I was there, there was this circular that came by asking for people who wanted to portray a historical person. I always remembered my mother talking about her grandmother, that would be my great grandmother, named Good Day. So I wrote some things about Good Day's life and I was accepted.

So as Good Day I would tell a few stories that my mother said Good Day told her. After that I became very, very involved in stories. Even in the last job I held as Director of Cultural Programs at North Dakota State Hospital, I used stories when I worked with people who were mentally ill. Helping others has always been always my dream-the ability to communicate through stories was part of what made that dream come true.

15. Does it take a long time to think up a story?

You know, the stories that I tell are all based on stories that were told, like this grandmother I talked about. When I was growing up these older people would come to visit with my grandpa and my mother's aunt (in the Dakotah way she was my grandmother also) and they would all come and tell stories. But what is more difficult is that it's hard for me to remember some of the stories that I want to remember. I don't invent stories; I don't invent the theme of the stories. If I don't remember a part of the story I omit it.

For example, there's one story about this primitive person who was very gross but his stories are filled with knowledge. In this story as he suddenly, through his own doing, loses his eyesight. He becomes very thirsty and wants water. He finds his way to the water by asking each plant who they are. He can tell he's getting close to water because plants grow in a certain pattern as they get closer to water. But I don't remember all the plants. And I don't remember the order anymore.

LL: Why don't you research the gaps and then fill them in yourself?

Well, see I don't know myself how the plants grow in progression to different bodies of water and I don't even think scientists know that. It's a knowledge they had earlier that was communicated by other stories but now we don't know that anymore.

16. Do you think people enjoy your stories?

I think they do. Sometimes I feel apprehensive going to certain schools-it's a given that certain places have a bad reputation and you worry that they won't be able to listen and I ask myself how I will do it. And, well, I had the surprise of my life once. I went to one of the local schools out here where people had said how terrible the children were and do you know that those children were just so wonderful! I was so happy. I can't tell you how happy I was.

17. Is there a story which you can relate to?

I think that it depends. Sometimes some stories have great meaning to me because it's something that I have experienced or something I am thinking about. So I do relate to the different stories, but it is different stories and at different times.

18. Have you ever forgotten a part in the story when you were telling it?

Not really when I was telling the story; I just never knew it to begin with. I mean, I don't remember it and so I omit it. I think I can remember forgetting details a few times but not very much.

19. How does it feel to be a storyteller?

For me, I feel very good about being a storyteller. The sad part of it though is that there aren't very many storytellers left anymore among our own people. On this reservation, there is one young man who tells stories, but the one I heard wasn't an old story, it was about some events that were going on. That's funny; I'll have to ask him if he knows any old stories because if he does he would be a very effective storyteller. But there aren't very many storytellers.

20. What type of stories do you tell?

All kinds. On the latest CD I tell stories about the early times of creation of this earth. And on "The Elder's Speak" CD there's a story of the Great Lake and that also concerns the beginning of one group of Dakotah people. I tell those kinds of stories. But some of those stories are part of The Mystery and the entire story is not to be shared with everyone. They can only be shared with other people who know or other people who have a right to know.

21. What type or genre of story do you mostly tell?

Our stories are oral. They're of two categories. One we call ohunkankan. Ohunkankan are stories where animals talk or trees talk and so forth. You know, like the cartoons I suppose children watch today on TV where all these strange creatures are doing all these odd things. There's always some part of it that is based on fact though. Like this primitive being we have called the spider man or unktomi. He was the beginning of us-before we learned to be civilized and had all kinds of gross manners. Well, in those stories he sings for ducks and ducks dance and so forth.

And then we have the other kind of story which are wicooyake. These are more like accounts of people and events. Those are the two types of stories that we have.

22. Did you make up some of your stories or are they all ancient folktales?

They are all historical stories that I heard when I was growing up. They were stories that my mother, grandmothers, or grandfather told me.

23. What is your favorite topic when telling stories?

I don't know that I really have a favorite topic. I think that one I have is stories that relate to compassion.

24. What is it like thinking about ideas?

Rather than thinking about ideas I think I would like to say what is it like trying to remember! Trying to remember a story, now that is very, very interesting. Like there's one story I have trouble remembering-the one about the plants. Then there's another story about this ancient primitive person and how he tries to usurp another person's identity. I always try to remember what the items were that he took from the person. But that's very, very difficult. I still haven't remembered it and I don't know anyone anymore that I could ask because I don't think anyone knows the story.

The other week when I was in a school about 40 miles northeast of here, there was a young woman (not young, but younger than I am) and she was talking about stories and she said, 'I remember when someone would come and tell all these stories but do you think I can remember a complete story? I cannot.' So I was kind of feeling sad that we don't have anyone anymore. In fact, right now I don't know of anyone who tells the ancient stories.

