

THE TIME TO SPEAK IS OVER

The Onset of the Sioux Uprising

Priscilla Ann Russo

EARLY IN THE MORNING of August 18, 1862, a number of Santee Sioux Indians attacked the Lower Sioux Agency on the south bank of the Minnesota River opposite present-day Morton. They were mostly Mdewakanton Sioux from nearby villages. By the time the war thus launched was over five to six weeks later, some Upper Sioux (Wahpeton and Sisseton) had also joined in the uprising.

The brunt of the war, however, was borne by the

¹"Chief Big Eagle's Story," in Kenneth Carley, ed., "As Red Men Viewed It: Three Indian Accounts of the Uprising," in *Minnesota History*, 38:130, 134 (quote) (September, 1962). First published in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* of July 1, 1894, this account was also reprinted in Return I. Holcombe, ed., "A Sioux Story of the War: Chief Big Eagle's Story of the Sioux Outbreak of 1862," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 6:382-400 (1894).

²Several accounts deal with Little Crow's loss of the chief speaker position and his subsequent desire to save face by being war leader. See Doane Robinson, *A History of the Dakota or Sioux Indians*, 264 (Minneapolis, reprint edition, 1956); William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 2:241 (St. Paul, revised edition, 1961); Thomas Hughes, *Indian Chiefs of Southern Minnesota*, 54 (Minneapolis, revised edition, 1969); Kenneth Carley, *The Sioux Uprising of 1862*, 11 (St. Paul, revised edition, 1976); and Roy W. Meyer, *History of the Santee Sioux: United States Indian Policy on Trial*, 117 (Lincoln, Neb., 1967).

Priscilla Ann Russo, a native of Mankato, Minnesota, is a lecturer in American Indian Studies at San Diego State University, San Diego, California. She holds an M.A. in American Studies from San Diego State and is completing her doctorate in American history at the University of California, San Diego.

Mdewakanton, and its indisputable leader was one of their number — Little Crow, or Taoyateduta (His Scarlet People). For some time he had played a principal role in marking the Sioux paths of resistance to the whites as well as in adopting certain of their ways. Yet on the eve of the uprising, in a heated contest, his people removed Little Crow from his position as chief speaker. That removal was referred to in Big Eagle's account of the middle-of-the-night war council that preceded the August 18 attack: "When the Indians first came to him [Little Crow] for counsel and advice he said to them, tauntingly: 'Why do you come to me for advice? Go to the man you elected speaker (Traveling Hail) and let him tell you what to do.'" To Little Crow the time to speak seemed over, and the time to lead his people was once again upon him. When that fateful council ended and the war began, Little Crow emerged for all time in Minnesota history as the leader of the Sioux Uprising.¹

The impact of the election for speaker upon the war, though apparently significant, has not been deeply explored.² Just what was a chief speaker? What were the reasons for an election at this critical point in time? In reality, what effect did the election have upon the emergence of Little Crow as the war leader?

The ethnohistorical perspective of the election needs to be clarified. Historical interpretations can easily distort the Sioux contact-traditional culture of this period. Doane Robinson, for example, interpreted the defeat of Little Crow to be a defeat for a hereditary "chieftainship which had been occupied by the Little Crow dynasty for more than a century." Ruth Landes compounded this error by using Robinson in another context to illustrate

that a hereditary chief could be "expelled" from office. An analysis of sources is thus warranted.³

One of the important sources used by Robinson and other historians (and already quoted in this article) is the record of Big Eagle, a participant in much of the war, who told his story through interpreters to Return I. Holcombe, a St. Paul newspaperman and historian. Big Eagle's story, when published some thirty years after the uprising, was the first major account by one of the "hostiles." Another significant source, the story of George Quinn (Spirit That Rattles as It Walks), a mixed-blood, was also funneled through Holcombe, but it was not



ENTITLED "Indian Camp at Red Wood," this drawing shows the Lower Agency area as it looked in the 1860s.

published until a century after the uprising. Quinn's account reported that "We found on arriving [at the Lower Sioux Agency] that there was some excitement over an election for Chief Speaker of the Mdewakanton band. Traveling Hail, a subchief, had been elected over Little Crow and Big Eagle." These sources make it clear that, contrary to Robinson and Landes, Little Crow still retained the position that he had obtained, in part, through hereditary ties. He was "chief" of the village group known as Kaposia. What he lost was the elected position of "chief speaker" of all the Mdewakanton villages, not just the Kaposia group.⁴

Among actual facts that are difficult to determine in the maze of secondary accounts is the timing of the election. In his interview with Holcombe that took place in 1898, although it was not published until 1962, George Quinn said: "We arrived at Redwood Agency August 13

and four days later the outbreak began in the Big Woods (or at Acton)." This statement was coupled with Quinn's comment that he had "found on arriving that there was some excitement over an election for Chief Speaker." Yet in his own history published in 1908, Holcombe stated that "in the spring Little Crow, Big Eagle, and Traveling Hail were candidates for speaker of the band. There was a heated contest, resulting in the defeat of Little Crow." There is an obvious inconsistency between "in the spring" and August 13, 1862. Robinson, who like Holcombe interviewed surviving "hostiles," set the date of the election as August 3, 1862. (It is possible that he simply omitted a digit.) Big Eagle gave the time of the "trouble among the Indians themselves" as "a little while before the outbreak."⁵

Other secondary accounts, too, say vaguely that the election was held "recently" or "earlier this summer," but the August 13 date seems the most plausible if we examine the sequence of events, including those that provided the immediate impetus for the election. Before going into the events of August 13, however, let us look at the background of the Mdewakanton people.

