ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The US-Dakota War

By **Kathleen L. Gorman,** Minnesota State Mankato

The long history of broken promises to Native Americans by the federal government exploded in an unforgettable way in August 1862. A dispute over a delayed annuities payment ended in warfare on the northern Great Plains. By the time the six weeks of fighting ended, at least 600 settlers (military and civilian) and a still undetermined number of Dakota (estimates run between 75 and 100) were dead. The surviving natives found themselves first imprisoned and then exiled from the state. And the echoes of the US-Dakota War continue to this day in fights over monuments, names, and the meaning of reconciliation.

The terminology used here needs a brief explanation. Sioux was a name given by the Ojibwe to members of a group of Native Americans connected by language or family ties in the northern Great Plains. It is worth noting the Ojibwe were long-time adversaries of those they called Sioux. The preferred name for those people is Dakota with different groups identified either geographically or by band names. The conflict in Minnesota in 1862 has been known by a variety of names over the years from The Great Sioux Uprising to the now used U.S.-Dakota War. Some familiarity with the geography also helps understand the way the conflict unfolded. While Minnesota is known as the Land of 10,000 Lakes, rivers play a major role in the state's economy and history. Much of the fighting in the US-Dakota War occurred along the Minnesota River which makes a very obvious bend at the city of Mankato and heads north towards Minneapolis and the Mississippi River. Early Dakota reservations were placed along the Minnesota with one (the Upper or Yellow Medicine Agency) near Redwood Falls in the west central part of the state and the Lower or Redwood Agency (near Morton).[1]

As with most of the issues between Native Americans and white settlers in the West, the problems leading to the US-Dakota War start with questions over land ownership and borders. Parts of what would become the state of Minnesota were first governed by terms of the 1787 Northwest Ordinance. From that point through Minnesota's statehood in 1858, the federal government negotiated a series of treaties with

[1] Thanks to the "Note About Names" in Scott W. Berg's *38 Nooses: Lincoln, Little Crow and the Beginning of the Frontier's End* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012) for a concise explanation of the terminology. The original terminology used in treaty negotiations differentiates between different groups of the Sioux tribe and that terminology will be used in discussions of the treaties.

the Native Americans in the territory, slowly stripping tribes of their land. The pattern of all these treaties was pretty much the same, the Dakota exchanged chunks of their land for both immediate and long-term payments by the federal government.

In 1837 the eastern Dakota gave up land in Wisconsin Territory and moved west of the Mississippi. In exchange for this land, the Dakota received $4,000 ($1,500 for horses and presents for the natives involved in the negotiation, $2,000 in goods, and $500 to move some buildings). Among the natives signing this treaty was the father of Little Crow, who would play a major role in the upcoming war. Fourteen years later Little Crow himself signed one of the two treaties concluded at Traverse des Sioux (and known by that name thereafter) in which the Dakota agreed to give up more of their land and move to two reservations in exchange for more than $400,000 divided up in a similar fashion to the 1837 treaty and more than $3,000,000 in annuity payments held by the government to be paid over fifty years. Those payments were to be delivered by July 1 of the year. The late payment of these annuities was a major issue for the natives who grew increasingly angry with the entire process.

And to add insult to injury even more land, some of the most productive farmland along the Minnesota River, was given to white settlers in an 1858 treaty. The 1858 treaty also granted special rights to Dakota who took up farming and chose a path of assimilation into white society. But by this point, violence had already erupted. In 1857 Washpeton Dakota led by Inkpaduta killed thirty-eight settlers near Spirit Lake, Iowa. The natives were upset whites were moving into land given to them and attacking Dakota with no redress by the federal government. The government insisted Dakota capture Inkapaduta and turn him in, starting a debate within the Dakota community about the entire nature of its relationship with the United States government. Anyone paying close attention would have noticed the area was a tinderbox and would not require much to be set aflame.

