

1862 in Dakota Land, a Genocide Forgotten:

How civilizational transformation can get lost in the fading rate of history.

by Michael Andregg, for the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations
38th annual meeting at the University of New Brunswick, St. John, Canada, June 26-28, 2008.
mmandregg@stthomas.edu

abstract

1862 was a critical year in a process by which a land larger than many nations was transformed from one civilization to another. But the process was not a classic conquest easily marked in history books. Rather, it was a slower ‘digestion’ of over 20 million hectares of territory by one civilization accompanied by moments of true genocide or at least “ethnic cleansing” amidst much longer periods of very high death rates for one group and high birth rates and especially immigration rates for the other group. But this was sufficiently gradual that most historians did not record it on their lists of wars and other organized conflicts. I will discuss some extremely divergent views on what happened then. One reason they are so divergent is because the conflict of 1862 and its aftermath were extremely complex, with massacres on both sides, and with Indians working on both sides. Some whites fought to exterminate the Indians while others risked their lives to save them, and vice versa. Half-breeds of many kinds were caught in the middle, trying to survive a dramatic civilizational transformation that was occurring all around them. The result: In 1800, the territory now called Minnesota was 99%+ Indian, and by 1900 it was 99%+ whites of European descent.

Introduction

The Minnesota State Historical Society describes the conflict this way in the introduction to its large collection of related manuscripts (1, page 7):

“In 1862, Minnesota was still a young state, part of a frontier inhabited by more than one million Indians. Times were hard and Indian families hungry. When the U.S. government broke its promises, some of the Dakota Indians went to war against the white settlers. Many Dakota did not join in, choosing to aid and protect settlers instead. The fighting lasted six weeks and many people on both sides were killed or fled Minnesota. Former Minnesota Governor Henry Sibley led an expedition of soldiers and Dakota scouts against the Dakota warriors. The war ended on December 26, 1862, when thirty-eight Dakota Indians were hanged in Mankato in the largest mass execution in U.S. history. Afterwards the government forced most of the remaining Dakota to leave Minnesota. For white Minnesotans, their experience of blood and terror negated all promises they had made to the Dakota.”

To many Dakota today this was a case of outright genocide preceded by a trail of broken promises in treaties enacted by whites with no sense of honor. To many whites today, Native Americans of any kind are rare curiosities who run casinos if they are lucky, and live in squalor on dirt-poor reservations if they are not lucky. These polar views are both incorrect, enabled by selective forgetting of the real history that led to this day.

(ISCSC member) William Eckhardt wrote about a “fading rate of history” in his superb “Civilizations, Empires and Wars: A Quantitative History of War” (2, 1992). He discussed how this phenomenon of lost data complicates the quantitative study of war. A related problem for all scholars is selective memory loss, because which data is lost fastest is not random. Genocides are especially likely to be “forgotten” quickly. The case I discuss today vividly illustrates some of the powerful social psychological processes at work. It is not necessary for evil people to censor records. Shared assumptions, legalistic definitions, preoccupation with other topics and a dash of hubris are sufficient for this result. The fact that victors write histories, and that the losers in this case relied on oral tradition is also significant.

Genocide is embarrassing to those with consciences, all the more so to peoples who claim to be very “Christian” or otherwise grounded in deep moral foundations. Shared assumptions that the people being replaced are not full humans deserving of human rights (e.g. “savages”) or are not really being killed but are “just moving away” assist the process of genocide. Artful definitions of key terms like “war,” “murder” and “justice” can help some people to ignore genocides, like others today ignore or rationalize torture as US policy. They do not have to be “bad” people, just “busy” people. “Manifest Destiny” was a vibrant idea in the United States of the mid-1800’s, and millions of immigrants from Europe were being told to go west for opportunity. Missionaries wanted to “civilize” the “heathen” by baptism into an entirely new way of life, and prevalent agrarian culture saw wilderness as land “wasted” on hunter-gatherers who produced nothing of commercial value.

