

MR. CARLEY, who is on the staff of the Minneapolis Sunday Tribune Picture Magazine, has written a brief history of The Sioux Uprising of 1862, which was published last year by the Minnesota Historical Society.

The SIOUX CAMPAIGN of 1862

Sibley's Letters to His Wife

KENNETH CARLEY

HENRY HASTINGS SIBLEY was at home in his stone house in Mendota late in the afternoon of August 19, 1862, when a visitor rode up in haste. It was Governor Alexander Ramsey, Sibley's old friend and political rival. Ramsey had been a guest at the house back in the spring of 1849 after he arrived from the East to become the first governor of Minnesota Territory. Now, however, as the second state governor (Sibley had been the first), he was making no mere social call on his predecessor.

Hard-riding messengers had just informed him that Sioux Indians were murdering and capturing settlers and destroying property in the Minnesota River Valley. Ramsey, a man of action, drove at once to Fort Snelling to see what troops might be sent to put down the uprising, then crossed the river to Mendota to offer Sibley command of them. Sibley accepted "upon condition of non-interference with his plans,"

¹For accounts of Ramsey's visit to Sibley, see William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 2:147 (St. Paul, 1961); Nathaniel West, *The Ancestry, Life, and Times of Hon. Henry Hastings Sibley*, 254 (St. Paul, 1889); Edward D. Neill, *History of the Minnesota Valley*, 136 (Minneapolis, 1882). Sibley's original commission, signed by Ramsey and Adjutant General Oscar Malmros, is in the Minnesota Historical Society's manuscripts collection.

²Quoted in Neill, *Minnesota Valley*, 136.

his biographer says, and that evening was commissioned "Colonel and Commander of the Indian Expedition."¹

The governor's choice was a logical one. In addition to personal and political prestige, Sibley had more than twenty years' experience in dealing with the Sioux. He had always been counted their friend and probably had as much influence with them as any white man in the state. Though fifty-one years of age and without any military background, he was accustomed to outdoor life as a hunter and fur trader and knew intimately the country and the ways of the Indians.

The only troops available were raw recruits, who had volunteered for service in the South and were not yet officially mustered in or equipped with arms, ammunition, and proper clothing. As Ramsey recalled later, they were "without transportation, quartermaster's or commissary stores, and, in fact, devoid of anything with which to commence a campaign against two or three thousand Indians."² Nevertheless, a small force was hastily organized, consisting for the most part of four newly formed companies of the Sixth Minnesota Infantry. Two steamboats were commandeered, and in the dark hours of the morning the expedition set off up the Minnesota River.



HENRY H. Sibley in 1859

August 20 — the day the Sioux made their first attack on Fort Ridgely — found Sibley and his troops landing at Shakopee. Thus began a military campaign that would last more than a month before its two chief objectives — defeating the Indians and releasing the captive whites — would be realized.³

An excellent contemporary account of this expedition and its aftermath exists in the form of extracts from some forty letters Sibley wrote to his wife from such places on the route as St. Peter, Fort Ridgely, Wood Lake, and Camp Release.⁴ The first letter is dated August 21, and the last, November 12. The extracts, most of them in Sibley's own neat handwriting, are in the Sibley Papers in the manuscripts collection of the Minnesota Historical Society. Apparently expecting the original letters to remain in the possession of his family, Sibley preserved what he evidently felt to be

historically important portions of them by copying them in ink. It appears that he made the copies in 1885 or later, because at the end of the extract for October 17 he added several citations from series one, volume thirteen of the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, a volume published in 1885.

In 1893, some two years after Sibley's death, the Minnesota Historical Society employed Return I. Holcombe, a St. Paul newspaperman and historian, to put the newly acquired Sibley papers in order. At that time Holcombe had access to the original letters of 1862 as well as the abstracts. On December 2, 1893, Holcombe reported: "I have carefully compared these abstracts with the letters and find them to be almost literal copies, so far as they extend; there are some omissions which I have thought best to supply." Holcombe also made abstracts from four letters — those dated August 25, September 4, September 12, and November 4 — which Sibley seems to have overlooked.⁵

Thus we know accurately what the commander wrote to Mrs. Sibley during the 1862 campaign, although the original letters have disappeared. The letters parallel his more formal writings on the 1862 expedition in many respects, but they also are rich in the intimate details and opinions a man will share with someone close to him but will omit from official communications. Like

³ For an extended account of Sibley's 1862 campaign and the subsequent trial and punishment of the Sioux, see Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:147-211. For a brief version, see Kenneth Carley, *The Sioux Uprising of 1862*, 36, 47-51, 55-67 (St. Paul, 1961).

⁴ Sibley married Sarah Jane Steele on May 2, 1843, at Fort Snelling. She was a sister of Franklin Steele, a prominent pioneer of St. Anthony and Minneapolis. Mrs. Sibley died on May 21, 1869, and Sibley never remarried.

⁵ Holcombe's report is with the abstracts in the Sibley Papers. Holcombe was born Robert Ira Holcombe in Ohio on February 24, 1845, but later changed his first name to Return, adopting the name of a great-great-grandfather who fought in the American Revolution. Mrs. Lewin D. McPherson, *The Holcombes: Nation Builders*, 38 (Washington, D.C., 1947). For further information on Holcombe, see below, p. 128.

his reports, Sibley's letters reveal an educated, sensitive, articulate man with a sense of history that carried him through his many difficulties and tribulations.⁶

ON THE SECOND day of the expedition, August 21, the command marched from Shakopee to Belle Plaine. There Sibley wrote his first letter of the campaign to his wife: "Have just arrived after many vexatious delays, for a greener set of men were never got together, and I have of course to attend to most of the work." He warned Mrs. Sibley not to "believe the thousand extravagant reports you hear" and added that "people are absolutely crazy with excitement and credit every absurdity. Things are bad enough no doubt in the upper country, but I have no idea that the savages will withstand the attack of an organized force." First, however, he had to put together something resembling "an organized force" and that he proceeded to do after arriving in St. Peter on Friday, August 22. His letter of that date to Mrs. Sibley announced: "All is quiet hereabouts, but murders continue to be committed in the region about New Ulm."

Reports reaching Sibley of widespread slaughter and pillage acquainted him more fully with the extent of the Indian outbreak and convinced him to wait at St. Peter for reinforcements and supplies before moving

⁶ Sibley's official reports and correspondence for the campaign of 1862 are in *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, 2:165-292 (St. Paul, 1899). Quotations from his letters to Mrs. Sibley are here reproduced as they appear in the manuscripts except for minor changes of punctuation.

