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Minnesota's INDIAN WAR

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THIS BRIEF story of the Sioux Uprising of 1862 sets the stage for more detailed accounts which follow. In them are presented a few of the many facets of the Sioux War, mainly in the words of participants, both Indian and white. This special issue of Minnesota History commemorates the bloody events that took place on the Minnesota frontier a hundred years ago—an episode which remains the state's greatest tragedy and has moral implications for all Americans and all generations. Ed.

THE GREAT UPRISING of the Minnesota Sioux in August, 1862, had been many years in developing. Like other tribes, the Sioux were made desperate by the tide of white settlement which swept westward across America. For centuries their economy had been based upon hunting and fishing and the wild foodstuffs provided by nature, but the steady reduction of their hunting grounds and the killing off of fur-bearing and food animals through the introduction of firearms made the problem of existence acute for them.

By successive treaties, signed in 1805, 1837, 1851, and 1858, the Sioux had gradually surrendered practically all their Minnesota lands, save for a ten-mile-wide reservation on the south bank of the Minnesota River, extending from a point a few miles west of New Ulm to Big Stone Lake. Within this narrow strip the Indians were concentrated, subsisting principally on annuities of money and goods provided by the

government under the terms of the various treaties. They were supervised from two administrative centers or agencies, one for the Lower (or eastern) Sioux bands at Redwood near present-day Redwood Falls, and the other located near the mouth of the Yellow Medicine River in the territory of the Upper Sioux.

The reservation included no good hunting ground, but there was plenty of fine agricultural land. For nearly forty years the government had been endeavoring to render the Minnesota Sioux self-supporting by teaching them to farm. Some headway had been made by missionaries, first at Kaposia and later at Traverse des Sioux, Redwood, and Yellow Medicine. Government farmers had been attached to the agencies as early as 1830, and by the summer of 1862 the Sioux agent reported that 1,110 acres of corn, 300 acres of potatoes, 90 acres of turnips and rutabagas, and a large quantity of field and garden vegetables had been planted "for



and by the Upper Sioux." The Lower Sioux accounted for an almost equal quantity.

Though a few Indians, mainly those converted to Christianity by missionaries like Thomas S. Williamson and Stephen R. Riggs, did undertake to become farmers and adopted the clothing and habits of white men, the majority of the tribe remained roving hunters. Those who clung to the traditional way of life looked with contempt upon the "cut-hairs" who demeaned themselves by following a plow. Thus a wide and definite line of cleavage developed between the "breeches" and "blanket" factions, adding to the bitterness of the approaching crisis.

THE OPENING of the Minnesota Valley to white settlement after the treaties of 1851 brought a tremendous influx of homeseekers, many of them from Eastern states or from Europe. Knowing little of Indians, and encountering them only as hungry, usually harmless beggars, they treated them with tolerant contempt. The story of the housewife who punished an Indian for stealing a piece of pork from a kettle of beans by pouring a teakettle full of hot water over him could no doubt be duplicated many times. By 1862 few settlers had any apprehension of trouble with their red neighbors.

This complacency extended to the Sioux agent, Thomas J. Galbraith. A political appointee named to the office by the incoming Republican administration in 1860, he had replaced Joseph R. Brown, an experienced frontiersman who had been sympathetic to the problems of the Sioux. Despite numerous indications of unrest, Galbraith so little appreciated the danger that on August 18, the day of the outbreak, he was at St. Peter en route to Fort Snelling with a company of young whites and mixed-bloods recruited about the reservation for service in the Civil War.

Earlier in that very month he had been confronted by a hunger riot at the Upper Agency. The bands were in the habit of assembling at the two agencies upon their return from the spring hunts to receive their annuity. About the middle of July, 1862, the Upper Sioux gathered at Yellow Medicine to the number of nearly five thousand, and as usual when such large groups of Indians come together, they had no reserves of food and were in a starving condition. The provisions and annuity goods were on hand in the agency warehouse, but the gold coin for the money payment had been delayed.