Thus many North Americans wanted to forget how a vast land was taken from weaker neighbors and thousands of highly literate people quietly, almost unconsciously sanitized their records and textbooks such that even though great historic detail remains available about what really happened, the dark parts of that reality were virtually forgotten within a century among the general culture.

The case I refer to is the living history of the State of Minnesota, one of 50 states in the United States of America. In 1800 CE this land was almost 100% Native Americans mainly of the Dakota and Ojibwe tribes, with a few French Canadian fur trappers and traders scattered about. By 1900, Native Americans constituted only .52 % (half of one percent) of the official census (3). By 1980, even the memory of Native American origins and history was almost gone except for a plethora of Indian place names.

Not that the Indians were blameless. When this war began, some Indians ambushed hundreds of settlers, killing as many as 400 in the first few days, mainly farmers and families who were often scalped, raped or brutalized before they died. The spark was an argument among 4 young Indian hunters over a hen’s eggs near a tiny town called Acton, two of whom were later killed by their own Dakota people for bringing a vast disaster to their entire nation. Years of encroachment by whites, loss of game, debts to traders and many promises on paper unkept made even eggs worth fighting for. Dakota villages were already in a pre-war status, and a council decided that this was the moment to strike back against the scattered farms.

Before getting into the details of what happened in 1862 which make this such an excellent case, I want to focus again on the process of forgetting because that is so intimately

related to the distorted histories through which we make urgent foreign policy decisions today. In 1995 The ISCSC met in Dayton, Ohio, where a local scholar would show us remnants of another Indian culture (Mississippian) then vying for the status of “civilization.” I asked an excellent scholar of war and peace (and a founder of the modern ISCSC, Matthew Melko) a question about the genocide of Native Americans. His reply was “What genocide?” He thought that 90% of Indians had died by disease (as do many other scholars) and that very little conflict deserving of terms like war much less genocide had occurred.

Perhaps that applies to Ohio, but it does not in Minnesota where an otherwise gentle collection of Norwegian and Swedish farmers, Irish, English, French, Germans and other immigrants quietly killed many of the natives of the area, drove most of the rest away to barren lands, and then worked very hard to erase even the memory of native culture from the minds of Indian children who survived. “Kill the Indian to Save the Man” became a slogan of forced assimilation. That was implemented by formal government programs executed partly by churches that were given reservations like franchises to induce assimilation through boarding schools, prohibition of native language and rituals, and harsher methods. In their minds, this was ALL done for GOOD reasons, to Christianize the heathen and bring them into modern agriculture and economy, to literally save their lives as well as their souls. Those Indians who complied got special privileges while those who did not were subject to extreme penalties including sometimes extrajudicial death.

At only one point from 1800 to 2000 did this process come close to a level of recorded violence required for the label “war.” That is often defined as “At least 1,000 deaths in one year due to organized, armed conflict involving at least one government” (Eckhardt, 1992). That year was 1862, the year of the “Dakota Conflict,” the “Mankato Uprising” or the “U.S. Dakota War” depending on who is labeling the affair. At least 600 whites lost their lives that fall, but estimates range as high as 800. The number of Indians who died, probably larger ¹, was not accurately counted. That is one example of the selective forgetting I refer to.

This puts the “conflict” too low on the dead people counted scale to get on formal lists of “recognized wars.” Some scholars would exclude this case for another reason, because the Indian “governments” were not “sufficiently organized” to count as nation states. Those scholars’ definitions require participation by two governments instead of Eckhardt’s one. Thus by definition alone the elimination of many indigenous peoples passed under the cognitive radar of many conventional war scholars. This definition, by the way, excludes most genocides.