⁷ Joseph Jack Frazer was a half-breed nephew of the Sioux chief Wacouta. He was also a hunting companion of Sibley and a future military scout for him. Using the pen name, Walker-in-the-Pines, Sibley wrote an account of Frazer's life in sixteen chapters for the *St. Paul Pioneer* beginning December 2, 1866, and continuing through March 17, 1867. These articles have been republished in book form under the title *Iron Face: the Adventures of Jack Frazer*, edited by Theodore C. Blegen and Sarah A. Davidson (Chicago, 1950).

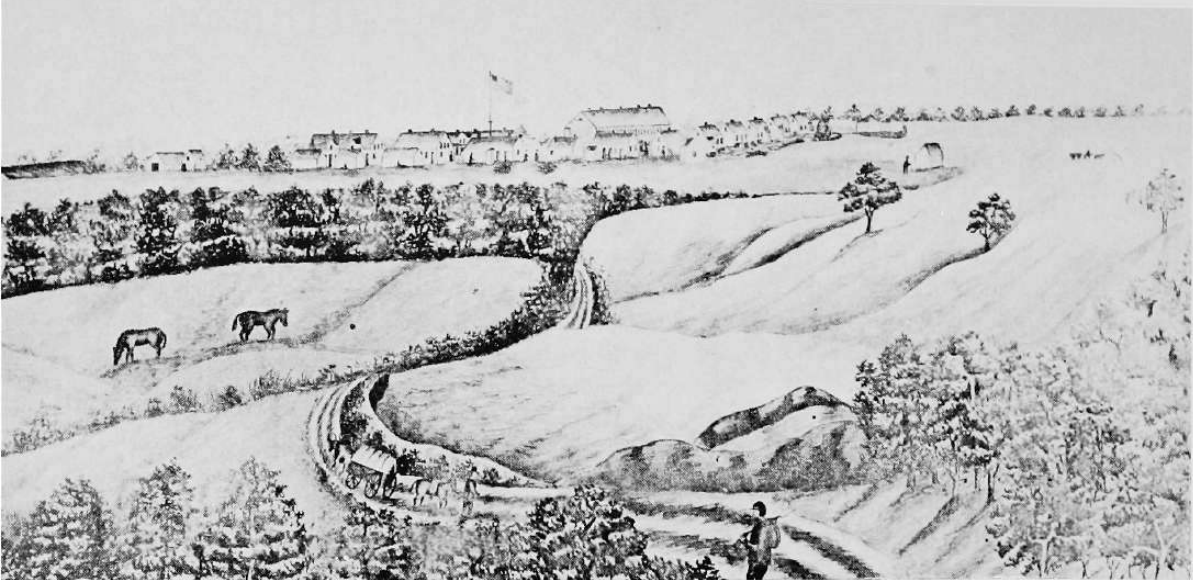
⁸ Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:148; Lucius F. Hubbard and Return I. Holcombe, *Minnesota in Three Centuries*, 3:392 (Mankato, 1908).

on to Fort Ridgely, more than forty miles to the west. The colonel evidently was satisfied that Fort Ridgely would hold out until he could assemble a force sufficiently strong to cope with the Indians. On August 24 he wrote his wife from St. Peter: "The post is closely invested, but Jack Frazer escaped from it on Wednesday night and says the garrison are in good health and can defend themselves until relieved, if the enemy do not succeed in firing the roofs of the buildings." He says further that there are more than two hundred women and children in the Fort, who have escaped from the villains. We intend to clean out the scoundrels with the utmost possible expedition."

In the same letter Sibley chided his wife about hastening to St. Paul to ask Ramsey for "a guard against Indians at Mendota, as somebody had seen one in the bushes." With a touch of male superiority he wrote, "Well, did I ever! You are just as safe there as if you were in New York City." Then he switched to a serious comment: "I wish I could say as much for the poor people up here, who are being butchered by the score, with all the horrible accompaniments of fearful mutilation."

Despite his long years of association and friendship with the Sioux, Sibley now wrote: "My preparations are nearly completed to begin my work upon them with fire and sword, and my heart is hardened against them beyond any touch of mercy." He called them "fiends" and "devils in human shape" and in subsequent letters summoned up similar epithets reflecting the bitterness of the times.

Writing again from St. Peter on the following day Sibley appeared to be bolstering his nerve: "I do not think the Indians will fight us before we get there, but if they attempt it they will get badly whipped, for we shall move with 1200 or 1300 men." (His "army" had been reinforced at St. Peter with the remaining six companies of the Sixth Minnesota and numerous militia units from nearby areas — all in need of more training and equipment.)⁸ Sibley also



A sketch of Fort Ridgely as it appeared from the northeast corner

did some husbandly complaining: "We have awful living — in a miserable dirty house, which I will be glad to leave tomorrow for a tent. . . . I am run to death with work."

The expedition finally got under way from St. Peter on August 26, but it was Thursday, August 28, before Sibley wrote his wife again, this time from a camp sixteen miles east of Ridgely. "We are gradually closing in upon the miserable hounds," he said, "and they are trying to skedaddle. I sent two hundred mounted volunteers to the relief of Fort Ridgely the night before last, and they entered without opposition, the Indians having previously abandoned the siege."⁹

Then he pointed up some of the problems that he felt compelled him to proceed deliberately in spite of criticism and cries for fast action: "My force is about twelve hundred strong, but one fourth of the number are mounted men who are not regularly enlisted and may abandon me at any moment. I hope soon to be re-inforced by more reliable material, and be supplied with ammunition and rations (in both of which we are lamentably deficient), so that I can overtake and kill a thousand or more of the savages and drive the remainder across the Missouri or to the devil." Having thus unburdened himself, he requested his wife to

send some clothes, "for I am dirty, unshaven, and ragged." Two weeks later he asked her to send "a fine tooth comb, a new tooth-brush, and a couple of handkerchiefs by first opportunity." The squire of Mendota still insisted on a few amenities in the wilderness.

"WE ARE HERE without having had any fight," Sibley wrote from Fort Ridgely on Friday, August 29, the day after the main force arrived and a full week after the fort's defenders had repulsed a determined Indian attack. Sibley said he had heard that the Indians were entrenching at the village of their leader, Chief Little Crow, seventeen miles away.¹⁰ "I am waiting only for cartridges to follow and attack them wherever they are to be found."