25. What inspires you to tell stories?

Again, to try to convey to people that we must be civilized. Civilization means trying to understand ourselves as human beings, what we are born with. The Dakotah believe that all human beings born into this world have certain primitive characteristics and people have to be careful otherwise those will dominate that human being. Many of the stories talk around these ideas, they don't come right out and tell you. But as you hear the stories you think about it.

The following questions, 26-32, are from a 4th-grade class at Sykeston School, Sykeston, ND:

26. Did 9/11 have anything to do with how you tell your stories?

I think that 9/11 and the things that have happened since then have impressed upon me one of the concerns the Dakotah-Sioux people had about the human being. That is that we have to be careful in our dealings with violence and anger. If we're not, then they will override what we consider to be our civilization. So when I tell stories, I always try to bring that out as much as possible.

When we were growing up the old grandmas would tell the grandpas not to tell stories about war. They didn't want the children to think it was okay to be violent; it is not. You know, there were very few cars in our area when I was growing up. When a car did come, the old grandmas would always be concerned that it was a white person coming. They said, "Oh, they are going to ask us to talk about warfare." They would tell us, "Don't tell anything about warfare, your grandchildren may hear that and may think that it's nice to be warring and fighting." Now this is the Dakotah people, not the Lakota people and I don't know about any other Siouan people. I know for sure the Lakota people like to talk about warfare.

It's easy to stir up anger and hatred and violence in people. I guess that has concerned me very much about 9/11. I was very concerned about how the media had been handling that.

27. Do you feel that life was more difficult then or now?

It would seem that even when I was growing up, life was better because people knew how to act and knew what was expected of them as civilized human beings. One could live without any worry. Nobody ever locked their doors when I was a child. Children could go about without fear of anybody hurting them. So I do think life in that way was much more peaceful. There may have been other physical hardships. But those were not difficult. Like, even as a child I would pick chips at night so my mother could start the fires in the morning and I would help haul water and do all of those things. We had to go outdoors to the outhouse but that must've been good for us because we got to breathe in a lot of fresh air. So I think that life is more difficult now. Especially from the standpoint of how the human beings treat each other.

28. Please tell more about the gumbo hills.

Gumbo hills are simply all over in North Dakota, especially in the western part. Gumbo is some kind of heavy shale where hardly anything will grow and these hills are jutting out there. They're just kind of grayish looking. There aren't that many in the eastern part of North Dakota. If you're east of the Missouri river you won't see any gumbo hills. But you can go to Theodore Roosevelt National Park in the Badlands and see many formations.

29. Why did you choose to tell stories and is it sometimes difficult to do so?

I choose to tell our stories because I think the messages in them about how human beings are supposed to live needs to be known today and people need to take notice so we can have some degree of civilization in our country.

30. How old is your dog?

I really don't know how old Hokshina is because I found him (his name means boy.) I did volunteer work at the radio station and one Saturday I came out and there he was. He was starving-his ribs were all sticking out and his back was all hunched up. He didn't look nice at all, but I felt so sorry for him. That's how I took him. I don't know how old he is.

31. Explain how you know what your dog is saying.

Well, sometimes I know what he wants. Like when I'm sleeping and he puts his nose on the edge of the bed, I know that he's saying, "Let me go outdoors!" And he makes all kinds of interesting noises but I really don't know what he's saying. I kind of know when he's hungry; he'll go by and look at his dish and that means "I need some food." And if I'm running water outdoors he'll come and stick his nose in it and try to lap up the water; I know he wants water. But other than that I don't know anything else that he is saying.

With regard to the story "The World Never Ends," the dog doesn't talk to the old lady, he just rips out the work she's doing on her quilt.

32. Is your native language written today?

Yes the native language is written today.

LL: Is there a place where one could find Dakotah dictionaries or writing?

Some of the older dictionaries are out of print. The ones that I have have been in the family for a long time. There's an old John H. Williams dictionary but that was copyrighted at the end of the

century. Then also there's an old Riggs dictionary...I know that Riggs has been reprinted, but I don't know if they're available for sale.

Classroom Connections

Language Arts

Personal Stories

(All grades) Mary Louise believes that we have a lot to learn from animals. Dogs, for example, remind us not to hold onto our anger or ill feelings when someone hurts us. As Mary Louise says, "We sometimes scold our dogs, but they still love us afterward." **Tell or write a story about an animal in your life and what you have learned from that animal.**

Listening Skills

(Grades 2-4) As you listen to Mary Louise telling "[The Woman Who Turned Herself to Stone](#)," make a list of all the animals she mentions. Listen twice to make sure that you get them all. **Make a list of all the animals that live in your neighborhood.** Compare lists with classmates.

Oral Literature and Folklife Studies

(All grades) Mary Louise reminds us that there is an extensive body of oral literature. Oral literature takes just as much work to create, learn, and transmit as written literature does. Mary Louise recalls her childhood filled with stories about the land and how to live a good life on it. What are some of the stories told in your home? **Interview family members and others about stories they remember from their childhoods and what those stories meant to them.** You might want to record them. Use the Local Learning Interview Tips. [LINK] Retell the stories in a class story circle, play your recordings, or write the recollections and combine them to publish a class family story book or podcast.

