

BLOODSHED AT BIRCH COULEE

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"Up with the Negro; down with the Indian" could paradoxically have been the cry of the "civil wars" raging in 1862. Of these two conflicts pursuing human rights, the more significant, between the North and South, eclipsed the less publicized one involving the frontiersmen of Minnesota and the Dakota Indians. The Sioux and Chippewa tribes, which composed the Dakota nation, had long resented the encroachments of the white settlers on their land.¹

On August 17, 1862, four hungry Indian braves deceptively engaged in a "shooting contest".² After the match, the Indians fixed their sights on living targets. Hammer struck flint; five whites were dead. This was the spark that ignited the ever-growing pile of tinder. Revenge was the byword of the pioneers. Who would strike first? The Dakotas did. The Indian Uprising of 1862 had begun. Town after town, all along the Minnesota River, felt the devastation of the savages.

It was on August 28, 1862, that Captain Hiram P. Grant's detail had been ordered to investigate the Indian attack on the town of Beaver Creek. Three days later, Captains Grant and Joseph Anderson halted their flagging soldiers. Their campsite was about 200 yards from Birch Coulee.³

¹ J. J. Egan and Bobt. K. Boyd, The Battle of Birch Coulee, as described by two of its participants. (Ollivia, Minnesota, 1926), p. 3.

² The savages planned the "shooting contest" so that the settlers' guns would be empty. The Indians were accustomed to reloading their guns after firing. This made the murders relatively simple. C. M. Oehler, The Great Sioux Uprising. (New York, 1959), p. 4.

³ A "coulee" is a French word for a ravine. This coulee, running North and South, is about a mile long. It empties into the Minnesota River opposite the Lower Indian Agency, which is thirteen miles northwest of Fort Ridgely and about 35 miles northwest of New Ulm. Oehler, op. cit., p. 168.

After due inspection, he wanted to return to Fort Ridgely immediately, but had not yet rendezvoused with Joe Brown's⁴ burial party.⁵ By stopping for the night he would give the burial party time to rejoin the militia.

The commander, Captain Grant, was unaware that Indians were stalking them. Under the leadership of Chiefs Big Eagle, Red Legs, Gray Bird, and Mankato, the Dakotas were contriving to besiege New Ulm. Thereupon they would withdraw toward Fort Ridgely, where their actions would be "governed by circumstances".⁶

When the sub-chiefs arrived at Little Crow's vacated camp,⁷ they discovered that white men had recently been there. The tracks indicated that they had headed northward. One of the warriors spotted the soldiers on the horizon. The sun was setting. The Indians therefore concluded that the soldiers would probably camp near the head of Birch Coulee. This was, they knew, the only source of wood and water in the vicinity. Dispatching their five best scouts to follow the troops, the Dakotas camped at the mouth of the coulee.⁸

The scouts returned after dark, reporting that the soldiers had halted at the head of the coulee. The council of war decided that a

⁴ Joe Brown was an Indian agent and he had organized a party to accompany Captain Grant. They were to bury the dead white men they found and also they were anxious to locate some of their relations who were missing as a result of the Indian raids and massacres. Harriet E. McConkey, Dakota War Whoop. (Auburn, New York, 1964), p. 158.

⁵ Captain Hiram P. Grant. "His report", Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 1861-5. (Saint Paul, 1891), Vol. II, p. 217.

⁶ "Chief Big Eagle's Story of the Sioux Outbreak of 1862" Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society. (St. Paul, 1894), p. 394.

⁷ Little Crow, the "Big Chief", had gone with a storming party towards Forest City and Hutchinson. Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p. 395.

daybreak attack on the army would assure them of victory. They believed, however, that only one company was encamped near the ravine. In preparing to attack, they chose 200 braves and surrounded the camp.⁹ Actually, Joe Brown's burial party had joined Captain Grant and Captain Anderson, who each commanded a company. The total number of Minnesotans was still only 153.¹⁰

The army bivouac was in the shape of a horseshoe.¹¹ Their supply wagons comprised the major portion of it, with picket ropes for the horses completing it. When Joe Brown finally arrived, he had intimated that he felt the location unsafe. However, he did not press his point; the situation of the camp remained unchanged. The camp was 200 yards east of the coulee. The same distance separated it from a small knoll of the west.