The next day Sibley told his wife that "I sent down from here in wagons to St. Paul between three and four hundred white women and children who had escaped into the Fort. They are penniless, and many of

⁹ Colonel Samuel McPhail led the mounted vanguard that lifted the siege of Fort Ridgely on August 27. *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, 1:736; Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:150; West, *Sibley*, 258.

¹⁰ Little Crow's village was located on the south side of the Minnesota River about two miles upstream from the Lower Sioux Agency. See map in Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:226.

them almost naked, and God knows what is to become of them. They are objects of public charity. If you could only hear one title of the stories told by these poor people, you would be horrified." He added, "Tomorrow we shall move forward slowly, so as to permit my re-inforcements, with ammunition and other supplies, to overtake my command. Little Crow and his followers have retreated, and I fear we shall have a long and weary chase before we can overtake them." Obviously, the colonel did not intend to stay at Fort Ridgely as long as ensuing events forced him to.

A recurring cause of delay appeared in Sibley's August 31 letter: "I intended to march today, but we had a fearful rain storm last night which lasted for several hours, saturating every thing in the camp, and it will take the whole day to dry." While waiting he "despatched one hundred and eighty men to bury the dead. There are forty or fifty bodies of murdered persons within twenty miles, and perhaps many more."

On September 2—the day that this burial party was ambushed at Birch Coulee—the commander addressed another letter to his wife. "This morning we were all in a state of excitement at hearing volleys of musketry occasionally, and seemingly at no great distance," he wrote, "and I fear that there is an engagement going on between

my detachment and the Indians. I have just despatched two hundred and forty men with two six pounders to the aid of my troops, and the rest of the command are ready to take the field at a moment's notice."¹¹

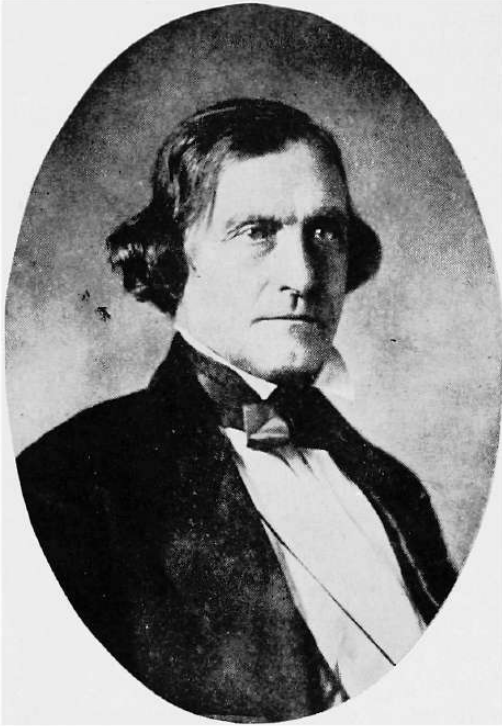
Sibley and "the rest of the command"—consisting largely of companies from the Sixth and Seventh Minnesota regiments—did have to "take the field" and in a letter from Fort Ridgely on September 4 the colonel wrote of making a forced march of thirty-six miles to Birch Coulee and back to relieve the beleaguered camp. Then he described the battle: "The detachment consisted of about 150 men. They were in charge of J. R. Brown, and had already buried 71 persons when they returned to their tents and encamped.¹² About 3 o'clock on Tuesday morning they were attacked by a large band of Indians and kept closely besieged until I relieved them yesterday morning, driving away the savages." He added a personal touch: "The poor fellows were very much worn down by constant fatigue and were delighted when I, the first

SARAH Steele Sibley



¹¹ This relief party, like the one Sibley had sent ahead to Fort Ridgely, was commanded by Colonel McPhail. Some Indians demonstrated so convincingly when the detachment approached the coulee that McPhail thought himself "almost completely surrounded." He retreated, set up a corral, and sent back to Fort Ridgely for reinforcements. See Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:153.

¹² This unequivocal statement leaves no doubt as to whom Sibley considered the burial detachment's commander, although the dubious honor has sometimes been claimed for Captain Hiram P. Grant of the Sixth Minnesota. Joseph R. Brown, famed pioneer Minnesotan and former Sioux agent, was a major of volunteers. His Indian wife and children were among the captives held by Little Crow. Though Sibley's first mention of the burial party numbered it at 180 men, he later said it included 150, which is the figure given in most accounts and the one Sibley used in his report to the adjutant general.



MAJOR *Joseph R. Brown*

man, entered into their camp." He gave the casualties at thirteen men killed and forty-seven wounded, "some of them fatally." Later (September 7) he said eighteen men were killed, or have since died, and forty [are] more or less seriously wounded." The latter presented "a pitiable sight," he said, when he visited them in the hospital. Then he enlarged somewhat on his previous description of the battle: "I was the first man to enter the doomed camp after driving off the savages, and as the survivors emerged from the holes they had dug in the ground in and around the tents, a more delighted set of mortals I never saw. There lay 91 horses shot dead, and a very few hobbling about all wounded. The killed and wounded men were lying around, and as the warm weather hastened decomposition, the odor was sickening."

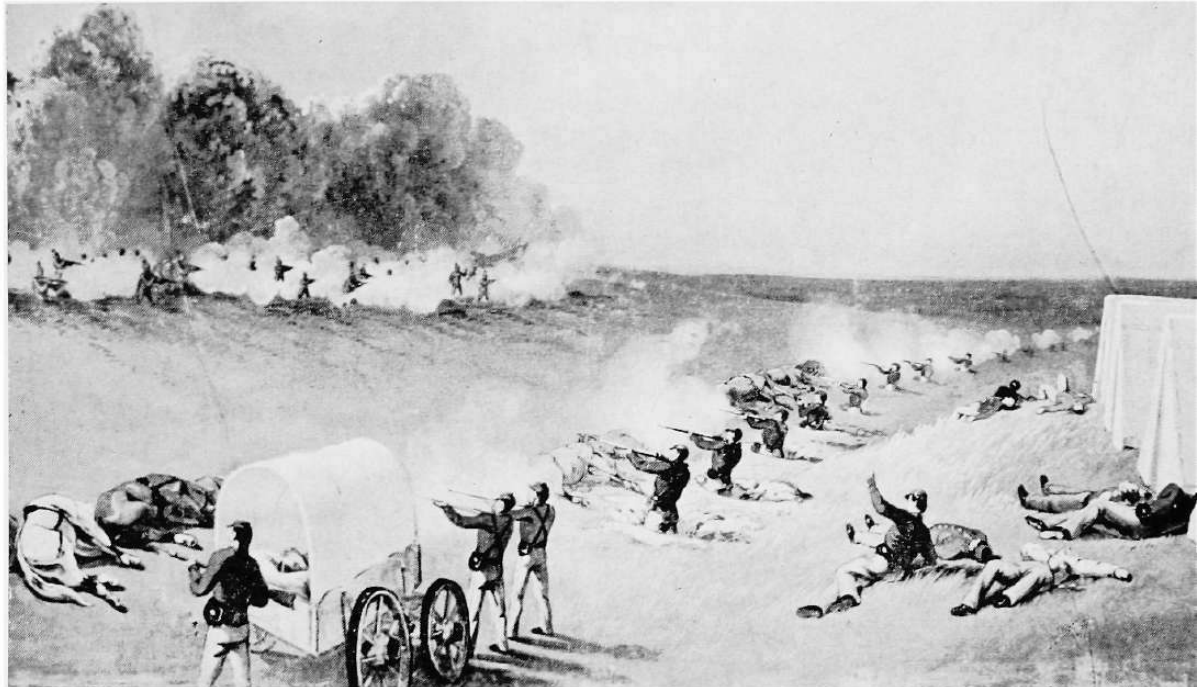
SIBLEY'S LETTER of September 4 contains the first evidence that reports of dissatisfaction with his slow advance rankled

