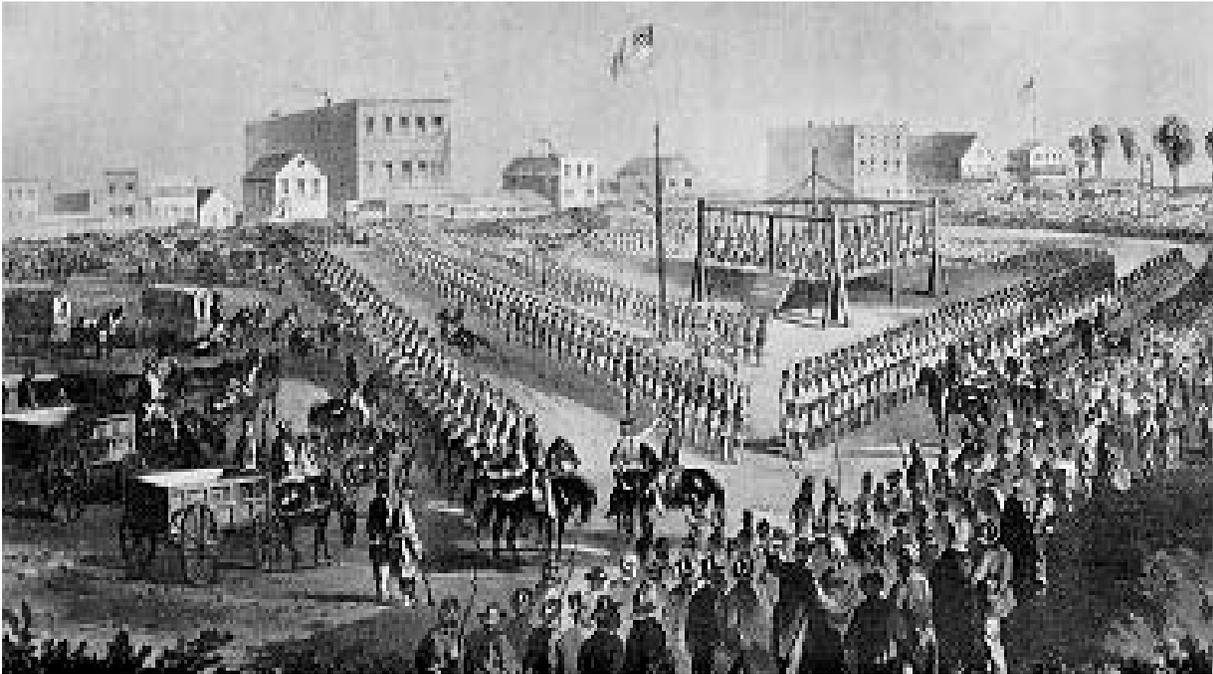


MANY AND GREAT, O GOD, ARE THY THINGS



The largest mass execution in American history was committed at 10 a.m. on December 26, 1862, in Mankato, Minnesota. On that day, thirty eight (38) Native Americans of the Dakota people were hung on orders of the President of the United States of America, having been tried by a military commission.

The executions were the final tragic result of what was then called the “Sioux Uprising against the American settlers” in the new state of Minnesota, a 37 day war that claimed the lives of 500 settlers and about 60 Dakota. The origin of the “Dakota Conflict” as it was later called, stemmed from the inability of the federal government to provide timely annuity payments as required by prior treaties with the Dakota, which left the Dakota without adequate food supplies.¹

Annuity payments reduced the once proud Dakota to the status of dependents. These payments also reduced the power of Dakota chiefs because annuity payments were made directly to individuals rather than through tribal structures. They also created bitterness because licensed traders sold goods to Indians at 100% to 400% profit and frequently took "claims" for money from individual Dakota paid out of tribal funds. No effective means of legal recourse was