While the long term causes of the US-Dakota War are not surprising (increasing white encroachment on Dakota land, a series of broken promises and misunderstandings), the immediate causes are not so clear. But testimonies by Dakota indicate they believed the Civil War gave them the chance they needed to reclaim their land and take back what they believed they were owed. When Thomas Galbraith, the local Indian Agent, recruited a company of whites and mixed-blood Dakota (the Renville Rangers) to go fight for the Union, the Dakota belief in the weakness of the whites was reinforced. If they had to recruit Dakota to go fight for them, whites had to be desperate for men. Dakota also feared the Civil War was costing so much that they would never see the annuity payments they were owed. That fear seemed to become reality when the 1862 annuity payment was delayed.

Galbraith himself was one of the problems. He got the job when Republicans took power in 1861. The Bureau of Indian Affairs was one of the more corrupt agencies in the federal government and its agents were appointed as political rewards, not because of their ability or knowledge. Galbraith had no experience working with Native

Americans when he took over the Redwood Agency. His boss, Clark Thompson, was equally naive and soon made promises he could not keep. By all accounts, the winter of 1861-62 was an especially harsh one and the Dakota were faced with starvation.

The federal government had food stored at both agency offices but initially declined to hand out that food, worried about possible annuity payment delays. The Dakota used the annuity payments to pay traders for supplies including food. Traders and Dakota both relied on the timely arrival of those payments to survive. Sometimes traders received payments directly from the annuity for debts owed by the Dakota. Delays in the annuity meant the Dakota could not pay traders who refused to extend any credit until they believed the Dakota could pay past debts.

Agents at the Redwood Agency decided to defuse the situation by distributing what they could. But a group of Dakota broke into the storehouse at the Yellow Medicine Agency and helped themselves forcing soldiers to distribute food (to try and prevent future attacks on the storehouses at both agencies) and try to work with private traders to get the Dakota the supplies they needed. Even this attempt to make a deal with the traders went badly when one local trader, Andrew Myrick, was quoted as saying, "So far as I am concerned, if they are hungry, let them eat grass." Myrick was killed in the conflict and his mouth was stuffed with grass, his insult not forgotten.[2]

The match was lit when four young Dakota men were out hunting and got into a dispute with white settlers. The accounts of what precipitated the dispute vary slightly but most agree that the hunt had not gone well and the four found a farm near Acton with hens and eggs available. They argued over asking for the eggs with accusations of cowardice flying between the four. The result was six dead whites, including a 15 year old girl. The survivors from the farm went for help and the four Dakota returned to the reservation to report what had happened. The Soldier's Lodge of the Dakota debated whether to turn the four over to white authorities for punishment, but instead chose to declare war. For their cause to have any chance to succeed, they needed all Dakota to join and needed the tribe's most charismatic leader, Little Crow, to join them. Little Crow knew they could not win and while reluctant to lead a lost cause, also needed to regain some prestige lost after his previous negotiations with the whites. Ultimately he joined the cause.

The Dakota attacked the Lower Agency on August 18 shortly after sunrise. They burned building and shot those trying to flee. Andrew Myrick was among those killed in this attack. It was a complete surprise and success. Approximately twenty whites were killed, ten captured, and just under fifty escaped via ferry. Many of those who fled went to Fort Ridgely, about thirteen miles east. They spread the word of the uprising to members of the 5th Minnesota, who were stationed at the fort. A group of fewer than fifty soldiers went to respond to the attacks. They were warned they would be outnumbered,

[2] The story of Andrew Myrick is told in numerous sources including Gregory F. Michano, *Dakota Dawn: The Decisive First Week of the Sioux Uprising, August 17-24, 1862* (New York and California: Savas Beatie, 2011), 33-39.

but chose to disregard the warnings. They rode into an ambush at Redwood Ferry where twenty-four were killed..

Scattered attacks continued along the Minnesota River and Fort Ridgely withstood multiple attacks until finally reinforcements arrived from Fort Snelling. However, another Minnesota River city did not fare quite as well. New Ulm, a town of between 600 and 900, was an attractive target for the Dakota. The first attack occurred on August 19th and the city's defenders managed to hold on long enough for a storm to drive off the attackers. Four days later the town was attacked again by a better organized group, but it was also defended by a better organized force. The town held on for a day before evacuation was ordered. Most civilians fled to Mankato, about 30 miles down the Minnesota River.