him. "Well, let them come and fight these Indians themselves," he wrote his wife about the people at home, "and they will [have] something to do besides grumbling. I have told Gov. R. in my dispatch that he can have my commission when he sees fit, as I would be too glad to let some one take my place. The officers say they want me and nobody else." Among the loyal subordinates the Democratic colonel named William R. Marshall and John T. Averill, "both Republican Lieut. Colonels."¹³

The commander was still disheartened and disgruntled on September 5, when he repeated that "I have placed my commission at the disposal of Governor Ramsey." He complained that the "responsibilities of my position are so great that I am deprived of necessary rest. I can hardly sleep at all. . . . It is hard indeed, while we are fighting and doing our best, to have a set of ninnyes and poltroons abusing us at home."

A hint as to why he was "nearly worn out with fatigue" appears in Sibley's letter of September 7. His men were so undisciplined that he himself had to check on those assigned to the night watch, and lack of experienced officers increased "the labor necessary to get the raw material I have to work with into condition for a campaign." Ten days later he said more specifically: "I have so much responsibility resting upon me in seeing that the camp is properly guarded at night that I sleep very little, and what I have enjoyed in that way has been with-

¹³ Marshall was lieutenant colonel of the Seventh Minnesota in 1862 and went on to be brevetted brigadier general in the Civil War. He later served as Minnesota's fifth governor. Averill was lieutenant colonel of the Sixth Minnesota in 1862 and was also eventually brevetted brigadier general. Typical of attacks on Sibley appearing in the Minnesota press, was the following sarcastic comment in the *St. Cloud Democrat* of September 11, 1862: "Col. Sibley, the State undertaker, with his company of grave-diggers and ferry-boat builders [,] will probably visit both Abercrombie and St. Cloud during the autumn, bury what bones he can find and consecrate the town site by writing a dispatch on it for reinforcements and arms to proceed on his mission." The editor later apologized.



THE battle of Birch Coulee as pictured in the Sioux War panorama painted by Anton Gág, Christian Heller, and Alexander Schwendinger, about 1893

out undressing ever since I left Mendota, as I have to make frequent visits to the sentinels around our large camp to keep them on the alert against an attack in the darkness. So I feel dirty and uncomfortable." And what did he get for his efforts? "I get curses from all quarters below, because I do not accomplish impossibilities."

Despite his expressed desire to be replaced, Sibley reflected at the end of his September 7 letter that "It would not do for me under the present circumstances peremptorily to resign my commission, for the safety of the State would be jeopardized if one less experienced in Indian wiles and mode of warfare than I am should be assigned to the command of the only force which stands between the central portion of the State and desolation." He dared not fail, so he would take his time.

Reasons why he was reluctant to advance against the Indians are clearly spelled out in various letters written from Fort Ridgely or a camp nearby. On September 7 he said, "I cannot go safely ahead without a sufficient supply of ammunition and rations." Three days later he told his wife, "I am also in want of cartridges, hard

bread, and clothing for the soldiers, which I hope will be forthcoming very soon." On September 14 he spoke again of the weather: "I had issued orders to march tomorrow morning, but we have had a violent rain storm which still continues, and will necessarily retard our move forward." And on September 16: "It does seem as if the fates were determined to oppose my advance, as the rain storm I wrote you about in my last, continued so long as to saturate every thing. I fear it has raised the streams and made the prairie roads still worse than they were before, and they had been bad enough."

On September 17 he discussed one of the most important reasons for delay: "Unfortunately, the horsemen not being regularly enlisted, have to the number of two or three hundred skedaddled in view of dangerous service, leaving me with only twenty five or thirty of that description of force. If I had a few hundreds of trained cavalry, I could bring the whole matter to a speedy conclusion; as it is, the Indians instead of fighting as they now threaten, may escape from the infantry and lead us a weary chase in the wide prairie."

But on September 10 he told what was probably the single most significant factor behind his slowness: "if I should make an advance movement, two or three hundred white women and children might be murdered in cold blood. I must use what craft I possess to get these poor creatures out of the possession of the red devils, and then pursue the latter with fire and sword." Sibley realized that caution increased the time the captives would be in the hands of the Indians, but he was deeply anxious to prevent any wrong move that would bring about a general massacre of the prisoners.

Sibley started exercising "craft" right after the Birch Coulee disaster, when, suspecting that Little Crow might be tired of fighting the whites, he left the Sioux leader a message attached to a split stake on the battlefield. The message read: "If Little Crow has any proposition to make to me, let him send a half-breed to me, and he shall be protected in and out of camp."¹⁴

On September 5 Sibley told his wife about the result of this overture: "I received a letter from Little Crow yesterday, by the two bearers of a flag of truce. He writes (his amanuensis is an educated half breed) that the reason the war was commenced was because he could not get the provisions and other supplies due the Indians, that the women and children were starving, and he could get no satisfaction from Major Galbraith, the U.S. Agent.¹⁵ That he had many white women and children prisoners, etc., etc. I have sent back the men today with a written reply, telling Little Crow to deliver the captives to me, and I would then talk with him like a man. What he will do remains to be seen." Sibley continued: "The half breed bearers of the flag of truce, both of whom I know, say that the mixed bloods with their families are not permitted to leave the camp and are virtually prisoners, as most of them are believed to sympathize with the whites."