¹ On July 23, 1851, in the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux, two bands of Dakota cede to the U.S. lands in southwestern portions of the Minnesota Territory (as well as portions of Iowa and South Dakota) for \$1.665 million in cash and annuities. Later in August 5, 1851, in the Treaty of Mendota, two other band of Dakota cede to the U.S. lands in southeastern portions of the Minnesota Territory for \$1.41 million in cash and annuities. The 7,000 Dakota were moved to two reservations each measuring twenty-miles wide by seventy-miles long bordering the Minnesota River in southwestern Minnesota. In 1858, the Dakota further reduced the size of their reservation by ceding additional land on the north bank of the Minnesota River.

available to wronged Dakota, leading some Dakota to talk of another option open to them: robbery and violence.

As tensions between Dakota and traders mounted, rumors began circulating that the annuity payment scheduled for August of 1862, if they will be made at all, will not be in the customary gold because of the ongoing Civil War.² The Dakota planned to demand that future annuity payments be made directly to them, rather than through traders. An August 4, 1862 confrontation between soldiers and braves at the Upper Agency at Yellow Medicine led to a decision to distribute provisions on credit to avoid violence. At the Lower Agency at Redwood, however, things were handled differently. At an August 15, 1862 meeting attended by Dakota representatives, Indian Agent Thomas Galbraith, and representatives of the traders, the traders resisted pleas to distribute provisions held in agency warehouses to starving Dakota until the annuity payments finally arrived. At a meeting called by Indian Agent Thomas Galbraith to resolve the impasse, Andrew Myrick, spokesman for the traders, says: "So far as I am concerned, if they are hungry, let them eat grass."³

On August 17, 1862, four young Dakota men were on a hunting trip in Acton Township in Minnesota, where they stole food and killed five white settlers. Soon after Dakota war councils were convened, and while there was no unanimous agreement among the councils to wage war on the settlers, attacks on the white settlements continued in an effort to drive them out of the Dakota homeland.

With military intervention, the violence ended in September 23, 1862 with over 2000 Dakota taken into custody. A military commission was convened three days later to "try summarily" Dakota for "murder and other outrages" committed against Americans. Up to 40 cases a day were heard by the five man commission, with some trials lasting only five minutes and the Dakota prisoners provided with no defense counsel. Over the next six weeks, 393 Dakota were tried, 323 were convicted, and 303 were sentenced to death by hanging.

During the Commission's proceedings, the ongoing Dakota trials were the topic of discussions at President Lincoln's cabinet meetings. Lincoln and several cabinet members were disturbed by military reports on the trials and planned executions, and moved quickly to prevent precipitous action. President Lincoln directed the military that "no executions be made without his sanction." Lincoln asked for "a full and complete record of their convictions" and "a careful statement" indicating "the more guilty and influential of the culprits." The military forwarded the records of the trials to President Lincoln, together with a letter urging Lincoln to authorize

² Unbeknownst to those gathered at the Lower Agency, the long delayed 1862 annuity payments were already on their way to the Minnesota frontier. On August 16, a keg with \$71,000 worth of gold coins reached St. Paul. The next day the keg was sent to Fort Ridgely for distribution to the Dakota. It arrived a few hours too late to prevent an unprecedented outbreak of violence.

³ This phrase would prove to be a chilling rallying cry for Dakota on the war path. As later told by Dakota Chief Big Eagle when the conflicts initially began:

The killing was nearly all done when I got there. Little Crow was on the ground directing operations. I saw all the dead bodies at the agency. Mr. Andrew Myrick, a trader, with an Indian wife, had refused some hungry Indians credit a short time before when they asked him for provisions. 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." When I returned to my village that day I found that many of my band had changed their minds about the war, and wanted to go into it. All the other villagers were the same way.

