

## The Indian Wars of Minnesota

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From the late 1600s to the 1850s, two principal tribes vied for control of the lands encompassing present-day Minnesota. The Dakota (Sioux), had long occupied Minnesota when the Ojibwe (Chippewa), a branch of the eastern Algonquians, began moving into the area from the east.

This intrusion led to periodic but bloody inter-tribal warfare which resulted in the eventual migration of the Dakota from the forested part of Minnesota to the open prairies and river valleys of the south and west. The Ojibwe in turn occupied the east central and northern forests.

Although the U.S. Army at Fort Snelling was initially charged with preventing occupation of Indian lands by whites, government policy shifted when pressures for western expansion became too great. In 1837 both tribes were forced to give up their lands east of the Mississippi. Eventually tract after tract of Indian land was taken for white settlement.

In addition, the Winnebago of northeastern Iowa were moved into central Minnesota by the government in 1848. Their removal from Iowa was prompted by complaints of pioneers who wanted to plow, plant and fence all of Iowa's rich prairie soil, but it was also hoped that the Winnebago would serve as a buffer between the warring Dakota and Ojibwe.

### **Prelude to War**

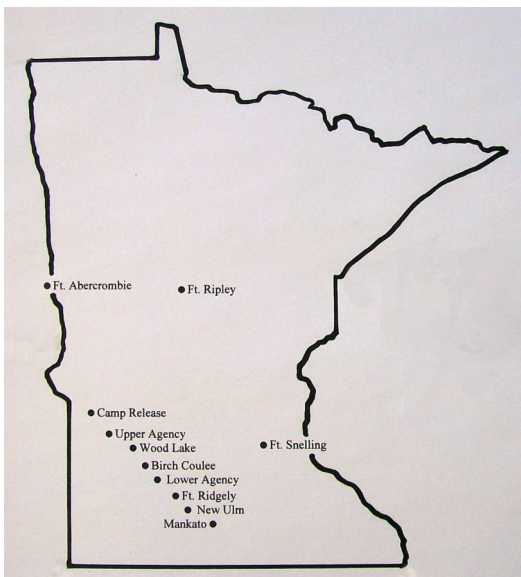
By 1858, the Dakota were confined to a narrow strip of land along the western "V" of the Minnesota River. Most Ojibwe were concentrated in six northern reservation villages and the Winnebago had been relocated to a reserve south of Mankato.

Life was especially hard for the Dakota. By 1862 conditions in southwestern Minnesota were

ripe for conflict. Relegated to their small reservation, under severe pressure to relinquish their own culture and religion, frequently misled and cheated by traders and treaty-makers, and faced with starvation due to poor harvests and delayed annuity payments by the federal government, many Dakota people came to feel that their only recourse was to fight for their honor, their fast-disappearing freedom and, indeed, their very survival. Many others, however—among them Christian Dakota and farmers favored by the Indian agent—strongly opposed going to war.

## **The Dakota War of 1862: War Breaks Out**

On August 17, 1862, four young Dakota men in a hunting party killed five settlers in Acton Township. It sparked an all-out war. The next day, two days after an appeal to Lower Sioux Agency traders for credit to buy food was refused, Dakota warriors under Chief Little Crow took over the Lower Sioux Agency on the Minnesota River, killing traders and other whites, and taking some of the women and children captive. When word reached Fort Ridgely, 46 men of Company B, Fifth Minnesota Volunteer Infantry, headed to the Lower Agency but were ambushed at Redwood Ferry crossing. More than half the soldiers were killed, including the captain. Dakota war parties fanned out along the Minnesota and Cottonwood Rivers, attacking farms and small settlements without warning. That night, the Upper Sioux Agency on the Yellow Medicine River (near present-day Granite Falls) was attacked and burned to the ground.



Continuing their offensive, the Dakota laid siege to the town of New Ulm on August 19. A much stronger attack came on August 23, but citizens and a hastily organized militia under the command of Judge Charles Flandrau managed to hold it off. Fort Ridgely was likewise attacked, and successfully defended, August 20 - 22. Meanwhile, bands of Dakota looted and burned—killing farmers and their families as they went—across a vast

swath of south-central Minnesota. Citizens of Minnesota were horrified by the ferocity of the unexpected uprising. Thousands of terrified whites became refugees as they abandoned their homes, animals and farms. Governor Alexander Ramsey later stated that half of the state's population was displaced by the conflict.

