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MARK STEIL: The 32-page narrative is now in the Edina home of 25-year-old Libby Holden and her family. The document is a simple-looking binder of legal-size paper with red margins on both sides of the sheets. Some of the cream-colored pages are little tattered at the edges. Holden says her great-grandmother typed out the oral history nearly 100 years ago.

LIBBY HOLDEN: The front page says, "transcript of the pictorial history of the Sioux Nation as kept by the White Horse family told by Chief Whitehorse of Whitehorse station, Cheyenne River Indian Reservation, South Dakota on September 8, 1910."

MARK STEIL: The neatly-typed pages document more than a century of the history and culture of the Lakota, known to white settlers as the Sioux. It starts with the year 1790. It's part of a Lakota oral history tradition, known as the winter count. Each year is described by a significant event. In the White horse narrative, the entry for some years is just a few words. Others are longer. Libby Holden reads a passage from 1845.

LIBBY HOLDEN: In this year, the Sioux Indians were starving and dying for lack of food because there had been no buffaloes in their country for a long time. So they took the head of an old buffalo and painted it red then placed it in a tepee and worshipped it with much singing and other things.

MARK STEIL: The entry goes on to say the ceremony was successful. The buffalo returned. This first-hand history is what makes the White Horse documents so valuable. But after Holden's great-grandmother typed it out in 1910, it seems to have disappeared. Libby Holden says her grandmother, who inherited the oral history, never spoke about it. It's possible she never knew she had the document. When she died, her possessions were stored at the family's printing company. Last summer, Libby Holden and several other family members began sorting through the items. Holden says, one big musty old trunk was especially interesting.

LIBBY HOLDEN: It was full. Jewelry, Native American bracelets, and beadwork that was gorgeous, letters, scarves, small pictures. And things were still on hangers and orderly in drawers.

MARK STEIL: Holden says the trunk also contained the White Horse oral history. She says it's possible the items were packed away by her great-grandmother and left untouched by her descendants.

LIBBY HOLDEN: Well, read it later that night at dinner or afterwards, and we said, hey, this is really cool.

MARK STEIL: She says the discovery of the White Horse narrative pulled the family back to a place important to its own history, the Cheyenne River Reservation in north central South Dakota. Holden's great-grandparents, George and Florence May Thwing, lived there in the early 1900s. George was an attorney who served Native Americans. Florence May is the one who actually typed up the White horse stories. Nearly a century after she and Chief White Horse sat down with interpreter Harvey Left Handed Bear, the family sent copies of the oral history back to the town that bears the chief's name. About 75 people attended a ceremony in the town of White Horse last December to mark the rediscovery of the narrative.

DONA RAE PETERSEN: It was very, very meaningful.

MARK STEIL: Tribal member Donna Rae Petersen helped organize the event.

DONA RAE PETERSEN: With this time frame of recession, depression if you will, in the small little community on the Moro river on a very super cold Sunday afternoon, people came together, and it was a good, warm feeling.

MARK STEIL: Petersen says, like many Indian communities across the nation, the people of Cheyenne River are becoming more interested in their cultural heritage.

DONA RAE PETERSEN: People were just genuinely happy to have something wonderful like this, come back to their community as far as information goes. It's our past coming back to life.

MARK STEIL: The White Horse narrative is a companion piece to a second historical document, the chief left behind. The White Horse winter count pictograph. It's a series of drawings on a piece of canvas. Each drawing represents one year, starting in 1790 and ending in 1910. It's been in a Denver Museum for several decades. Ray DeMallie is an anthropology professor at Indiana University who's researched and written about winter counts. He says, to find an oral history, like the White horse narrative, that tells the stories in a pictograph is a rare event.

RAY DEMALLIE: It's an important and irreplaceable document.

MARK STEIL: DeMallie says, the winter count was used by the Lakota as a way to track the years. There was a designated winter count keeper who added a new drawing each year.

RAY DEMALLIE: The winter count would be brought out literally during the dark evenings of winter, and the count keeper would show the pictographs one by one and tell the stories behind them. The primary audience would be children bringing them up with a sense of history.

MARK STEIL: The drawings are very simple. Some are easy to interpret. Others may leave the viewer guessing a drawing on the White Horse winter count of a human figure covered with red spots tells of a smallpox outbreak that year. There are at least a couple of dozen winter count pictographs known to exist in the US. Narratives explaining them, though, are much rarer. There may be only a half dozen or so of these oral histories, ranging from rough notes to the more complete narratives like the White Horse document. For Libby Holden of Edina, the oral history her family found last summer is a unique contribution to Lakota culture. But it's also important to her own family history.

LIBBY HOLDEN: We always knew that our great-grandfather had strong associations with the Native American population in South Dakota. But we never knew that our great-grandmother was also involved with them. The document sheds a lot of light on her role.

MARK STEIL: That role was most prominent on a cool late summer day, a Thursday in 1910 when chief White Horse dictated his stories. By that date, 20 years after the Wounded Knee massacre, the days of the Lakota living on the open prairie were long over. Hemmed in on reservations, they faced new threats almost yearly. Even as he dictated his stories, the chief knew that the federal government would begin selling parts of the Cheyenne River Reservation to white homesteaders that very month. But that loss is not what he focused on in the winter count.

LIBBY HOLDEN: The last entry is 121, 1910. In this year, we saw a great comet in the sky. It was called by the white people Halley's comet. I think that's a wonderful way for the document to end. Reading that last entry makes me smile. It makes me think that there's hope that the culture of the family of White Horse can be preserved. It can continue to go on and be as constant as Halley's comet.

MARK STEIL: But some pages of the cultural history of the White Horse family are a little tattered at the edges. Others are missing completely. Thanks to a Twin Cities family, though, a few of those lost pages have been restored. Mark Steil, Minnesota Public Radio News, Worthington.