Poetry and Personification

(Grades 2-8) In addition to being an authentic story rooted in the culture and landscape of the Dakota people, "The Woman Who Turned Herself to Stone" offers a lesson on personification. Personification is giving an object human qualities and powers. Imagine inhabiting something—a stone, a tiger, a French fry. Ask: What do you feel? What do you see from the inside looking out? What do you taste or smell? What do you look like? **Calling upon your imagination and your senses, write a personification poem.** Share your poem in a poetry circle. Each poet can hold a "talking stone" while speaking. Holding the stone establishes speaking order and offers security while speaking in front of an audience.

Biography

(Grades 8-12) "The Woman Who Turned Herself to Stone" is about self-discovery and individuality. The woman spent her time differently from her friends and family, and she knew she wanted to live a different lifestyle. She was accepting of herself. Think about how the woman's community and family responded to her and what the story and the woman's choice reveal about Dakota culture. Then **write a fictional or biographical piece about being different in a family or community** and how to come into one's own.

Native American Story Genres

(Grades 5-12) There are many genres, or types, of Native American stories. Research online and in the library other genres and examples of each. Try to **find a Native American story to share**, not a story that has been heavily edited by a non-Native person. You might concentrate on tribal groups from your region. Share your findings in a class discussion.

Social Studies

Geography, Mapping

(Grades 4-8) Use a **special historical atlas or an Indian history book** to find two things: (1) North America as it was originally inhabited by Native Americans, and (2) modern Indian reservations. With the second map, locate the Standing Rock Reservation. Based on findings draw a new map, showing the Standing Rock Reservation inside the Dakota people's original boundaries.

Native American History and Culture

(Grades 5-8)

- Both Dakota and Lakota people of the Great Sioux Nation live on the Standing Rock Reservation. **Research the history of the Sioux** and use your findings to create a web page. Include your sources and hyperlinks.
- Mary Louise's father's mother was Hidatsa. **Research where the Hidatsa lived** and their language and culture. Write a short essay and illustrate it with a map of where the Hidatsa once lived.

Neighborhood Maps

(Grades 3-5) The woman who turned herself to stone loved going for walks. **Take a walk around your school or neighborhood to create a map.** Take notes of sounds and landmarks as you walk. You can even record sounds. Afterward, look at your notes and list the sounds, landmarks, feelings, and experiences that you want to represent. Draw or paint a map showing the sounds and landmarks you heard.

U.S. History and Government

(Grades 8-12) Historians' points of view vary. **Compare how your U.S. history textbook treats Indian history with how American Indian historians** treat it. An example of history from the Indian perspective is *Indians in American History*, edited by Frederick E. Hoxie, Harlan Davidson, 1988. Identify three or four differences for a class discussion.

Visual Arts

Collage

(Grades 2-5) The woman who turned herself to stone loved nature walks. Go on a nature walk to collect leaves and pebbles and whatever is in your landscape and **use natural materials to create a collage.** Give your collage a title and write an artist's statement about what you created.

Music

Native American Flute

(Grades 4-8) Starting with web sites listed in the Resources below, **research the flute music of some American Indian tribes**, including the Dakotah. What are the music traditions of a tribe in your region? Share findings, including recordings, in a class music circle.

Science

Ecology

(Grades 3-5) The gumbo soil of North Dakota is very silty and turns to thick, sticky mud when wet. Research the soil types of your region and what crops grow best there. The county agricultural extension agency web site is a good place to start. **Illustrate a short report with images of local soil types and crops.** Try to include soil samples.

Vocabulary

bilingual

butte

Dakotah

grasslands

gumbo soil

Hidatsa

landscape

legend

myth

personification

reservation

Sioux

trickster tale

why story

Resources

American Folklife Center Homegrown Music Series webcast of [Mary Louise Defender Wilson](#) introduced by [Troyd Geist](#).

[Four Winds Trading Company](#) traditional and contemporary Native American books and music.

[Gary Stroutsos](#) played the flute music you hear in the background of Mary Louise's story. Visit Gary's home page to read about his work in bridging cultures through music.

[International Native American Flute Association](#) fosters preservation, appreciation, and advancement of the Native American flute.

[Makoche](#) is a recording company in the Dakotas that produces music inspired by Native American cultures. They also produce voice recordings like "The Elders Speak," and "My Relatives Say" featuring Mary Louise.

[National Museum of the American Indian](#) on the National Mall in Washington, DC, is part of the Smithsonian Institution. Admission is free. Many education resources are on the web site.

[North Dakota Council on the Arts Folk Arts Program](#) is directed by folklorist Troyd Geist, whom we interviewed for the Local Learning [About Us](#) section. On the Council's web site you can hear more of her audio stories and learn how to bring Mary Louise to your school as an artist in residency.

[Standing Rock \(Sioux\) Reservation](#) web site provides tribal and historical information.