The shrewdness of Sibley's move in thus opening communication with the enemy became apparent when news was received

of a split in the Indian ranks. On Saturday, September 13, he told his wife, "I have another communication from Little Crow, and the bearers of the flag of truce state that there is a party in his camp who are opposed to the war, and deny any participation in the murders and other outrages."¹⁶ On September 17 Sibley grew rather caustic about this antiwar faction: "They want to play 'good Indian,' but they must separate from the 'unclean thing,' or share the same fate."

The extract from Sibley's September 13 letter closes on another subject: "I learn that General Pope has been designated to command the new Department of the Northwest, in which case I shall soon ask to be relieved from my present command."¹⁷

GRADUALLY things got better. Cartridges arrived on September 11, provisions and clothing showed up on succeeding days, and on the thirteenth 270 men of the Third Minnesota, who had been surrendered by some of their officers at Murfreesboro, Tennessee, and paroled, joined Sibley's column. This addition of experienced troops was especially valuable "as they have been drilled and seen service in the south, [and] they will be of great advantage in organizing the raw material in the other regiments."

Sibley began his letter of September 17 in good spirits, even allowing himself a

¹⁴ Sibley's message and others that followed are given in the report of Adjutant General Oscar Malmros in *Minnesota Executive Documents*, 1862, p. 444. See also Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:172.

¹⁵ Little Crow's interpreter and "secretary" was Antoine J. (Joe) Campbell. See Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:128, 163n., 228-231.

¹⁶ Among Indian leaders opposed to the war were Wabasha, Wacouta, Taopi, and the Wahpeton orator, Paul Mazakutemani (Little Paul).

¹⁷ Major General John Pope's appointment as commander of the newly created Military Department of the Northwest, with headquarters in St. Paul, was widely interpreted as a "banishment" for his defeat at the second battle of Bull Run. See Robert Huhn Jones, *The Civil War in the Northwest*, 6 (Norman, Oklahoma, 1960).

pun: "It has cleared off at last, and tomorrow we shall cross to the south side of the Minnesota River and go in search of my friend Little Crow, with whom I have kept up a correspondence and now have 'a crow to pick.'"

Near the end of the letter Sibley told of a pitiful incident: "A civilized Indian came down the River in a canoe yesterday with his own family, two white women and eight children, whom he aided to escape from the Indian camp. One of the women, the mother of three of the children, is near her confinement, and you may judge of the shock she received when she was informed that her husband named DeCamp, a very fine man by the way, had been killed in the Birch Coulee battle. She was dreadfully distressed of course, and as they lost everything they possessed, and she and her little ones had scarcely enough to cover their nakedness, her case was a sad one indeed."¹⁸

On September 19 the force of 1,619 men moved, at last, from Fort Ridgely, where they had been stationed since August 28. After seeing his command safely across the Minnesota River, Sibley wrote at midnight: "We are now fairly launched on the wild prairies in search of the murderers of innocent men, women and children, and I trust

we shall catch & chastise them as they deserve. A very few days will decide the success or failure of the expedition, for the savages will either give us battle or flee so fast that we cannot overtake them without cavalry." He cautioned his wife not to expect many letters, for "opportunities for communication will be few, and far between."

For three days after crossing the Minnesota River the column moved leisurely along the government road that led to the Upper Sioux Agency, which was located near the mouth of the Yellow Medicine River below present-day Granite Falls. On the night of September 22, the troops encamped near the east shore of Lone Tree Lake, which a guide mistook for nearby Wood Lake—hence the name of the battle that soon took place there.¹⁹

During the night, Indians numbering from 700 to 1,200 under the leadership of Little Crow stole down from their camp near the mouth of the Chippewa River and hid in the tall grass along the road and in the rolling prairie around Sibley's camp. They intended to waylay the soldiers as they began their march next day. Some men of the Third Minnesota "sprang" the ambush, however, when they set off early in the morning to dig potatoes at the Upper Agency, three miles or so to the north. This precipitated a general encounter in which the Indians were routed.²⁰

Writing the same evening, Sibley gave a brief account of the battle. First he assured his wife that he was safe: "Thanks to a kind Providence, I have passed through a sharp battle today without injury, although the balls flew thick around us." Then, without mentioning the ambush, he summarized what happened: "A large force of savages attacked us this morning, and after a desperate fight of two hours, we whipped them handsomely, killed twenty five or thirty of their warriors, and wounded a large number, with a loss on our side of four men killed outright and thirty five or forty wounded." He said he had "peremptorily refused" a surrender offer made by

¹⁸ Joseph W. De Camp, government sawmill operator at the Redwood Agency, had left for St. Paul on business when his wife and children were captured at the start of the outbreak. He returned to search for his family and was slain at Birch Coulee. The Indian who rescued Mrs. De Camp was an educated Christian named Lorenzo Lawrence. Mrs. De Camp later married the Reverend Joshua Sweet, the chaplain at Fort Ridgely who attended De Camp in his last hours. For her own account of her harrowing experiences, see Jannette E. Sweet, "Mrs. J. E. De Camp Sweet's Narrative of Her Captivity in the Sioux Outbreak of 1862," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 6:354-380 (St. Paul, 1894).

¹⁹ For an account of the march to Lone Tree Lake, see I. V. D. Heard, *History of the Sioux War and Massacres of 1862 and 1863*, 167-173 (New York, 1863); Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:177.

²⁰ *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, 1:159; Hubbard and Holcombe, *Minnesota in Three Centuries*, 3:401-406; Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:178-182; Heard, *Sioux War*, 173-178.



SURRENDER of white prisoners at Camp Release, as pictured by John Stevens

the Indians after the battle “if I would promise them immunity from punishment and would allow them to carry off their dead.”

He felt he and his men had “inflicted so severe a blow” on the Indians “that they will not dare to make another stand.” This estimate of the situation turned out to be correct. Wood Lake, though probably not quite the “desperate fight” Sibley claimed, was a decisive victory that ended organized warfare by the Sioux in Minnesota. Thus one main object of the expedition was accomplished and the commander now turned his attention to the other — the release of the captives.

Sibley knew it was pointless to chase the retreating and mounted Indians with insufficient cavalry. He also feared that too vigorous a pursuit of Little Crow and his followers might endanger the white and half-breed captives. Therefore he held his troops for two days at the Wood Lake battlefield, caring for the wounded and negotiating with the antiwar faction among the Indians. He learned that this group had taken over the captives and had established

a new camp near the mouth of the Chippewa River in the vicinity of present-day Montevideo.