WHEN WHITE MEN began to pass through the Dakota lands, the Santee Sioux comprised the four eastern "council fires" of the original "seven fireplaces." These four eastern bands were the Mdewakanton (People of the Mystic Lake), Wahpekute (People Who Shoot Among the Leaves), Wahpeton (People of the Leaves), and Sisseton (People of the Swamps). To the people of the other three "council fires" — the Teton, Yankton, and Yanktonai — the four groups to the east were known as Santee, a term derived from *issati*, meaning "knife-bearers." Their historic geographic location and social organization changed through time. Expelled from their ancestral Mille Lacs area by the Chippewa (Ojibway), and also probably drawn to more open prairie country by increased availability of the horse and other factors, the Santee migrated toward the historic villages of the early nineteenth century. Their encampments

³ Robinson, *Dakota or Sioux*, 264; Ruth Landes, *The Mystic Lake Sioux: Sociology of the Mdewakantonian Santee*, 90-91 (Madison, 1967).

⁴ "Account of George Quinn," in Kenneth Carley, ed., "As Red Men Viewed It," in *Minnesota History*, 38:147 (September, 1962); James Owen Dorsey, "Siouan Sociology," in Bureau of American Ethnology, *Fifteenth Annual Report*, 215 (Washington, D.C., 1897); Samuel W. Pond, "The Dakota or Sioux in Minnesota as They Were in 1834," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 12:322-324 (1908).

⁵ "Account of George Quinn," in *Minnesota History*, 38:147; Lucius F. Hubbard and Return I. Holcombe, *Minnesota in Three Centuries*, 3:285 (Mankato, 1908); Robinson, *Dakota or Sioux*, 264; "Big Eagle's Story," in *Minnesota History*, 38:130; Pond, "Dakota or Sioux in Minnesota," in *Collections*, 12:320-321, 491-492.

clustered near the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers, except for those at Big Stone and Traverse lakes. The eastern Dakota, said missionary Samuel W. Pond, "were essentially one people," although they considered themselves "closely connected with those living farther west."⁶

The Santee remained in the same Minnesota-Mississippi areas through the first half of the nineteenth century. More frequent contact with white culture brought easier access to weapons and other material items. With greater dependency upon this trade came changes in various aspects of their culture. An increasing depletion of game was one symptom of environmental change. A probable shift from ancient kin-centered life to broader sociopolitical organization beyond kinship ties may have been intensified. However, descriptions of Santee "customs and manners" by observers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are significantly similar to those of the early nineteenth century. This is not to say that sociocultural changes had not occurred since 1680, when Father Louis Hennepin lived among the Dakota at Mille Lacs Lake. After contact with white culture, the Santee increasingly emphasized hunting for trade as well as subsistence. In addition, the depletion of game reflected the ecological basis of warfare beyond "honor to revenge" killing of the enemy who had put to death many Santee relatives. "If they would have game to kill," wrote Pond of the Sioux in the 1830s, "they must kill men too." Nevertheless, within a continuum of change, the contact-traditional culture of the Santee was still intact in the third decade of the nineteenth century.⁷

The Mdewakanton and Wahpekute evidenced a mixed forest and prairie culture, while the more westerly Wahpeton and Sisseton were closer to a plains culture. Even farther west, the Yanktonai, Yankton, and Teton

flourished in the plains culture area. The Santee were the first of the Dakota groups to be engulfed by the advancing American frontier. Within three decades, seemingly sudden changes were to lead to the 1862 uprising and the disintegration of the Santee contact-traditional culture.⁸

The most disruptive agents of change for the Santee were the historically familiar rapacious traders, ethnocentric missionaries, white men's decimating diseases, inept Indian Bureau officials, equivocating United States government representatives, and deplorably conflicting military policies. Perhaps the ultimate disruptive force for the Santee, as for all Native Americans, was land-hungry settlers. As has been seen elsewhere in this issue, the Santee by 1862 had a long list of grievances: the conspiratorial nature of the negotiations for the treaties of 1851 and 1858 and the failure of the United States government to fulfill its treaty obligations; the traders' procurement of treaty proceeds and the disadvantageous methods of trade for the Indians; the United States government officials' efforts to deter Inkpaduta's raids by coercing the other Sioux in 1857, even though the renegade Inkpaduta group had been previously exiled by the Wahpekute; and the increasing pressure of settlers.⁹

The concept of civilization versus "savages" was not just an idea but a reality to the majority of white frontiersmen in Minnesota. In 1863 Agent Thomas J. Galbraith wrote that "Christianity and its handmaid or daughter, civilization," were "at war" with the customs of the Indians. He deplored "with what tenacity these savages cling to their habits and customs." Although the ingrained ethnocentrism of the whites did not go unnoticed by the Santee, "the Dakota did not believe there were better men in the world than they," Big Eagle commented. He added that "many of the whites always seemed to say by their manner when they saw an Indian, 'I am much better than you,' and the Indians did not like this. . . . The whites were always trying to make the Indians give up their life and live like white men — go to farming, work hard and do as they did — and the Indians did not know how to do that, and did not want to anyway. It seemed too sudden to make such a change. If the Indians had tried to make the whites live like them, the whites would have resisted, and it was the same way with many Indians."¹⁰

A number of the Santee, particularly chiefs like Wabasha and Little Crow, recognized that resistance was futile, but several events during 1862 heightened their grievances. On September 7, 1862, five days after the battle of Birch Coulee, Little Crow gave his views in a letter from Yellow Medicine that answered an earlier communication of Colonel Henry H. Sibley. Although translated in imperfect English by mixed-blood Antoine J. ("Joe") Campbell and "signed" by Little Crow, it may

⁶Dorsey, "Siouan Sociology," 215-217; Mary Eastman, *Dahcotah; or, Life and Legends of the Sioux Around Fort Snelling*, xxiv-xxv (Minneapolis, reprint edition, 1962); Landes, *Mystic Lake Sioux*, 3-4.