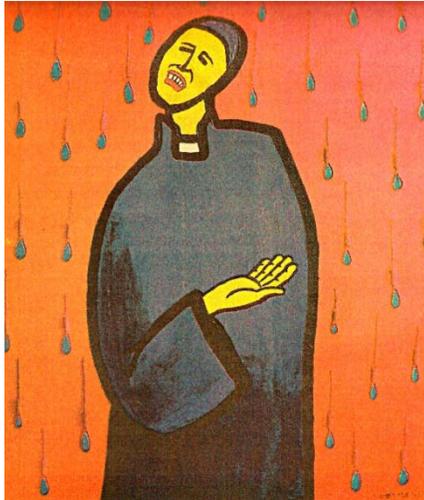
execution of all of the condemned and warning of mob violence if the executions did not go forward. Lincoln asked two clerks to go through the Commission's trial records and identify those prisoners convicted of raping women or children. They found only two. Lincoln then asked the clerks to search a second time and identify those convicted of participating in the massacres of settlers. This time they came up with thirty-eight. American settlers wanted President Lincoln to hang the 303 Dakota condemned to die by the commission. In December of 1862, several hundred settlers, armed with hatchets, clubs, and knives, attacked the camp where the condemned Dakota were being held, but were surrounded and disarmed by soldiers.

Interceding on behalf of the Dakota was Episcopalian Bishop Henry Whipple, known to the Indians as "Straight Tongue" for his honesty and fair dealings with the Dakota. Presbyterian missionaries to the Dakota also supported a fair trial.



Bishop Henry Whipple

Whipple was a champion for the cause of Native American groups in Minnesota against what he saw as an abusive and corrupt Federal policy towards Indians, even at the risk of endangering the establishing of his new diocese. Whipple traveled to Washington to meet with Lincoln to discuss the causes of the Dakota Conflict. By Lincoln's own account, Bishop Whipple's visit impressed him deeply and Lincoln pledged to reform Indian affairs. President Lincoln pardoned 265 at the urging of Bishop Whipple. But Whipple's intervention was not popular at the time.



“38 Tears of Bishop Whipple” © by the Rev. Robert Two Bulls. A post modern icon of Bishop Whipple. Used by Permission of Artist.

It was said that "The doomed ones wished it to be known among their friends, and particularly their wives and children, how cheerful and happy they all had died, exhibiting no fear of this dread event. To the skeptical it appeared not as an evidence of Christian faith, but as a steadfast adherence to their heathen superstitions." But during the night several were baptized, and received the communion of the Episcopal Church.

The Indians sang as they left their prison heading to the gallows, and continued singing until the end. It was reported at the time that they were singing a “death song,” but it was actually a Dakota Odowan or hymn, known in our 1982 Episcopal English hymnal as “Many and great, O God.” The following is the first two verses of the hymn:

Many and great, O God, are Thy things,
Maker of earth and sky;
Thy hands have set the heavens with stars;
Thy fingers spread the mountains and plains.
Lo, at Thy Word the waters were formed;
Deep seas obey Thy voice.

Grant unto us communion with Thee,
Thou star abiding One;
Come unto us and dwell with us;
With Thee are found the gifts of life,
Bless us with life that has no end,
Eternal life with Thee.

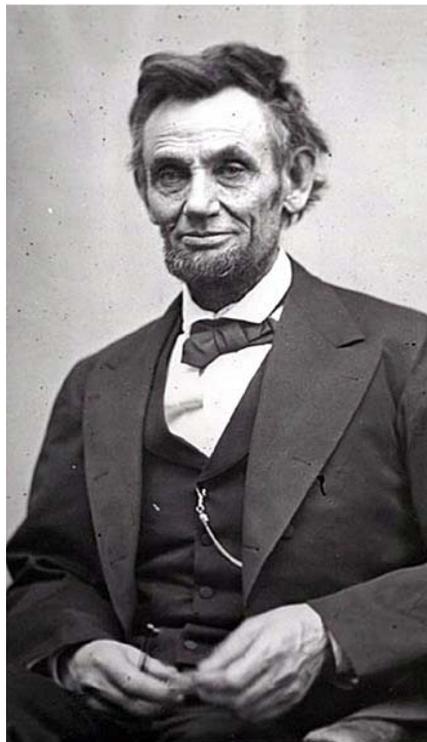
A more accurate translation of the Dakota Odowan that the Dakota prisoners actually sang is attached to this story.