THE ARMY left its camp at Lone Tree Lake on September 25, and about 2:00 P.M. the next day secured the release of many of the captives. The commander told his wife how this was done in a letter written on September 27 from Camp Release, the name given the general area where the captives were freed.

“You will rejoice to learn,” he wrote, “that after having beaten the savages so soundly, I moved up with my command to this spot, where is located the large camp of Indians and half breeds, and to my inexpressible satisfaction, found most of the female captives, and a few children safe therein. I went into the encampment with a few of my officers, leaving a guard of a couple of hundred soldiers on the outside, and after a brief speech, demanded the immediate surrender to me of all the white prisoners.”

Sibley got results: “They were brought into the circle, to the number of between a hundred and a hundred and fifty, and a piti-

able sight they presented. The poor creatures cried for joy at their deliverance from the loathsome bondage in which they had been kept for weeks, suffering meantime nameless outrages at the hands of their brutal captors. Most of them were young, and there were a score or more of fine, lady-like appearance, notwithstanding the ragged clothes they wore. They all clustered close around our little group, as if they feared that attempts would be made to keep them in custody. I re-assured them on that score, and when all were collected, they were placed in charge of the guard, and conducted to my own camp near by, where tents and other accommodations had been provided for their reception."

He then mentioned some individual cases. "There is . . . a Mrs. Adams," he wrote, "whose six months child was killed when she was captured, who is exceedingly pretty, and has a complexion as white as snow. She says she was let alone and protected by a really friendly Indian, who treated her like a sister."²¹ There is one young lady, very respectable and of fine personal appearance, a Miss Williams, who has been very much abused; indeed, I think all of the younger ones have been."²²

Another captive's story was somewhat irregular. "One rather handsome woman among them," said Sibley, "had become so infatuated with the redskin who had taken her for a wife that, although her white husband was still living at some point below and had been in search of her, she declared that were it not for her children, she would

not leave her dusky paramour." In a letter dated September 28 Sibley added: "The woman I wrote you of yesterday threatens that if *her* Indian, who is among those who have been seized, should be hung, she will shoot those of us who have been instrumental in bringing him to the scaffold, and then go back to the Indians." The commander moralized: "A pretty specimen of a white woman she is, truly!"²³

On September 27, too, Sibley returned to a familiar subject: "I have today written to Governor Ramsey and General Pope, asking to be relieved of my command and a successor appointed at once. I think I have borne enough and accomplished enough to justify me in seeking a release. The officers in the camp are highly pleased at the manner in which the expedition has been conducted, and oppose my leaving them, saying they want no other commander." Sibley's request was denied, and on September 29 President Abraham Lincoln made him a brigadier general of volunteers, although Congress did not confirm the appointment until April 7, 1864.

As it had been throughout the campaign, food was a serious problem — "We are now in a great want of provisions, and unless soon supplied from below, the command will have to subsist on potatoes alone, of which fortunately, there is no lack in the abandoned Indian fields." And on October 1 — "We are pretty near a starving condition in camp."

In the same letter Sibley told his wife he would send the rescued captives down to Fort Ridgely "tomorrow." He said "they consist up to date, of 94 pure white women, and some young children without a single living relative. The villainous savages have treated the former, with few exceptions, in a most beastly manner, subjecting them to daily, and nightly outrage." Eventually 107 whites and 162 half-breeds were freed — a total of 269.²⁴

THE SIOUX had been vanquished and their captives rescued, but Sibley and his

²¹ The *Mankato Semi-Weekly Record*, October 11, 1862, and the *Central Republican* (Faribault), October 8, 1862, listed Mrs. Harriet Adams of Hutchinson among the captives freed at Camp Release.

²² Mattie Williams, Mary E. Schwandt, and Mary Anderson were captured near New Ulm on August 18. Miss Anderson was severely wounded and died during captivity, and Miss Williams and Miss Schwandt were captured and held until freed at Camp Release. See Mary Schwandt-Schmidt, "The Story of Mary Schwandt," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 6:461-474.

²³ This woman has not been positively identified.

²⁴ *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, 2:262; Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:185.

men still had to round up as many Indians as possible, try a sizable number of them and punish the guilty. On September 28 he wrote: "I have arrested today sixteen of the warriors in the 'friendly' camp near by, and have appointed a military commission of five officers to try them and numerous others who are believed to be guilty."²⁵ The commission began hearing testimony that very day. On October 5 Sibley reported that members of the commission "have tried about thirty of the prisoners thus far, of whom twenty, including one negro, have been sentenced to be hung."²⁶

Although on September 28 Sibley wrote that he would execute "at once" any criminals convicted, he changed his mind between then and October 5, when he noted, "I shall postpone the execution until I have secured all the other villains, and it is probable that a hundred or more will soon pay the penalty of their misdeeds at the same time." Then he admonished his wife: "Keep these revelations to yourself, as it is not my intention to make them public for the present."

Meanwhile, numerous Indians either gave up or were captured. The first surrender in the friendly camp of about 150 lodges yielded some 1,200 Indians, mostly women and children, and that figure rapidly increased as the days went by. To alleviate the problem of feeding so many prisoners, Sibley on October 4 sent 1,250 Indians under guard to the Upper Agency near the Yellow Medicine River to live on crops planted there by farmer Indians.

On Saturday, October 11, Sibley wrote his wife that he was about "to start in pursuit of some of the refugee bands, when I received a despatch from General Pope, ordering me to send all the men, women, and children prisoners, of whom I have more than fifteen hundred, immediately to Fort Snelling." On this development he commented: "This will be hard upon those who may be innocent among the men, but as the order is imperative, go they must. I shall, at any rate, be saved the task of hanging a

large number of the scoundrels, who richly deserve it, by turning them over to General Pope to be dealt with at Fort Snelling."

A hundred and one male prisoners, "chained two & two together," were held at Camp Release by October 15, and Sibley noted that two hundred and thirty-six at Yellow Medicine, "will be secured in the same way today."

He continued to reveal deep bitterness against the men: "Some of them are probably innocent, but by far the greater part will be found guilty of murder, rape, etc. As they will all be sent under guard to Fort Snelling, in obedience to orders, my command will be deprived of the gratification of strangling the guilty ones." For "the poor women and children in the lodges," however, he soon showed sympathy, for they "were the very picture of distress when they learned that they were to proceed to join their kindred at Yellow Medicine without their natural protectors. Poor wretches, they are objects of pity, notwithstanding the enormities perpetrated by their fathers, husbands, and brothers."²⁷ Again on October 17 he commented unhappily: "The poor women's wailings when separated from their husbands, fathers & sons, are piteous indeed, and I dislike to go in person to their lodges when I issue the orders for their removal."