Supported by a small force of volunteer troops under the command of Lieutenant Timothy J. Sheehan, Galbraith held off the

Indians for nearly three weeks by doling out enough provisions to prevent actual starvation. On the morning of August 4, however, the red men refused to wait longer, surrounded the military camp with a strong cordon of warriors, and broke into the warehouse. The lieutenant stood his ground to the extent of training a mountain howitzer upon the Indians, but joined the missionaries in counseling moderation. At last Galbraith issued the annuity goods and provisions, and the Indians, somewhat pacified by this action, dispersed with the understanding that they were to be summoned when the gold arrived. No similar riot occurred at the Redwood Agency, but the Indians in their nearby villages became more sullen as the hot August days passed.

Galbraith's capitulation at the Upper Agency marked the second time that the Minnesota Sioux had successfully defied the authority of the United States as represented by the Indian agent and the military. Five years earlier, in March, 1857, an outlaw band of Sioux headed by Inkpaduta had swept through the Lake Okoboji region of northern Iowa and the settlement of Jackson in southwestern Minnesota, leaving nearly forty settlers dead in their wake. They had then drifted leisurely west to the



Winter Lodge.

James River, and an infantry party from Fort Ridgely merely made itself ridiculous in Indian eyes by attempting to force its way through the deep snowdrifts of mid-March and capture mounted red men. Sioux respect for the government's authority was further dimmed by a knowledge of the struggle going on in the South. The exodus of young men from the frontier regions and the attempts to recruit volunteers even among half-breeds on the reservation, encouraged the Indians to feel that the white man's power could be challenged.



A TRIVIAL incident provided the spark to ignite the magazine of pent-up Sioux rage. On Sunday afternoon, August 17, 1862, a party of four young braves from the Rice Creek band of Lower Sioux, on a hunting expedition near Acton in Meeker County, came upon a hen's nest in the woods near a cabin. Their debate over whether to steal the eggs led to dares, and one young man, his bravery challenged, declared that he was not afraid to go to the cabin and shoot the white man. The others accompanied him, and thus came about the cold-blooded killing of five people, two of them women. Appalled at what they had done, the four murderers stole a team and drove directly to their camp, a short distance above the Redwood Agency.

Upon hearing their tale, the leader of the band, Red Middle Voice, took them immediately to Chief Shakopee, whose village was nearby. Convinced that punishment for the deed would fall upon all the Lower Sioux, Shakopee and his braves favored war, but the support of other bands and leaders was necessary. Messengers were sent out, calling for an immediate council at the house of Chief Little Crow.

Though not the tribe's titular head, and held in disfavor by many because he had taken a leading part in signing the unpopular treaty of 1858, Little Crow was nevertheless regarded by most of the Lower Sioux as their natural leader. Being more widely traveled and better acquainted with the white man's civilization than his followers, he was keenly aware of the desperation—even hopelessness—of the proposed war. But he was proud of his reputation as a military strategist, and perhaps he feared the loss of prestige that taking a stand for peace might involve. Thus he reluctantly agreed to lead the warriors in their attempt to regain Minnesota for the red man.

The first fury of their attack was directed at the small white community centered about the Lower Agency, which was looted and burned on the morning of August 18.



Terrified refugees, escaping across the Minnesota River, carried news of the massacre to Fort Ridgely, some thirteen miles below. Captain John S. Marsh of the Fifth Minnesota, who was in command at the fort, assumed that the disturbance was local and set out with a detachment of only forty-six men. They marched directly into an ambush at Redwood Ferry, and twenty-four, including a half-breed interpreter, were killed, while Marsh himself was drowned in attempting to escape by swimming across the river.

Fortunately for Fort Ridgely orders had been sent to Lieutenant Sheehan, whose company was then en route to Fort Ripley, to return immediately. Galbraith also had been notified, and he hurried back from St. Peter with his band of recruits. Thus by the night of Tuesday, August 19, the garrison, including armed refugees, had been increased to some 180 fighting men.