The last two major battles occurred in September. At Birch Coulee, soldiers who were part of a burial party were surrounded by Dakota. They managed to survive more than a day long siege when army reinforcements arrived. The siege was lifted by artillery, but not before at least seventeen soldiers were killed and more than forty wounded. Some scholars believe the Battle of Birch Coulee stopped the Dakota from more attacks on river settlements and also warned whites about the dangers of whites continuing to travel undermanned through Dakota Territory.

The decisive battle of the war occurred on September 23 at Lone Tree Lake (although the battle is called Wood Lake due to mistaken identification of the lake) Prior to the battle, Colonel Henry Hastings Sibley, commander of the Minnesota State Militia, learned the Dakota held at least 250 prisoners and began negotiating for their release. The captivity narratives of some of those prisoners drove much of the desire for revenge after the war. Little Crow was willing to release the prisoners but not yet willing to lay down his arms. Sibley had been delayed in his plans to attack by a lack of both men and equipment. The federal government was unable to assist with supplies due to the demands of the ongoing Civil War.

They did send some manpower and a new general, John Pope, to oversee the war. Pope and later scholars believed his removal to Minnesota was punishment for his defeat at the Second Battle of Bull Run. Pope brought with him a talent for drilling unruly soldiers and anger at the Dakota for his exile. At Lone Tree Lake US soldiers accidentally found Dakota preparing an attack and were able to defeat them largely due to superior numbers, approximately 1,500 US soldiers against 700 Dakota. It was the first and last decisive defeat for the Dakota and marked the end of significant fighting in Minnesota. Warfare on the frontier itself would continue for another twenty-eight years, not only in Minnesota and the Dakotas but throughout the west. It would not end until Wounded Knee in 1890..

Three hundred ninety-three Dakota were ultimately tried by a military commission for their roles in the fighting, 323 were convicted, and 303 sentenced to execution. The commission was charged to try the defendants "summarily" and that they did. On the last day of hearings, more than 40 cases were heard. The defendants were

not provided with legal counsel (Colonel Sibley believing they were not entitled to it) and it is still disputed whether the military commission had the legal authority to conduct the trials. Since the commission members who issued the verdicts were all personally affected by the uprising, there is little doubt they were prejudiced against the defendants. The situation was not a good one politically for Lincoln. Settlers throughout the frontier wanted the natives punished harshly for their actions, some of Lincoln's own supporters were unhappy with the entire situation, and Lincoln had already established his policy of reviewing death penalty cases in the military. Lincoln heard directly from settlers including a letter from Thanddeus Williams in November 1862:

> To illustrate, allow me to recite a few instances; 1. A settlement was depopulated & several of the young girls taken into captivity; one of these, a maiden of sixteen had her clothes cut off in front below her breast, so as to expose her person; for three days & nights 23 painted savages satiated their lust on her, keeping her in a wood, tied to a log; she finally escaped. Numbers of such instances occured. 2. A messenger returning from Ft. Ridgely, had occasion to pass through a small settlement. It was totally depopulated; no smoke issued from the chimneys; the plow stood in its broad furrow on the prairie; the grain unharvested in the fields ~~ovr~~ over which wild buffalo were roaming, & destroying; the houses left standing were pierced with bullets, while the places of others were only marked by a heap of ashes; following his devious path a few rods further, he came to two little children, sitting on the ground, with their arms around each other; they appeared ignorant of what had happened, perfectly stolid. "We are waiting for mother", they said; "where is your mother, poor children?" asked the messenger. "Down there!" they pointed down a little path. He followed it a few yards, when he came to <u>thirteen</u> dead bodies, lying side by side near a little spring; what was most touching was, the only living thing among them was a little babe vainly endeavoring to draw nourishment from the breast of its murdered & outraged mother! Sickened with the sight, he passed on, & left those poor children to their fate, for his footsteps were pursued by lurking foes, & he could not pause. Many such incidents could be recounted; 27 dead bodies were found rotting in a pile in an other place.[3]

In the end Lincoln approved the execution of "only" thirty-nine Dakota, one of whom was reprieved shortly before the execution.