The responsibility of trying the Indians was also weighing on Sibley's mind. "The military commission is still at work," he wrote on October 17, "and the Indian prisoners are being tried as fast as a due regard for justice will permit. I have to review all

²⁵ Members of the commission were Colonel William Crooks of the Sixth Minnesota, Lieutenant Colonel Marshall (soon replaced by Major George Bradley of the Seventh Minnesota), Captains Grant and Hiram S. Bailey of the Sixth regiment, and Lieutenant Rollin C. Olin of the Third regiment, who served as judge advocate.

²⁶ The Negro was Godfrey (or Otakle), a mulatto who was married to a squaw of Wabasha's band. His death sentence was commuted to ten years in prison after he turned state's evidence and thereby helped expedite the trials of other prisoners. For Godfrey's story, see Heard, *Sioux War*, 191-201.

²⁷ Letter of October 13, 1862.

the proceedings and decide the fate of each individual." To his wife he confided that "This power of life and death is an awful thing to exercise, and when I think [that] more than three hundred human beings are subject to that power, lodged in my hands, it makes me shudder. Still, duty must be performed, and judgment visited upon the guilty."

Regardless of his misgivings, Sibley eventually approved the military commission's proceedings except in one case. The hasty trials and cursory treatment of evidence in most instances hardly added up to the modern view of "due regard for justice," yet Sibley was hearing complaints from home that the trials were taking too long. In his letter of October 20 he said: "I see the press is very much concerned lest I should prove too tender-hearted." His answer was: "I shall do full justice, but no more. I do not propose to murder any man, even a savage, who is shown to be innocent of the 'great transgression,' or to permit of the massacre of women and children."

CAMP RELEASE was so far from civilization that Sibley on October 23 began moving his force and the Indian prisoners some fifty miles downriver to the Lower Sioux Agency, near present-day Redwood Falls. He mentioned this shift in advance to his wife and explained, "I am compelled to fall back to the Lower Agency for the lack of rations and forage for the animals." Another reason for changing his base was the fact that "The weather looks decidedly threatening, and I am anxious that my command shall move out of this wide, wild prairie before a snow storm overtakes us. The men are without sufficient tents and warm clothing, and many, myself included, gave their blankets to the nearly naked white captives, and now suffer for the want of them."²⁸

Sibley told of his arrival at the Lower Agency in a letter dated October 25: "I am thus far advanced homewards, being but

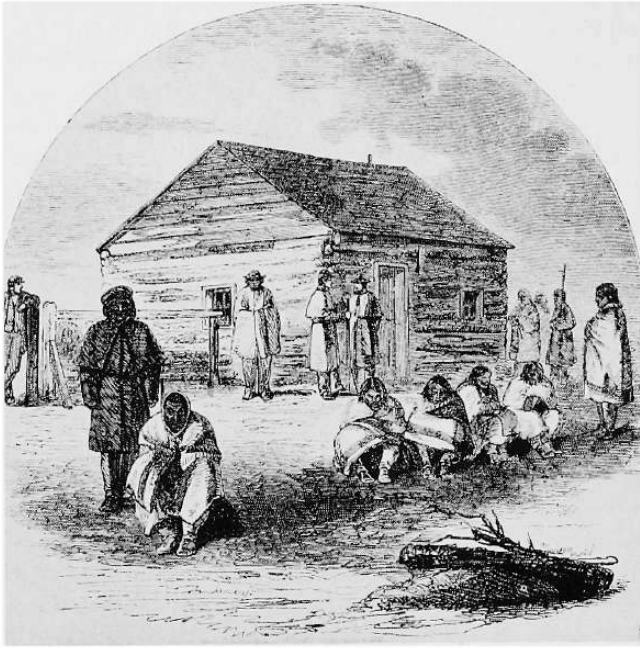
twelve miles above Fort Ridgely. I have all my command with me except five companies left to bring down the men prisoners. They will be here in three days. There are one hundred and sixty convicts here, safely confined in a log enclosure awaiting their doom. The big crowd of sixteen or seventeen hundred, consisting of a few of the old men and the women and children, will reach here tomorrow."

All of the remaining letters, except the last, were sent from "Camp Sibley." He explained that "The command with one consent, have dubbed this 'Camp Sibley,' although I do not recognize it in my official despatches to General Pope, as it would savor somewhat of vanity." Since he was writing to his wife and not the general, he permitted himself some "vanity" in the next sentence: "It is likely to be the scene of events which will be historical in their character, and it may not be inappropriate to have our family name connected with them."

On October 28 Sibley wrote that his column was "again united, and I have a much larger force than I have ever had before. I have about two thousand men, six hundred of whom are mounted, a description of arm not furnished me until the campaign was nearly ended."

With the tables turned and the white troops now guarding Indian prisoners, their commander was faced with a thorny—and eternal—human problem. "I find the greatest difficulty," he wrote on October 25, "in keeping the men from the Indian women when the camps are close together. I have a strong line of sentinels entirely around my camp, to keep every officer and soldier from going out without my permission; but, some way or other, a few of the soldiers manage to get among the gals—and the latter, I notice, take care not to give any alarm." Three days later the civilian turned general lamented, "With that number of men, most of them as wild as deer, and two thousand Indians of all ages and both sexes, I have my hands full in enforcing strict discipline,

²⁸ Letters of October 19 and 20, 1862.



THE makeshift courthouse
used by the military
commission at the Lower Agency

but I have succeeded pretty well in doing so.”

The military commission on November 5 finished the work it had begun on September 28. It tried in all 392 prisoners, sentencing 307 to death, and giving prison terms to 16. Many of these Indians obviously had expected to be treated as prisoners of war, but the commissioners (with Sibley’s approval) condemned them merely for being present in various battles. The number was reduced slightly to 303, and on November 7 General Pope telegraphed their names to President Lincoln, in whose hands rested the final decision on their fate. To help him with his task, Lincoln asked for the records of the convictions.²⁹

SIBLEY had been gone so long that his wife began to worry about whether he was getting too fond of soldiering. “You assert that I am becoming enamored with a military life,” he wrote on October 28 from Camp Sibley. “You mistake. I am far more so of a certain wife of mine, who I hope soon to rejoin.” Six days later he left little doubt about his estimate of frontier service: “After so long a sojourn in a wild country,

fighting savages, an inglorious warfare at best, and living in a dirty tent without sufficient covering to keep me warm, and living upon bread, pork, and potatoes, day after day, *ad nauseam*, it is not surprising that I long for one good home meal.” The end was in sight, however, and he expected “a speedy deliverance, for at least a time, from the labors which have tasked both body and mind for more than two mortal months.” This forecast proved accurate, for on November 25 Sibley became the head of the new Military District of Minnesota, with headquarters in St. Paul, while Pope moved to Madison, Wisconsin, retaining over-all command of the Department of the Northwest.