Meanwhile the Indians wasted precious hours which might have been used to strike at the main centers of resistance before the whites had time to gather their forces. Never tightly organized or subject to discipline, many of the warriors scattered over the countryside, killing, capturing, burning, and looting, despite the efforts of Little Crow and other leaders to assemble them for a major offensive. Nor were all the Sioux committed to the struggle. Some Lower Sioux chiefs, notably Wabasha and Taopi, opposed the war and held aloof, while the Upper Sioux bands were even more sharply divided.

NOT UNTIL the afternoon of August 20 did the Indians launch an organized attack on Fort Ridgely. The outpost was poorly located for defensive purposes. Unprotected by a palisade, the cluster of buildings was situated high on a bluff to the north of the Minnesota River, with deep wooded ravines extending up to it at several points. In their first attack the Indians were able to mass their forces under cover of the gullies, and with a bold rush reach the log dwellings in

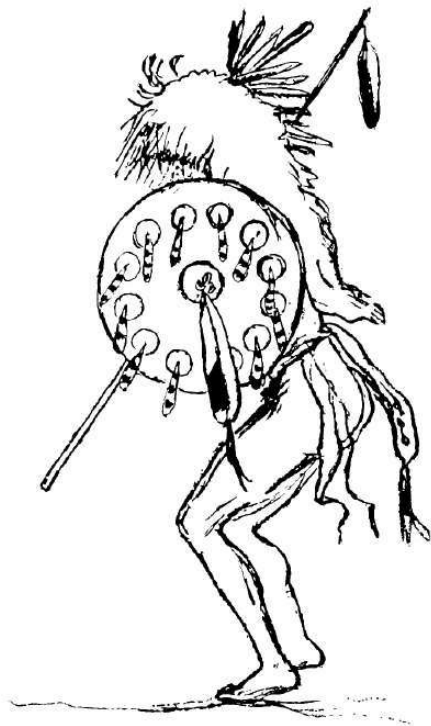
the rear of the barracks almost before the garrison realized that the assault had begun. Vigorous and accurate use of several pieces of artillery under the command of Sergeant John Jones broke up the attack, but the firing continued until nightfall.

Again on August 22 the Sioux attempted to take the fort, this time with a much larger force. After several hours of stubborn fighting they were once more driven off with the aid of well-placed artillery shells. Thus ended the fighting at Fort Ridgely, with total white casualties of three dead and thirteen wounded.

Meanwhile, hard fighting had been going on at the town of New Ulm, on the south bank of the Minnesota some eighteen miles southeast of Fort Ridgely. Late in the afternoon of August 19 a raiding party of Indians made its appearance in the rear of the town and began firing, but barricades which had been erected in the business section and long-range rifles in the hands of determined citizens, together with a heavy thunderstorm, deterred the Indians from pressing home the attack. On that same evening, Judge Charles E. Flandrau with a company of 125 men recruited in St. Peter and other valley towns reached New Ulm. Flandrau was chosen commander and went to work to strengthen the town's defenses.

On Saturday morning, August 23, the Indians again massed on the outskirts of New Ulm, and soon made a determined assault on the town. Forcing their way up from the river, they gained a foothold in the buildings of the lower town, but vigorous street fighting with the barricades as a line of support broke up the attack. Not until after dark did the Indians finally withdraw. Sunday morning saw some long-range skirmishing, but the worst was over.

WHILE the Minnesota Valley settlers were of necessity conducting their own defense, a relief force had been hastily organized at Fort Snelling. Composed of raw recruits and commanded by Henry H. Sibley — who was commissioned a colonel for the purpose



The buffalo dance —

— it advanced as far as St. Peter on August 22. There it was delayed by lack of proper arms and ammunition. With the arrival of reinforcements and supplies, Sibley and his force pressed on to Fort Ridgely, which they reached on August 28, having encountered no hostile Sioux.