## Countermoves

In the midst of the Civil War, Minnesota found itself at war within its own borders. Governor Ramsey asked his old political rival, Henry H. Sibley, a veteran Indian trader and Minnesota's first governor, to scrape together an army and commissioned him to command an expedition against the Dakota. He called for fresh volunteers and secured permission from President Lincoln to delay sending Minnesota Volunteer Infantry troops south to fight against the Confederacy. Citizens hastily organized 54 armed militia companies for local defense.

With a force of about 1,200 troops—nearly all of them inexperienced as soldiers—Sibley left Fort Snelling for the besieged Fort Ridgely. He moved with caution, gathering supplies and drilling his men along the way. He finally reached the fort on August 29, a good four days after the Dakota had abandoned their attempt to capture it. By then, Fort Ridgely had already been reinforced by troops rushed in from Fort Ripley and by the Renville Rangers, a newly recruited company diverted from Civil War service.

Sibley's army suffered a major defeat at Birch Coulee on September 2, about 15 miles west of Fort Ridgely. A detachment of 150 soldiers, sent out to search for survivors, reconnoiter, and bury the dead, was ambushed in a surprise, pre-dawn attack. A fierce fight ensued. Twenty-four soldiers were killed and 60 were wounded before a large relief column from Fort Ridgely arrived the following afternoon. Only two Dakota attackers were known to have been killed.

By September 3, hostilities had broadened to include Hutchinson, Forest City, and settlements to the north along the Red River Valley. Fort Abercrombie (about 25 miles south of present-day Fargo) was repeatedly attacked until late September. Nearly all commerce between Fort Gerry (Winnipeg) and Fort Snelling ground to a halt.

Sibley's force, which now numbered 1,600—including elements of the Third, Sixth, Seventh, and Ninth Minnesota regiments and the Renville Rangers—gradually fought its way up the Minnesota River valley and won a decisive victory on September 23 at Wood Lake, near present-day Granite Falls. The Battle of Wood Lake ended organized hostilities, although skirmishes with small bands of Dakota continued for a few more weeks.

## **Aftermath**

The war had lasted six weeks. An estimated 450-550 white civilians, 93 U.S. soldiers, and an unknown number of Dakota militants had been killed. A large section of the state had been devastated; many settlers chose to never return. Surrender by those Dakota who had not fled to the plains came on September 26, 1862, at Camp Release, so named for the 269 white and mixed race captives who were turned over to Sibley by friendlier Dakota Indians who had protected them.

A military court soon began holding trials and sentenced 307 Dakota to death for taking part in the war. President Lincoln, at the urging of Episcopal Bishop Henry B. Whipple, reviewed the trial records and changed most of the sentences to prison terms, but 38 Dakota were executed in a mass hanging at Mankato on the day after Christmas.

That winter, 300 remaining Dakota warriors were imprisoned at Mankato and more than 1,600 others—women, children and some men—were held in an overcrowded internment camp constructed on the bottomlands below Fort Snelling. Many died as a result of a measles epidemic that swept the camp in December. Treaties with the Dakota were nullified by Congress and nearly all members of the tribe were banished from the state. Those who had not already fled were soon sent to reservations in the Dakotas and Nebraska. To keep them from returning, the state government offered a reward for the scalp of any Dakota man killed in Minnesota. The mostly innocent Winnebagoes were moved once again, first to the Crow Creek reservation in present-day South Dakota and then to northeastern Nebraska.

For the next two years, immense punitive expeditions headed by Sibley and General Alfred Sully pursued escaping Dakotas and their western relatives as far west as the Yellowstone River, marking the onset of warfare between the U.S. government and holdout Dakota bands that lasted until 1881.

## **The Last Battle**

The last of the bloody nineteenth century encounters between U.S. troops and American Indians was fought on Minnesota soil in 1898. The trouble started on the Leech Lake Indian Reservation near Walker in Northern Minnesota. Members of the Pillager band of Ojibwe felt they

were being defrauded of certain logging rights. They were also resentful of several arrests made on the reservation by government authorities. One day, twenty Ojibwe men stormed the jail and set two members of their band free. The alarmed U.S. marshal wired for help and 100 regulars from Fort Snelling's Third U.S. Infantry Regiment were quickly sent to Walker. Almost all were raw, untrained recruits. While taking some Indians into custody, a private's rifle accidentally discharged, touching off a a barrage of gunfire from other Indians who had secretly surrounded the soldiers. In the ensuing battle, six Ojibwe and six soldiers were killed, including the commander, Major Melville Wilkenson.

Fears of another Indian uprising gripped northern Minnesota. National Guard troops were dispatched to the area but by the time they arrived, tempers had cooled. Subsequent arrests and an investigation led only to light sentences and some policy changes favorable to the tribe.

It was a quiet end to a long, tragic chapter in American history.