⁷Pond, "Dakota or Sioux in Minnesota," in *Collections*, 12:320 ("one people" quote), 376-377; Meyer, *Santee Sioux*, 20.

⁸Dorsey, "Siouan Sociology," 213-222; Alanson Skinner, "A Sketch of Eastern Dakota Ethnology," in *American Anthropologist*, 21:164-174 (1919); James H. Howard, "The Cultural Position of the Dakota: A Reassessment," in Gertrude E. Dole and Robert L. Carneiro, eds., *Essays in the Science of Culture in Honor of Leslie A. White*, 250-251, 257 (New York, 1960); Meyer, *Santee Sioux*, 23, 48; Landes, *Mystic Lake Sioux*, 14-16.

⁹Meyer, *Santee Sioux*, 115.

¹⁰Annual Report of Thomas J. Galbraith, in Indian Office, *Reports*, 1863, p. 282-284 (also found in Report of the Secretary of the Interior, in 38 Congress, 1 session, *House Executive Documents*, no. 144, p. 397-398 — serial 1182); "Big Eagle's Story," in *Minnesota History*, 38:129-130.

well have been composed in a council. Part of it deserves quotation because of the insight it offers concerning the onset of the uprising:

"Dear Sir — For what reason we have commenced this war I will tell you. it is on account of Maj. Gilbrait [*sic*] we made a treaty with the Government a big for what little we do get and then cant get it till our children was dieing with hunger — it is with the traders that commence Mr A[ndrew] J Myrick told the Indians that they would eat grass or their own dung. Then Mr [William] Forbes told the lower Sioux that [they] were not men[,] then [Louis] Robert he was working with his friends how to defraud us of our money, if the young braves have push the white men I have done this myself."¹¹

It was "on account of" Major Galbraith and the traders that several incidents did lead to the uprising. Galbraith's appointment as agent, a result of political expediency and the sanctioned reward system of a new administration, was a "political blunder of major proportions." As annuity payment time approached, tensions mounted among the Sioux, the traders, and the inept Galbraith.¹²

To protest the presence of traders at the pay table, and their possible support by troops during the anticipated annuity payments in June, Lower Sioux young men organized a "soldiers' lodge." The lodge sent a del-

egation of protesting braves to Fort Ridgely. The commandant, Captain John S. Marsh, assured them that although the troops were required at the payment, they would not assist the traders in collecting purported debts. The triumphant braves were said to have boasted vigorously when they returned to their villages.¹³

The indignant traders thereupon refused to extend further credit and attempted to gain military support for the payment of their claims. Although the annuity money still had not arrived in July, the Mdewakanton and Wahpekute braves met again as a soldiers' lodge, this time primarily to debate the formation of a retaliatory war party against the Chippewa. When the discussions then turned to the traders, the braves concluded that they "would be forced to submit" if the troops came with bayonets to aid the traders. At the same time, an infantry guard of about 100 soldiers under Lieutenant Timothy J. Sheehan was sent to the Upper Agency to assist Galbraith during the approaching payments.¹⁴

¹¹ Hubbard and Holcombe, *Minnesota in Three Centuries*, 3:396; Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:172.

¹² Meyer, *Santee Sioux*, 115.

¹³ Hubbard and Holcombe, *Minnesota in Three Centuries*, 3:285–286. A "soldiers' lodge" or *tiyotipi* wielded great power and was composed of a number of braves or *akitsita* (head soldiers or soldier-police). See Landes, *Mystic Lake Sioux*, 76.

¹⁴ Hubbard and Holcombe, *Minnesota in Three Centuries*, 3:283–286 (quote), 289; Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:229.

INDIANS IN COUNCIL (1850) is one of Seth Eastman's numerous water colors of Sioux activities.



A number of contemporary opinions of Galbraith recorded during this tense period revealed him as an arrogant, undiplomatic agent whose hard drinking compounded his inability to handle the situation. Although he made token doles of annuity supplies in July, Galbraith consistently refused to issue the provisions on hand separately from the delayed annuity money. In June, Galbraith had assured the Santee that the annuities would be paid by July 20. It was not his fault that governmental red tape delayed the shipment of the \$71,000 due until well into August, but his handling of resulting crises left much to be desired. By the middle of July, some 4,000 hungry Sisseton and Wahpeton, along with an estimated 1,000 Yanktonai from the plains, assembled at the Upper Agency. A highly volatile situation developed on August 4, when some 400 mounted Indians plus 150 on foot surrounded and pointed guns at the military guard on hand. A strategically placed howitzer averted an assault on the agency warehouse, but the unbending Galbraith put off issuing even token provisions until persuaded to do so by Lieutenant Sheehan, Captain Marsh (whom Sheehan sent for), and missionary Stephen R. Riggs. After a "council" on August 7 and perhaps other meetings, the Indians received some annuity goods and provisions and agreed to wait in their villages for word of the arrival of the annuity money.¹⁵

Although they considered themselves "one people," the Santee often aligned separately, with the Lower Sioux Mdewakanton and Wahpekute as one grouping and the Upper Sioux Sisseton and Wahpeton as another. Although less overtly "hostile" at the time, the Lower Sioux, too, felt mounting grievances. Following the 1851 treaties, they had to leave the locale of their old villages, while most of the Upper Sioux did not. The Lower Sioux had also seen their payments from the treaty of 1858 entirely diverted to the traders, while the upper bands had received half or a little more of the money due them. In effect, the white encroachment upon the reservation also posed greater hardships for the lower bands. The Mdewakanton and the Wahpekute were to become directly involved in the onset of the uprising.¹⁶