After their defeat in the fall of 1862, about 1600 surviving Indians, mostly women and children with some elders, were “interned” at the foot of Fort Snelling which had been built from 1819 - 1827 at the confluence of the Mississippi and the Minnesota rivers to control this

¹ The number of Indians who died during this war is disputed and will forever remain uncertain. Two meticulous historians claim this was under 100, but also note that Indians customarily removed their dead from battle grounds, and if the body was not found by whites it was not counted. Only 16 Indian deaths are recorded from the battle of Wood Lake where the largest engagement with the best organized regular Army forces occurred. Oral history relayed by Scott DeMuth later here claims their casualties were “very high” but gives no numbers. Written records trump oral histories among scholars.

vast territory. Many modern Indians call this a concentration camp; whites just a camp if they know of it at all, but a picture from the day shows a high stockade wall and a very dense concentration of teepees (see below). About 10% died there that winter, many of measles and pneumonia, but a serious case can be made that they all would have been killed by enraged settlers if they had not been guarded by soldiers. Certainly this was the opinion of Gen. Henry H. Sibley who had defeated the fighters, gathered survivors, innocents and “friendlies” and Col. William R. Marshall who marched them 120 miles to Fort Snelling.

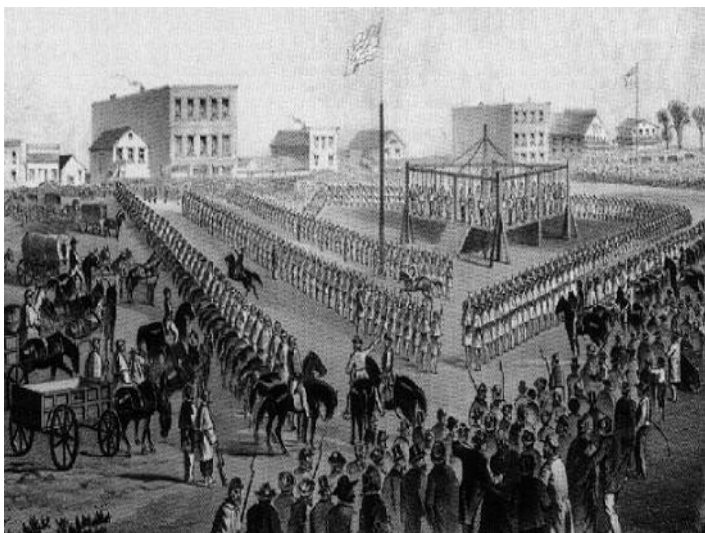
Some died during their forced march from areas near Fort Ridgely where they were captured or gathered, and some were released to whites who vouched for them. 1658 set out, 1601 arrived and records from the troops who guarded them recorded lethal attacks on the 4-mile long group near Henderson. However you interpret that, during the hard winter 130-300² of the 1601 people interned died on that flat land below Fort Snelling due to the combined effects of trauma, malnourishment and epidemic disease in close quarters. About 1300 Indians survived to be shipped down the Mississippi River to St. Louis, where they were loaded onto a large ferry and shipped up the Missouri River to a Crow Creek reservation in South Dakota. 300 more died there before they were moved again, to a Santee reservation in Nebraska.



Photo of the Ft. Snelling enclosure by B.F. Upton, winter of 1862-63

Every move went from more fertile to more barren land with harsher prospects for survival. About 400 Dakota men who had been captured were separated from the women and children, and 392 were quickly tried. 303 were given death sentences, and 38 Dakota men ultimately were hung simultaneously from an elaborate gallows in Mankato, Minnesota, USA, on the day after Christmas of 1862 in the largest single execution in U.S. history.

² 300 is the most widely cited number, but estimates go as low as 130 according to two historians (4). Both rely on daily counts at the Fort used to check out rations. That number is contradicted by other estimates, like the physician who dealt with many illnesses and deaths, and other testimonies. The real number will never be known, but since 1601 arrived and “about” 1300 left, 300 is cited most often.