The company was entirely made up of "raw recruits".¹² When providing for their expedition, they made a costly blunder. They loaded the wrong caliber ammunition on the supply wagons.¹³

All but 30 soldiers bedded down for the night. Three sentries were stationed at each of the ten posts. They were to be relieved every four

⁹ Of the 200 braves, Big Eagle had the men under him 220 yards west of the camp, behind a small knoll. Red Legs had his men in the coulee east of the camp. Mankato split his warriors between the coulee and the prairie north of the camp. And Gray Bird's band was mostly on the prairie, south of the camp. Ibid., p. 394.

¹⁰ Marion P. Satterly, A Detailed Account of the Massacre by the Dakota Indians of Minnesota in 1862. (Minneapolis, 1925), p. 62.

¹¹ William A. Truesdell. "Field Notes of the Birch Coulee Battle" fieldW. Unpublished and unpagged.

¹² Theo. D. Blegen, (ed.), Minnesota History. (Saint Paul, 1930), Vol. XI, p. 300.

¹³ A. P. Connolly, Minneapolis and the B.A.R. (Minneapolis, 1906), p. 29.

hours. The men slept peacefully" until four o'clock.¹⁴ At the changing of the guard, one of the sentries heard a rustle in the grass. He discussed with a companion the prudence in shooting. "If it is an Indian, it'll be one less to fight and if it is an animal, we'll have a little more to eat."¹⁵ His rifle cracked. An Indian vaulted forth. This was a signal for his comrades. None of them were armed with rifles since their job was to knife the guards silently. Then the main body of Dakotas could attack with complete surprise.¹⁶ The sentry's shot destroyed this strategem. A staggering blow was now impossible.¹⁷

Within five minutes the soldiers were at their posts returning shot for shot. Yet, the Indians killed all but one horse in the first thirty minutes.¹⁸

After the first phase of the battle, which ended about ten o'clock, the Indians withdrew. For no apparent reason they devised a new manner of attack. One of the soldiers who participated in the battle later remarked: "The Indians made a mistake and did not continue to advance after the initial attack. If they had, it would have been their victory."¹⁹

¹⁴ Robt. K. Boyd, The Battle of Birch Coulee (Eau Claire, Wisconsin, 1925), p. 12.

¹⁵ The troops had been hiding for three days. With supplies diminishing, their food ration was cut to a "quarter of a hard cracker and one ounce of raw cabbage". Letter from Jos. Anderson, Capt., Co. A, Cavalry Regiment, to Major J. R. Brown, Commanding Expedition to Sioux Agency.

¹⁶ E. W. Earle, Reminiscences of the Sioux Massacre (Fairfax, Minnesota, no date), p. 112.

¹⁷ Robt. K. Boyd, "Personal Account of the Battle of Birch Coulee", Unpublished and unpagged.

¹⁸ Egan and Boyd, op. cit., p. 9.

¹⁹ "Birch Coulee Attacked by Indians", Saint Paul Daily Press (St. Paul, Minnesota), September 6, 1862.

The Missesotans profited by the retreat. They used this valuable time to dig trenches. However their only tools were "Three spades and one shovel". Due to this lack of equipment, it took them eight hours to prepare a suitable breastwork.²⁰

Joe Brown, Captain Grant's right hand man, was wounded early in the battle. His loss was greatly felt by the commanding officer since the Indian agent was better acquainted with the terrain and Indian customs.²¹

The night was very dark. A severe electrical storm was threatening. One of the men, James Auge, had volunteered to ride to Fort Ridgely for help.²² As he was mounting the last living horse, a flash of lightning revealed his action. A gun discharged: the horse fell. There went their "last chance for help". Some of the men stated later that even if Auge had mounted the horse, he would never have escaped the line of fire.²³

Some twelve hours earlier, twenty yards outside Fort Ridgely, Charles H. Watson, Company F, Sixth Minnesota Infantry, was on guard duty on a knoll. He thought he heard shots coming from the distant northwest. He reported this to Colonel Sibley. The Colonel went up the hill, but could hear nothing. He told Watson to notify him should the sounds reoccur.²⁴

²⁰ "Indians Strike at Birch Coulee", The Pioneer and Democrat (St. Paul, Minnesota), September 6, 1862.