In 1862, during the open "hostilities" of the Sisseton and Wahpeton at the Upper Agency, the Lower Sioux

were weaving an even more intricate course of events. On about August 8 Little Crow apparently spoke for his people when he confronted Galbraith as he issued provisions to the Upper Sioux. Sheehan later reported: "I was present when the agent consented to the issuing of the rations to the Upper Indians, and told Little Crow and his men that they would immediately issue rations to the Lower Indians." That promise was not kept, and Sheehan explained: "I think that probably the immediate cause and the real cause of the grievance of Little Crow and his men and the Soldiers' Lodge were not issuing those rations as agreed to." While Little Crow still spoke for his people at this time, the position of chief speaker of the Mdewakanton band in August, 1862, was coming into focus; the impetus for an election had begun.¹⁷

Within a week, Little Crow, "speaking for some hundreds of Indians present," harangued Galbraith and the traders for the last time. Galbraith had arrived at the Lower Agency on August 13. On that date Little Crow was clearly acting as chief speaker of the Mdewakanton when he said: "We have waited a long time. The money is ours, but we cannot get it. We have no food, but here are these stores, filled with food. We ask that you, the agent, make some arrangement by which we can get food from the stores, or else we may take our own way to keep ourselves from starving. When men are hungry they help themselves."¹⁸

The interpreter refused to translate Little Crow's speech. Galbraith turned to John P. Williamson, the missionary present, and implored: "Williamson, you tell us what Little Crow says." When he heard the translation, Galbraith, seemingly incapable of acting on his own initiative, consulted the traders, who talked briefly among themselves. Then one of them replied, "Whatever Myrick does, we will do." Andrew Myrick started to leave without answering, but Galbraith demanded a response. With deliberate insolence, Myrick sneered, "So far as I am concerned, if they are hungry, let them eat grass" or "their own dung." Williamson translated the fateful, bitter words. "There was a moment of silence, followed by savage whoops and wild gestures, with which the Indians disappeared."¹⁹

TO THEIR existing grievances, Little Crow and his people now added Myrick's insult. As we have seen, it was quoted in Little Crow's response to Sibley as one of the reasons for the war. Big Eagle later described Andrew Myrick's fate on the morning of August 18: "He said to them: 'Go and eat grass.' Now he was lying on the ground dead, with his mouth stuffed full of grass, and the Indians were saying tauntingly: 'Myrick is eating grass himself.'"²⁰

In order to establish a direct relationship between Myrick's insult and the election for chief speaker, it is important to determine the date of the trader's words.

¹⁵ Hubbard and Holcombe, *Minnesota in Three Centuries*, 3:292-295; Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:222, 228-231; Meyer, *Santee Sioux*, 110; Galbraith, *Report*, 273-274.

¹⁶ Meyer, *Santee Sioux*, 112-114.

¹⁷ Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:232.

¹⁸ Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:232.

¹⁹ Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:233; Winifred W. Barton, *John P. Williamson, A Brother to the Sioux*, 48-52 (New York, [1919]); Meyer, *Santee Sioux*, 114. "Victorian reticence," said Meyer, could explain the omission of "dung" from Williamson's daughter's account cited by Folwell.

²⁰ "Big Eagle's Story," in *Minnesota History*, 38:135; Hubbard and Holcombe, *Minnesota in Three Centuries*, 3:396.

Although noting that Galbraith “came down” to the Lower Agency on August 13, William W. Folwell, leading historian of the uprising, assigned the date of the “eat grass” statement as “about August 15.” Folwell arrived at that date from Galbraith’s report of an “interview” with Little Crow on August 15, but the historian acknowledged that “it is difficult to assign a date for the ‘council.’” Galbraith’s own report does not indicate that his interview with Little Crow included any allusions to Myrick’s statement. It is possible that the agent neglected to report the “eat grass” incident of August 13 and instead reported only his personal interview with the chief on August 15. Galbraith later reported: “On the 15th day of August, 1862, only three days previous to the outbreak, I had an interview with Little Crow and he seemed to be well pleased and satisfied. Little, indeed, did I suspect at that time that he would be the leader of the terrible outbreak of the 18th.”²¹

When Galbraith talked with Little Crow on August 15, events had moved swiftly. Little Crow no longer spoke “for some hundreds of Indians.” By that time he had already been defeated in the election for chief speaker of the Mdewakanton. Disgusted with the treaties, the agent, and the traders, the Mdewakanton had expressed some of their rage in a demand for the election of a new chief speaker. George Quinn later recalled this critical time of “some excitement over an election for chief Speaker. . . . Traveling Hail, a subchief, had been elected over Little Crow and Big Eagle. A few Indians were dissatisfied and some of them shouted a war whoop, but the excitement died out, because in a few days it was succeeded by a greater. The reason Traveling Hail was elected was that he had opposed the sale of the ten-mile strip north of the river, in 1858. This strip was sold by the influence of Major [Joseph] R. Brown, the Agent for the Sioux. He got a lot of the chiefs and head men to go to Washington and make a treaty for the sale of the land. Wabasha, Little Crow, Traveling Hail, Mankato and other chiefs went and made the treaty but Traveling Hail opposed the sale of the land, as did nearly all of our people.”²²

Big Eagle’s account of these events adds a few details: “We had politics among us and there was much feeling. A new chief speaker for the tribe was to be elected. There were three candidates — Little Crow, myself, and Wasuihiyeyedan (Traveling Hail). After an exciting contest Traveling Hail was elected. Little Crow felt sore over his defeat. Many of our tribe believed him responsible for the sale of the north ten-mile strip, and I think that is why he was defeated.”²³