At the third drumbeat, the rope that held both the platform and the prisoners was cut and the prisoners fell to their deaths. A loud cheer went up from the thousands of spectators gathered.

Some doctors, including one named Mayo, arrived to collect cadavers for their medical research, and the rest were buried in a mass grave. Among many of the recorded stories of this event there are two lesser known ones that stand out for us to consider today:

After spending a freezing, disease-ridden winter at Fort Snelling, the remaining Dakota were banished to an inhospitable reservation in South Dakota. All, that is, except one man named Chaska. In an example personifying the trial defects, Chaska—who had saved the lives of captive white women—was errantly hanged instead of one Chaskaydon, convicted of shooting and mutilating a pregnant woman.

The marshal of the prison had gone to release Chaska: “[B]ut when I asked for him, the answer was ‘You hung him yesterday.’ I could not bring back the redskin. [Daniel W. Homstad and originally published in the December 2001 issue of *American History Magazine*.]”



President Abraham Lincoln

The Proclamation of Emancipation (commonly referred to as the “Emancipation Proclamation”) signed by Lincoln, was hailed at the time as a landmark piece of government policy directed against slavery (although it only applied to those freed slaves already residing in Union territory and not in the Confederacy):

Ultimately Lincoln’s handling of the Dakota Conflict trial is another example, like the Emancipation Proclamation, of Lincoln’s ability to understand what he can and cannot do in a trying situation where there is no perfect solution. Perhaps Lincoln’s position is best summed up in a

conversation he had with Minnesota Senator and former Governor Alexander Ramsey, who pushed hard for Lincoln to deal with the Dakota harshly. When Ramsey told Lincoln that his leniency towards the Dakota would cost the Republican votes in the 1864 presidential election, Lincoln is reported to have said to Ramsey, “I could not afford to hang men for votes.” [Niles Anderegg, November 12, 2009 . . . 11:19 am in the President Lincoln’s Cottage Blog.]

In April of 1863, Congress enacted new legislation that provided for the removal of Dakota bands from the southern portion of Minnesota. Most of the Dakota bands were moved to South Dakota. The remaining prisoners who were not condemned to death were moved from Mankato to Camp McClellan, near Davenport, Iowa. In 1866, President Andrew Johnson ordered the release of the 177 surviving prisoners.

The Sioux Wars went on for many years. A military expedition carried the fighting into the Dakota Territory in 1863 and 1864. As the frontier moved westward, new fighting erupted. Finally, in 1890 at Wounded Knee, the generation of warfare that began at Acton, Minnesota in August of 1862 came to an end.

Reflections to Consider:

Contrast Bishop Whipple and President Lincoln in their responses to the conflict and their decision-making towards the Dakota; what can we learn from each of them as to what they did? Do you know the hymn “Many and great, O God”? It is hymn 385 in the 1982 Episcopal Hymnal. A midi file of the tune can be found online:

<http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/m/a/mangreat.htm>

What does the lesser known story of Chaska speak about justice and prejudice?

Some scholars today believe that Lincoln reacted and decided based upon being a lawyer as well as politician. He had those who wanted Indians dead and church people like Bishop Whipple to please, so he took the middle ground.

Was that a good decision? Study both sides of issue.

What do the Gospels speak to us about justice and prejudice? If you were Lincoln what would have you done and why?

Read more about Bishop Whipple online at:

<http://anglicanhistory.org/usa/whipple/sanborn.html> and
<http://anglicanhistory.org/usa/whipple/flandrau.html> .

Read more in the interview with the Rev. Robert Two Bulls “Minnesota Priest’s Pop Art Challenges Stereotypes” by Pat McCaughan in “diocesan digest” of *Episcopal New Monthly* 2/1010, page 5.

Contributed by Malcolm Nāea Chun (Native Hawaiian), and edited by Paul Nahoia Lucas (Native Hawaiian).