In November 1862, 1600 Dakota were moved to Fort Snelling near St. Paul where approximately three hundred died during the long winter. Both the camp at Fort Snelling

[3] Thaddeus Williams to Abraham Lincoln, Saturday, November 22, 1862, in Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress. Transcribed and annotated by the Lincoln Studies Center, Knox College, Galesburg, Illinois.

and the camp near Mankato holding the condemned Dakota faced attacks from angry settlers and were defended by U.S. Army troops. The prison camps were also places of death. One captive, Good Star Woman, described life there.

> A high fence was put around their camp, but the settlers came and took their horses and oxen .... Measles broke out, and the Indians thought the disease was caused by the strange food. This was the first time they ever had the disease. All the children had measles .... Sometimes 20 to 50 died in a day and were buried in a long trench, the old people underneath and the children on top.[4]

Good Star Woman described herself as "one of the Friendly Sioux" as most of the prisoners were Dakota who had not taken up arms. Some had actively assisted the whites, but that made no difference in their post-war treatment. Many settlers still objected to the idea of any Dakota remaining in Minnesota and in April 1863 Congress passed the Dakota Expulsion Act which revoked all treaties with the Dakota and ordered their removal from the state. This act has never been repealed despite recent calls to do so.

On December 26, 1862 thirty-eight Dakota were executed in Mankato, Minnesota (one Dakota received a last minute reprieve from Lincoln after questions about the testimony implicating him were raised). It remains the largest mass execution in United States history. (Because whites were unfamiliar with the Dakota language and naming practices it is likely that at least one of those executed was a case of mistaken identity). Their bodies were dumped into a mass grave on the edge of town where many would be dug up by grave robbers. However, the execution did not end the war against the Dakota. The state paid bounties for the scalps of Dakota and there were a number of military expeditions against remaining Dakota. Little Crow was a casualty of bounty hunters in July 1863.

Most Dakota ended up on reservations in Nebraska or South Dakota and only slowly have reestablished a presence in Minnesota. The 150th anniversary of the Civil War has been marked by books, articles, recreations, and even this very web site. Seemingly every skirmish has been recreated and memorialized. But the overall mood remains one of celebration, marking the nation's survival and even growth because of the conflict.

In Minnesota, the 150th anniversary of the US-Dakota War was marked by soul searching. On August 17, 2012 Governor Mark Dayton issued a statement calling for the day to be a Day of Remembrance. His phrasing reflects the continuing conflicted feelings in the state: "August 17, 1862 marked a terrible period in Minnesota's history. The first victims of the 'US-Dakota War of 1862' lost their lives on that day, 150 years

[4] Good Star Woman's story is told in Frances Densmore's "A Sioux Woman's Account of the Uprising in Minnesota", in the Frances Densmore Collection at the Minnesota Historical Society.

ago. The ensuing attacks and counter-attacks killed hundreds more U.S. soldiers, Dakota braves, conniving traders, and innocent people." In December 2012 Minneapolis declared the US-Dakota War "genocide" and St. Paul did the same a month later. Descendants of the settlers killed created their own web sites, monuments, and organizations (Friends and Family of Dakota Uprising Victims complete with their own Facebook page) and continue to react whenever the Dakota are portrayed as victims. Dakota and their supporters recreate the forced marches to Fort Snelling and out of the state. The site of the mass execution, Mankato, created a reconciliation park near where the executions occurred and hosts a Pow Wow every year (Mahkato Wacipi) with reconciliation as its theme and expressly honoring the 38 executed Dakota. One hundred fifty years later the battle continues on the northern Great Plains far below the radar for most Americans, just as the original war had been.[5]

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[5] Governor Drayton's statement was released to the press on August 16, 2012, see http://mn.gov/governor/newsroom/pressreleasedetail.jsp?id=102-46359 .