As has been seen elsewhere in this issue, Little Crow was the main spokesman for the Lower Sioux during the treaty negotiations in Washington in 1858. In spite of strenuous efforts to gain an accounting of the treaty money, Little Crow had to give in to the white man’s

“system” represented by Indian Commissioner Charles E. Mix. Although Traveling Hail and others also signed the treaty, Little Crow bore the principal blame for the loss of lands and other treaty shortcomings.²⁴

In losing the election for chief speaker in 1862, Little Crow lost not only the responsibility but also the esteem that went along with that position. And the status of the chief speaker reflected the importance of oratorical ability among the Santee. As was noted by Samuel Pond, who lived among them for some twenty years before they moved to reservations: “The influence and authority of a chief depended almost entirely on his abilities as a speaker . . . if he was not a ready speaker he was little regarded.” Mary Eastman, from her personal knowledge of the Sioux in the 1840s, explained that the “influence the chief possesses depends much more upon his talents and capacity to govern, than mere hereditary descent.”²⁵

Personal qualities seem to have counted more heavily than kinship ties in the election of 1862. Traveling Hail (sometimes called Passing Hail), the elected speaker, was a nonhereditary chief of a unit of the former Lake Calhoun farming village whose election resulted from his personal opposition to the treaty of 1858. That opposition is not apparent in the official records of the treaty negotiations, so it must have emerged after the Indians returned from Washington. Little Crow, although a hereditary village chief, was held accountable by all the Mdewakanton, not just by the people of his village. These circumstances do not entirely accord with James H. Howard’s contention that the Santee represented “government by kinship.” It was through the majority voice expressed in an election, not hereditary ties, that the Mdewakanton accorded the status of chief speaker.²⁶

WHAT WAS the sociopolitical organization underlying this effective majority voice in 1862? Howard’s reassessment, based on Alanson Skinner’s earlier anthropological studies, contends that “all of the Santee bands were divided into exogamous patrilineal clans.” The Santee “bands” in Howard’s eyes meant the Mdewakanton, Wahpekute, Wahpeton, and Sisseton. As to former

²¹ Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:232–234 (“difficult” quote, 233n); Galbraith, *Report*, 272 (“interview” quote), 275.

²² “Account of George Quinn,” in *Minnesota History*, 38:147.

²³ “Big Eagle’s Story,” in *Minnesota History*, 38:130.

²⁴ Charles J. Kappler, comp. and ed., *Indian Affairs. Laws and Treaties*, 2:785–789 (Washington, 1904); Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:394–395.

²⁵ Pond, “Dakota or Sioux in Minnesota,” in *Collections*, 12:394; “Big Eagle’s Story,” in *Minnesota History*, 38:130; Eastman, *Dahcotah*, xviii.

²⁶ Pond, “Dakota or Sioux in Minnesota,” in *Collections*, 12:326–327; Hubbard and Holcombe, *Minnesota in Three Centuries*, 3:273; Howard, “Cultural Position of the Dakota,” 252.

Dakota clans, Fred Eggan re-examined the work of Howard, Landes, and Lewis Henry Morgan, among other anthropologists, and indicated a need for "further ethnohistorical and comparative research." Morgan's pioneer studies dealt directly with the Santee historical period immediately preceding the uprising and are thus significant to this article.²⁷

In 1858 Morgan analyzed possible Dakota kinship systems based on information supplied by missionary Stephen R. Riggs. In addition, Morgan personally visited the Sisseton in 1861. He later wrote: "When I visited the eastern Dakotas in 1861, and the western in 1862, I could find no satisfactory traces of gentes [*clans*] among them." Eggan felt that Morgan's studies "suggest that the Dakota once had patrilineal clan organization, but had allowed it to decay." Even if such clans formerly existed, they were not organized on this basis by 1862, and quite possibly not even in the prereservation nineteenth century.²⁸

What then was the underlying sociopolitical unit? It was the village. In her 1935 studies of the Mdewakanton, Landes found "no evidence of Santee clans but only of villages, showing traits that included those Howard attributes to Santee 'patrilineal clans.'" She appraised the "aboriginal village" as "the one important fixed political unit; larger groupings were organized only briefly and voluntarily on the basis of the village unit." The critical factor in the concept of a village unit is a group that lives together, but not necessarily in a fixed physical site. As gathered by Landes, the terms for village "indicate collective living." The Mdewakanton village unit in some respects appears quite similar to the *tiyošpaye*, the "significant political group" or "band" among those who considered themselves Oglala, a division of the Teton Sioux or Dakota. *Tiyošpaye*, loosely translated, means "they live together." Although the degree of fluidity varied, Mdewakanton or Oglala came together for matters of "tribal" importance primarily during periods of crisis.²⁹

²⁷ Howard, "Cultural Position of the Dakota," 252; Fred Eggan, *The American Indian: Perspectives for the Study of Social Change*, 108 (Chicago, 1966).

²⁸ Leslie A. White, ed., *Lewis Henry Morgan: The Indian Journals, 1859-62*, 6-8, 110, 129 (Ann Arbor, 1959); Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society*, 154 (quote) (New York, 1878), also available in modern edition, Eleanor B. Leacock, ed. (New York, 1963); Eggan, *American Indian*, 108.