Sibley was careful and deliberate in his movements, being hampered at every step by inexperienced men and an acute shortage of mounted troops. Such as he had of the latter were sent out with burial parties, while the main force remained in camp at Fort Ridgely. One of these detachments, under the command of Major Joseph R. Brown, buried the massacre victims at the Lower Agency, then proceeded to encamp for the night of September 1 on the open prairie at Birch Coulee, near the present town of Morton. Early the next morning the force was surrounded by Indians and besieged for some thirty hours, suffering heavy casualties. It was finally relieved by the advance of Sibley's entire command.

Moving slowly up the Minnesota Valley, Sibley encountered the Indians in a haphazard but decisive battle near Wood Lake on September 23 and dispersed their forces. Meanwhile the growing group of Sioux who opposed the war had taken advantage of the absence of Little Crow and his followers during the battle and seized control of the large number of white captives. The presence of these prisoners—mostly women and children—held as hostages by the enemy had hitherto complicated Sibley's task. Outmaneuvered by both the whites and their own people, Little Crow and his immediate supporters fled to the Dakota plains, leaving the rest of the tribe to liberate the captives and surrender to Sibley.

On the afternoon of September 26 the white commander entered the Sioux camp and received 241 captives, of whom ninety-one were white and the rest mixed-bloods. Some twenty-eight more were also freed within the next few days. The majority of the Minnesota Sioux either surrendered to Sibley or were captured in military raids during the succeeding weeks. Those men against whom any evidence could be brought were placed on trial before a military commission. Cases to the number of 392 were tried between September 28 and November 3 on charges of murder, rape, and general participation in the outbreak, and the sentence in 303 cases was hanging. President Lincoln's revision of the list, however, saved all but forty from the death penalty. One of these received a commutation, one died, and the remaining thirty-eight were hanged at Mankato on December 26, 1862.

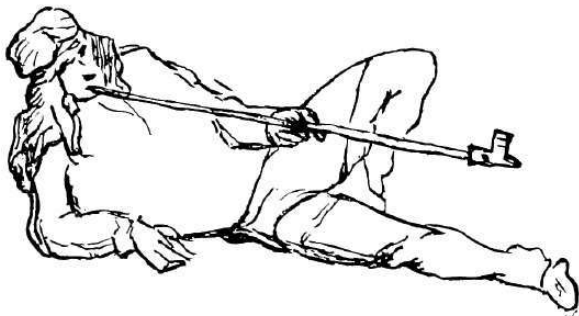
The hostiles who escaped with Little Crow located in the Devil's Lake region of

North Dakota, from whence they made sporadic raids against the Minnesota border during the next three years. On one such foray in the vicinity of Hutchinson on July 3, 1863, Little Crow was shot and killed by an armed settler. Two other leaders, Shakopee and Medicine Bottle, who had fled to Canada, were kidnapped in January, 1864, by Americans with English assistance. Taken to Fort Snelling, they were hanged on November 11, 1865.

PUBLIC SENTIMENT in Minnesota remained bitter against the Sioux, and Congress was responsive to demands for the complete removal of the tribe from the state. By acts of February 16 and March 3, 1863, all treaties with the Sioux were abrogated, and they, together with the Winnebago—who were generally suspected of sympathy with the uprising—were moved to a reservation at Crow Creek on the Missouri River above Fort Randall. There the luckless Indians were taken by crowded steamboats and left to live or die. Many did the latter before the government relented and moved them to a more hospitable spot on the Niobrara River.

The number of lives lost in the uprising will never be definitely known. It has been variously estimated at from 450 to 800. Survivors' accounts include numerous incidents of horror and brutality, as well as shining examples of heroism and fidelity among both Indians and whites.

For Minnesota the outbreak meant only a temporary setback in the tide of settlement, but for the Sioux nation it marked the beginning of nearly a generation of fruitless warfare in defense of their homeland.



THE ILLUSTRATIONS in this article have been adapted for reproduction from sketches made by Frank B. Mayer during a sojourn among the Minnesota Sioux in 1851. The infant shown at the bottom of page 95 is resting in a traditional cradleboard; the brave on page 96 is setting forth on a hunt; and the Indian opposite is smoking a pipe whose bowl of red stone was no doubt quarried in southwestern Minnesota. The originals are in the Newberry Library, Chicago.



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