First, however, the commander had several matters to take care of in the field. Though it was too late in the season to launch an extensive expedition against the Indians who had escaped westward, Sibley made use of his now abundant mounted troops to

²⁹ Photostats of the records of the commission are in the manuscripts collection of the Minnesota Historical Society. The originals are in the National Archives and the office of the Judge Advocate General, United States Army.

scour the countryside for more Indian fugitives.³⁰ He also sent out burial parties. "An expedition . . . of 40 mounted men have just returned," Sibley wrote his wife on November 4. "They found and buried 45 bodies of men, women, and children massacred at the first outbreak, making 193 in all we have buried."

On November 7 Lieutenant Colonel Marshall and a guard detachment started the long trek to Fort Snelling with about 1,700 uncondemned Indians, mostly women and children. The miserable column got through to the fort on November 13, although one infant was killed and several Indians were injured when citizens of Henderson attacked them.³¹

Similar fury on the part of the frontier populace was shown on November 9 when Sibley led a column of troops that moved the 303 condemned Indian braves from the

Lower Agency to South Bend, near Mankato. "In passing through the town of New Ulm," he told his wife, "the long succession of wagons containing each ten prisoners, flanked by a strong force of mounted men, was set upon by a crowd of men, women, and children, who showered brickbats and other missiles upon the shackled wretches, seriously injuring some fifteen of the latter and some of the guards.

"The assailants were finally driven back by a bayonet charge, and fifteen or twenty men who were among them were arrested and made to march on foot twelve miles to the spot where we encamped for the night, where after being reprimanded for the insult to the U. S. flag committed by them and their female associates, they were released and compelled to walk back the entire distance to New Ulm. I did not dare to fire [*into the crowd*] for fear of killing women and children. The Dutch she devils! —They were as fierce as tigresses."³²

In his letters to his wife as well as his reports, Sibley makes it clear that he expected the 303 condemned prisoners to die. Therefore he, like most other Minnesotans, was disappointed on December 6 when Lincoln drastically reduced the "death list" of Sioux from 303 to 39. Unlike the commis-

³⁰ It should be pointed out that both General Pope and Governor Ramsey fully realized that Sibley needed cavalry to chase mounted Indians. The best they could do, however, was to furnish horses for infantrymen late in the campaign.

³¹ Samuel J. Brown, *In Captivity*, 11 (Mankato, 1900); Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:200.

³² In copying the extract, Sibley judiciously omitted the final sentence. It was Holcombe who preserved this parting shot for posterity.

ATTACK on the condemned Indians by the citizens of New Ulm



sioners, Lincoln chose to distinguish between rapists and wanton murderers on the one hand and battle participants on the other. Another Indian received a last-minute reprieve before thirty-eight Sioux went to the gallows in Mankato on December 26, 1862, in "America's greatest mass execution."³³

It is interesting to note that on November 3 Sibley mentioned to his wife his estimate of the total number of whites killed in the 1862 uprising, a subject on which controversy probably will never end. In his original letter, according to Holcombe, the figures given are four to five hundred. But apparently his estimate was pushed upward with the passage of time, for in making the abstract some twenty years later, Sibley wrote: "Not less than six to eight hundred have met their death at the hands of the wretches."

The 1862 campaign did not end Sibley's career as a military commander. In the late spring and summer of 1863 he led one column of a two-pronged punitive expedition against the Sioux still at large in Dakota Territory. The general and his troops marched hundreds of dusty, stiflingly hot miles from Camp Pope, near present-day Redwood Falls, to the Missouri River. They accomplished little of military importance, although they defeated the Sioux in several skirmishes and drove them temporarily across the wide Missouri.³⁴

On November 29, 1865, President Andrew Johnson appointed Sibley a major general of volunteers, by brevet, "for efficient and meritorious services," and the Senate confirmed the appointment the following April. His relatively brief military career was concluded late in 1866 when he was "honorably mustered out of the service of the United States."³⁵

Sibley's reputation as a commander rests mainly on his 1862 campaign in Minnesota, easily his most important. Critics at the time and since have maintained that he moved much too slowly. Perhaps he did. But modern "armchair generals," girded with hind-

sight, would do well to keep in mind that Sibley had mountainous problems and responsibilities. His difficulties stemmed from inexperienced troops, a lack of adequate weapons, a shortage of supplies, and absence of cavalry when he needed it most. Throughout the campaign, too, he felt he had to proceed cautiously lest one false move cost the lives of the white prisoners in the hands of the Sioux. Finally, it should be emphasized, Sibley did accomplish the objects of his campaign.

All in all, the expedition fulfilled a desire he expressed in his October 28 letter to his wife from Camp Sibley — "that our children shall, in after years, have reason to be proud of the part their father has played in the greatest Indian tragedy of the age."

³³ Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:209–211; West, *Sibley*, 286–291; *Mankato Weekly Record — Supplement*, December 26, 1862; *St. Paul Daily Press*, December 27, 1862; *St. Paul Pioneer*, December 28, 1862.

³⁴ For accounts of the 1863 expedition, see Hubbard and Holcombe, *Minnesota in Three Centuries*, 3:411–415; *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, 2:297a–310 (1899); Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:266–276.

³⁵ See West, *Sibley*, 338–340.

THE PICTURES on pages 100, 101, 103, 104, 105, and 108 are from the collection of the Minnesota Historical Society. The drawings on pages 112 and 113 appeared in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* for June, 1863.

Memorials

THE MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY has a Memorial Fund to which contributions can be made upon the loss of a relative or friend. Such gifts not only serve as appropriate expressions of sympathy and condolence, but they help to support work that is a fitting memorial to any Minnesotan.

Whenever a contribution is received for the Memorial Fund, a suitable card is mailed to the bereaved family, and the names of those whose memories are honored, as well as of contributors, are recorded in a Memorial Book.

Send your contribution to the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul 1, Minnesota, along with your name, the name of the person to receive the card, and the name of the person in whose memory the contribution is given.



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