²⁹ Landes, *Mystic Lake Sioux*, 80n ("no evidence" quote), 35 ("aboriginal village" quote), 29 ("collective living" quote). William O. Farber, "Representative Government: Application to the Sioux," in Ethel Nurge, ed., *The Modern Sioux Social Systems and Reservation Culture*, 125 ("*tiyošpaye*" quotes) (Lincoln, 1970); Skinner, "Eastern Dakota Ethnology," in *American Anthropologist*, 21:173.

³⁰ Dorsey, "Siouan Sociology," 213, 215-216, 221 (various quotes).

³¹ Skinner, "Eastern Dakota Ethnology," in *American Anthropologist*, 21:164, 172-173.

That the Mdewakanton gathered for matters of "tribal" importance in critical periods is central to our theory. This is where the election of 1862 comes into focus. The election for chief speaker involved an organization larger than the village unit. Here it is necessary to touch on the important ethnological study of Santee coming together by Alanson Skinner as well as James O. Dorsey's earlier reports on Siouan sociology. Through an interdisciplinary approach, the concept of historic village unit can hypothetically be applied in place of the terms "gentes" or "clans" used by Dorsey and Skinner. In this context the Mdewakanton can be named as the specific Santee band instead of the terms "phratry" or "tribal" used in earlier studies. This approach is not meant to equate terms but rather to help explain the possible sociopolitical organization during the election for chief speaker in 1862.

Dorsey wrote: "Among the eastern Dakota the phratry [*Mdewakanton band*] was never a permanent organization but it was resorted to on special occasions and for various purposes, such as war or the buffalo hunt." To Dorsey, "each subtribe or phratry [*Mdewakanton band*] comprises a number of gentes [*village units*]." He listed seven Mdewakanton "gentes" identified by informants in 1880.³⁰

In 1913-14 Skinner gathered data on the eastern Dakota and wrote that the "three major bands of the Eastern Dakota [*Mdewakanton*, *Wahpeton*, and *Sisseton*] were subdivided into exogamous patrilineal gentes [*village units*]," with the Mdewakanton band being further subdivided "into six groups." In Skinner's study of eastern Dakota sociopolitical organization he wrote: "Each gens [*village unit*] had its own group of twenty *wakicun* or councilors who had a tent of their own. In the tribal camp circle each councilor's tent was pitched in front of the place occupied by his gens. For matters of tribal [*Mdewakanton band*] importance the councilors of all gentes got together. All the councilors had equal authority and each gens voted as a unit. They had a herald [*chief speaker*] who announced their decisions."³¹

Skinner's recorded pattern of sociopolitical organization of "all gentes" when applied to historic village units should not be considered absolute, even though the historical evidence strongly suggests that what earlier studies considered "gentes" or "patrilineal clans" were in reality nearer to being historic village units. It is not within the realm of this discussion to explore historical sources aligning and tracing historic village units, although it would be interesting to attempt such a reconstruction. Dorsey's list of Mdewakanton "gentes" gathered in 1880 shows a striking similarity to pre-1862 historic villages. Skinner apparently based his conclusions on Santee traditions of the historic period villages. Still, his pattern does not absolutely apply to the election



LITTLE CROW as photographed by Joel E. Whitney

of 1862, mainly because variation from his recorded pattern would reflect the flexible aspects of sociopolitical organization at the Mdewakanton band level.

SINCE THE Mdewakanton organized larger groupings on the "basis of the village unit," additional insight may be gained by examining this basic sociopolitical unit. Organizational patterns can be illuminated through "extension," a principle that existed within the Santee mode of thought. In effect, the sociopolitical organization at the village unit level reflected by extension the sociopolitical organization at the Mdewakanton band level. When the "calling together" at the village unit level "met to consider matters of great public interest, it was considered necessary to have as many of the men present as possible," but as Pond observed, "if the matter was of little importance, they were not so careful to have a full assembly." The numbers of "chiefs" and "councilors" present might vary with the time and purpose. In 1862 the numbers were probably great partly because of the importance of the election for speaker and because of the fact that large numbers were already assembling for the anticipated annuity payments. These Mdewakanton seemingly came together to make decisions in a manner similar to the village unit described by Pond: "It was in these assemblies that the chief frequently ascertained

what course would be acceptable to the majority of this band." In 1862 the chiefs and councilors faced the problem of determining which response the majority of the Mdewakanton would accept.³²

Their response, triggered by Myrick's insult, took the form of a council that elected a new chief speaker. In their councils the majority voice ruled, but not without debate. The 1862 election was not simply a matter of casting ballots, with the polls closing after the sun went down. Big Eagle said that the election was "an exciting contest." A parallel existed at the village unit level as described by Pond: "The persons present at these councils did not always agree in their views of public matters, and there were sometimes animated discussions, but rarely noisy disputes." Even when concessions were made to the majority, it was not without "grumbling." We have seen that after Traveling Hail's election, "a few Indians were dissatisfied and some of them shouted a war whoop." As Little Crow's replacement, Traveling Hail could now proclaim the decisions of the Mdewakanton band council and harangue as the voice of the majority.³³

His real influence would normally have been determined by his oratorical abilities. Even the names for the positions accorded speakers reflect their roles as orators. At the village unit level, they were variously called "speaker," "herald," or "police camp crier." For the Mdewakanton as a whole, the term was "chief speaker." The elected position of chief speaker could rank high in influence when the holder was held in esteem. Again, this seems contrary to Howard's reassessment of the Santee as representing "government by kinship," although his view that the "office of band chief was hereditary . . . passing from a father to his eldest son" also applies in some cases.³⁴

The hereditary aspects of historic "chiefs" at the Mdewakanton band level of organization require more intensive study. By the 1830s it is known that at least one hereditary village chiefs oratorical abilities also significantly marked him as a "ranking chief." Numerous accounts point to old Shakopee as a gifted, influential orator, and, like Little Crow, he may have been the chief speaker of the Mdewakanton band. Pond, writing in 1834, described Shakopee as a "chief" who "in some respects . . . stood at the head of the Dakota chiefs

As a speaker in council he had no equal among his contemporary chiefs." A century later, from oral tra-

³² Landes, *Mystic Lake Sioux*, 35, 205 ("extension" quote); Pond, "Dakota or Sioux in Minnesota," in *Collections*, 12:435-436.