²¹ William Watts Folwell, A History of Minnesota (St. Paul, Minnesota, 1924), Vol. II, p. 153.

²² Egan and Boyd, op. cit., p. 19.

²³ Connally, op. cit., p. 37.

²⁴ Boyd, "Personal Account", loc. cit., unpag.

At one o'clock that afternoon, the sentry was again alerted by shots. He immediately summoned the Colonel. Sibley went out again but heard nothing. Nevertheless he went Major R. N. McLaren, with "50 rangers and three companies of infantry", to investigate.²⁵

When Major McLaren's troops arrived, Mankato rallied his savage band at the coulee. They made such a loud commotion that the Major was confused and ordered a retreat. He halted the retreat two miles from the ravine, where they built breastworks. Mankato fooled the soldiers and stationed only thirty Indians to check their advance. This strategy was effective and prevented the rescue column from relieving the besieged soldiers under Captain Grant until late on the morning of September the third.²⁶

Captain Grant had been ordered to report to Fort Ridgely no later than the night of September second. Since no report had been forthcoming from either him or McLaren, Sibley decided to investigate. He himself accompanied Colonel McPhail's regiment. The column marched along the Fort Amhercrombie Road. Arriving late that morning, they joined McLaren's troops who were "holding off" the thirty Indians. Together they attacked. They scattered the "handful of Indians", and approached the main body from the rear.²⁷

It was at this time that one of the soldiers in Grant's fortifications, Bob Boyd, heard an Indian yell, "Wah-see-choo-otah-do".²⁸ He

²⁵ Franklyn Curtiss, (compiler), History of Renville County (Chicago, 1916), Vol. I, p. 167.

²⁶ Big Eagle's Story, Collections, op. cit., p. 396.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Egan and Boyd, op. cit., p. 30.

knew the Dakota language and spread the news that "many white men" were coming. No one believed him. They thought their plight was unknown since their attempt to obtain help had failed. When they heard the bugler and was the charge of the "bluecoats", they fought with a new zest. The fighting continued for an hour and a half. Caught in cross fire, the Indians recognized retreat to the southwest as the only alternative. Using a quasi rearguard action, several of the more courageous warriors tarried to fire a few shots at the jubilant soldiers.²⁹ This was thirty-one hours after the Indians first attacked.

After the repulse, the roll call revealed 19 dead and 45 critically wounded.³⁰ There had been only one physician, Dr. J. W. Daniels, to care for them during the battle. There were but eight of the original troops who came out unscathed.³¹

The Indians lost merely two warriors. Later, Chief Big Eagle said, "Owing to the white man's way of fighting, they lost many men; owing to the Indians' way of fighting, they lost but fewlll"³²

The wagon in which Justina Krieger³³ was lying had 50 bullet holes in it. One of the Sibley tents showed 375 perforations.

If it had not been for Colonel Sibley's prompt decision, the outcome

²⁹ Big Eagle's Story, Collections, loc. cit.

³⁰ Boyd, "Personal Account", unpublished.

³¹ Connolly, op. cit., p. 30.

³² Big Eagle's Story, Collections, loc. cit.

³³ During their march before the battle, Captain Grant had encountered this woman who was naked, had knife slashes in her back and had been without food and water for twelve days. The soldiers put her in a wagon and continued on their way. Folwell, op. cit., p. 155.

³⁴ Bfant, "His Report", op. cit., p. 218.

of this Uprising might have been reversed. Though the Indians had been defeated in this battle, still the inhabitants along the river felt their harrassing effects for the next three months. But the death knoll had been ktruck. For, on December 26, 1862, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, sentenced thirty-eight Dakota Indians to be hanged at Mankato, Minnesota.³⁵ The raging fire of the "civil war" in Minnesota had been quenched.

Ironically enough, just six days after the hanging of the Indians, President Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation.

³⁵ John G. Nicolay and John Hay, (ed.), Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln, (New York, 1905), Vol. VIII, pp. 134-135.

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