³³ "Big Eagle's Story," in *Minnesota History*, 38:130; Pond, "Dakota or Sioux in Minnesota," in *Collections*, 12:436; "Account of George Quinn," in *Minnesota History*, 38:147.

³⁴ Howard, "Cultural Position of the Dakota," 252.

ditions she gathered, Landes termed Shakopee the "ranking chief" of the Mdewakanton band. His influence spread as the "orator of the Sioux." Even Big Eagle noted that "many think if old Shakopee had lived there would have been no war, for he was for the white men and had great influence." But old Shakopee died shortly before the war and was succeeded by his son, also named Shakopee (or Little Six), who eventually was executed for taking part in the uprising.³⁵

Who, then, held such influential "chief" positions at the Mdewakanton band level in 1862? According to Big Eagle, "Many whites think that Little Crow was the principal chief of the Dakota at this time, but he was not. Wabasha was the principal chief, and he was of the white man's party; so was I; so was old Shakopee, whose band was very large." George Quinn, too, explained that Wabasha was "head chief" of the Mdewakanton. Immediately prior to the Sioux Uprising, then, two identifiable Mdewakanton band level "chief" positions existed — Wabasha as principal, or head, chief and Traveling Hail as chief speaker. Yet Little Crow was better known

than either of these men among both Sioux and white people because he had been the speaker for some time. Asa W. Daniels, the physician at the Lower Agency until 1861, explained why: "Wabasha was a chief highly esteemed, but he lacked the energy and gift of speech that gave Little Crow such controlling influence." Daniels also reported that Little Crow "seemed very proud" of his gift of speech. His pride doubtless contributed to his feeling "sore over his defeat" for the speakership, as Big Eagle put it — a position he had attained even while the great orator Shakopee was still alive.³⁶

Little Crow apparently had acted as chief speaker for the Mdewakanton not only during the 1858 treaty negotiations but also during those conducted in 1851 at Mendota. At that time he was described as having a "fairly musical" voice that stilled even little children. It was also noted that he was the only "chief" present who had not gone to Washington to sign the 1837 treaty by which the Indians gave up lands between the St. Croix and Mississippi rivers. And it was said that Little Crow had been a "great war chief" who would speak for all the Mdewakanton. During the 1851 negotiations, Little Crow said: "Fathers: These chiefs and soldiers and others who sit here have something they wish said to you and I am going to speak it for them. There are chiefs here who are older than myself, and I would rather they had spoken; but they have put it upon me to speak."³⁷

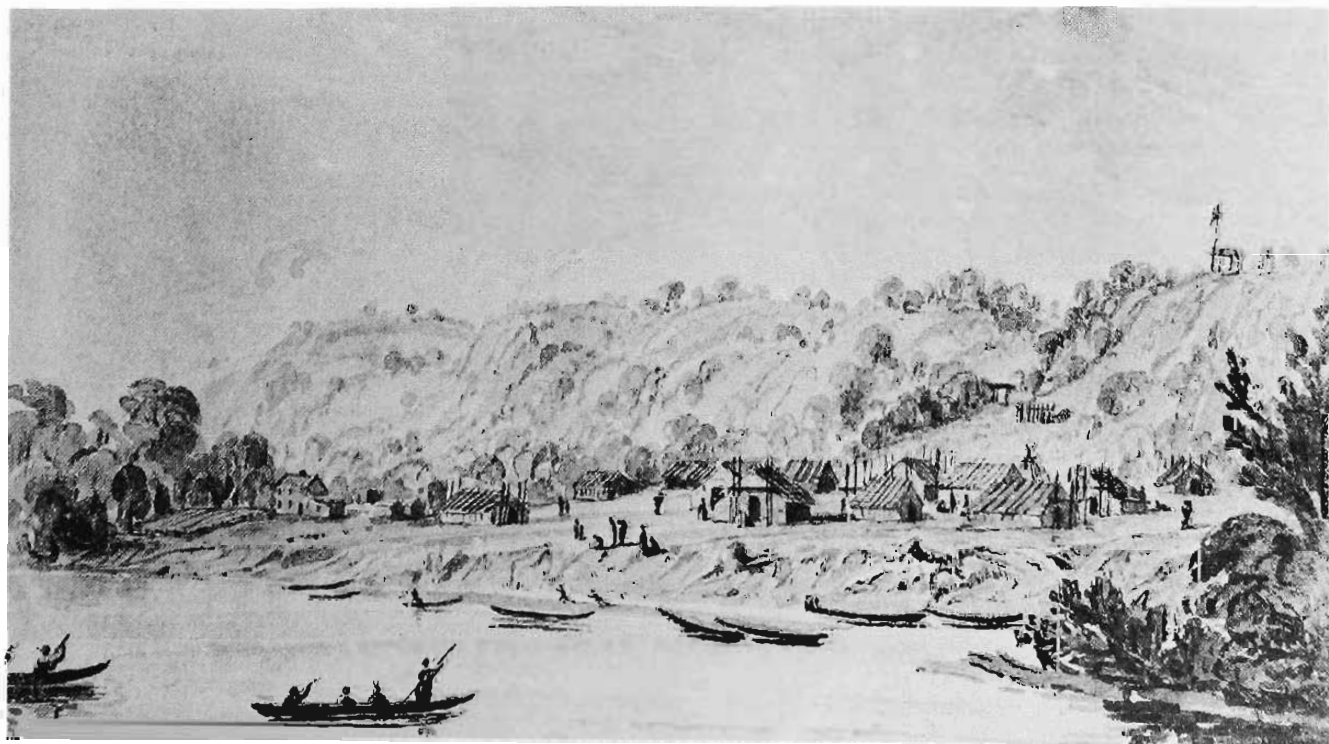
Eleven years later, on August 13, 1862, Little Crow, still speaking for his people, indicated "we may take our own way to keep ourselves from starving." Then followed Myrick's insult and the heated contest for chief speaker on that day when the Mdewakanton "came together" in a matter of "tribal" importance. The election

³⁵ Pond, "Dakota or Sioux in Minnesota," in *Collections*, 12:328, 394; Landes, *Mystic Lake Sioux*, 35, 84; Eastman, *Dahcotah*, 110 ("orator of the Sioux" quote), 122; "Big Eagle's Story," in *Minnesota History*, 38:130.

³⁶ "Big Eagle's Story," in *Minnesota History*, 38:130; "Account of George Quinn," in *Minnesota History*, 38:147; Asa W. Daniels, "Reminiscences of Little Crow," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 12:517-518 (1908).

³⁷ Hubbard and Holcombe, *Minnesota in Three Centuries*, 2:307 ("musical" and "Fathers" quotes), 314 ("war chief" quote), 315.

LITTLE CROW'S VILLAGE (*Kaposia*) was depicted by Seth Eastman in this water color made during the 1840s when the artist was commandant at Fort Snelling. The village was on the west bank of the Mississippi near present-day South St. Paul.



itself reflected this organization. In effect, the organization adapted to means of survival. It was an attempt to retain, through a pre-existing level of sociopolitical organization, a sense of autonomy despite acute dependence upon traders' goods and the agent's intermediary control over their treaty goods. Chief speaker Little Crow had faced Myrick, the other traders, and the agent, who refused to issue their treaty goods, and yet their children faced possible death from hunger. Thus the important matter for which the Mdewakanton came together was their very survival. The need for an election to choose a new speaker came out of Myrick's "eat grass or their own dung" insult.

If the time to speak seemed over for Little Crow on August 13, the time to lead his people in their own way soon came upon him. On August 17, 1862, four braves from the splinter village of Hochokaduta (Red Middle Voice) killed five settlers at Acton and thereby stirred the Mdewakanton to council. Again, on the basis of coming together for matters of "tribal" importance, the Sioux responded to the changing sociocultural conditions wrought by the rapidly advancing American frontier expansion. This time the settlers would receive dramatic evidence of the Santees' response.³⁸

As that fateful council progressed between midnight and dawn of August 18, Little Crow's oratory ranged from his first taunting words about going to "the man you elected speaker" to his oft-quoted closing speech. Little Crow knew that troubles "came upon his people" and the "young men" had started to war. "He at first opposed the movement with all his might," one later account said, "but when he saw he could not stop it he joined them in their madness against his better judgement."³⁹

As Little Crow's son Wowinapa recalled, his father argued against war until he was called a "coward." This inflamed him to an emphatic reply: "Taoyateduta is not a coward, and he is not a fool. Braves, you are like little children: you know not what you are doing." He then underscored the futility of war against the white men who were "as many as the leaves in the forest" while the Sioux "are only little herds of buffalo left scattered." In his eloquent conclusion, as recalled by Wowinapa, Little Crow said: "You are fools. You cannot see the face of

your chief; your eyes are full of smoke. You cannot hear his voice; your ears are full of roaring waters. Braves, you are little children — you are fools. You will die like rabbits when the hungry wolves hunt them in the Hard Moon (January). Taoyateduta is not a coward: he will die with you."⁴⁰

Whether his words were exactly as his son remembered them or not, Little Crow once again emerged as the war leader of the Santee Sioux through his oratorical ability. When his people came to him for advice and to hear him speak, they doubtless were aware that, in Pond's words, their leaders' "best speeches were made to their own people, and were called out by some sudden emergency that caused great excitement." At such times the Mdewakanton heeded speeches "delivered at some critical moment, when good counsel was urgently needed, and when there was no time for premeditation or deliberation. The eloquent speaker who was not found wanting on such occasions was justly esteemed a public benefactor, and stood high in the estimation of the people."⁴¹ By the end of the fateful council, Little Crow had regained his lost esteem. The Santee had come to him for their war council. With the dawn of August 18, 1862, Little Crow led his people. The time to speak was over; the uprising had begun.

³⁸"Big Eagle's Story," in *Minnesota History*, 38:133–134.

³⁹Samuel J. Brown, "In Captivity," in 56 Congress, 2 session, *Senate Executive Documents*, no. 23, p. 11 (serial 4029). This was also published as a pamphlet (Mankato, 1900).

⁴⁰This version of Little Crow's speech as his son is supposed to have remembered it appeared in H. L. Gordon, *The Feast of the Virgins and Other Poems*, 343 (Chicago, 1891). It was reprinted with the title, "Taoyateduta Is Not a Coward," in *Minnesota History*, 38:115.

⁴¹Pond, "Dakota or Sioux in Minnesota," in *Collections*, 12:396 ("best speeches" quote). 493 ("no man" quote).

THE DRAWING on page 98 is from *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, June, 1863. The water color on page 100 is through courtesy of the Hill Reference Library, St. Paul. The pictures on pages 104 and 105 are from the Minnesota Historical Society's audio-visual library.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).