Drawing of the hanging at Mankato, Dec. 26, 1862, by W. H. Childs

The distinction between “friendly” and hostile Indians deserves some explication. The Dakota were very divided about what to do about the white people flooding into their land. First, they were organized into many different bands and tribes which were not all of one mind. Second, some were already quite assimilated, called “cut hairs” by their “traditional” brethren, and were working farms growing potatoes, corn and raising livestock. Others worked as scouts for the Army or local militias. Large numbers of “half-breeds” resulted from the previous century of almost exclusively male fur traders marrying Indian women. In fact, when the original war parties of Dakota were formed, about half had to be impressed into service by their more aggressive cousins, by charges of cowardice and claims of duty to a people who were near starvation as their land was depopulated of game and supplies promised by the Great White Father of the east (in return for land cessions) failed to arrive.

These distinctions were mostly lost in the chaos and fear of the first day. When the fighters were defeated just 5 or 6 weeks later, all visible Indians were rounded up yielding about 2050 total. 1658 women, children and very elder males were separated from 392 other male prisoners who were quickly tried without access to counsel and not allowed to testify in their own defense. That would have been difficult anyway since few spoke English. When President Lincoln saw this huge list of men condemned in one day by dubious processes he decided to commute the sentences of those accused only of fighting, and sent the list back to determine who had allegedly raped or murdered outside of battles with the organized militia or units of the Army. Two were convicted of rape, and 36 others of varieties of murder. The rest were sentenced to hard time in a military prison camp in Iowa for fighting, and most served about 4 years where another one third died. But the rest were eventually returned to their families who lived by then on reservations far away.

Having lived among the Indians for over 20 years, Gen. Henry Sibley was well aware of the very mixed involvement of only some of the Indians now in his care, most of whom were utterly innocent women and children. But he was also aware of the rage of the settler community and of the harshness of the coming winter which would challenge feeding his own men and animals, much less such a large group of prisoners. Fearful they would all die, he resolved to protect them at the camp to be built at the base of Fort Snelling near St. Paul.

On Sept. 9, 1862 Governor Alexander Ramsey had declared that “The Sioux Indians of Minnesota must be exterminated or driven forever beyond the borders of the state.” In 1863 he put a \$25 bounty on the scalp of any Indian killed by settlers. That was a lot of money in those days.³ At one point that was raised to \$75, and when a farmer shot an Indian man eating raspberries with his son, he received a record \$500 when it was discovered that the man was “Little Crow,” a Dakota chief. How many bounties were collected during this period is unclear to me, but a senior historian from the Minnesota History Center suggests quite a low number (4). It remains probable to me that many other Indians were killed by individual settlers for years thereafter as they were killed further west. Certainly the decision was made to remove all Dakota Indians from the state of Minnesota, and military expeditions were organized for that purpose.

Organized campaigns kept some records, but this is where the issue of recorded killings versus quiet deaths becomes quite important. Some Indians were undoubtedly killed like one might kill a coyote, to preserve one’s chickens, or a wolf or a bear, to protect one’s children. They had been banished from the new state of Minnesota due to the savage war and the authorities had declared them fair game for extermination. Now pay attention, dear reader, because this is important. **This is the phenomenological heart of this paper.** Indians were killed like varmints or pests, or dangerous animals in the wild west of America for years, for generations actually, if you look further west. Not in large, organized campaigns of Armies recorded as wars, but in single episodes repeated thousands of times in remote areas all over our American west. My own grandfather participated in this, as did many others. I have known it to happen even in gentle Minnesota of the late 1900’s. But this aspect was not talked about much, nor often recorded in official histories. Angry soldiers may have used a squaw at the Fort for target practice, for example, as recorded in the paper of that day, but a later account from the Colonel in charge claimed she was only “outraged” (raped). And an angry white woman killed an Indian baby on the hard march to Fort Snelling. But you won’t find these stories on modern tourist brochures or in any museum display. Yes, many Indians died of starvation and disease when driven to barren lands or confined in prisons. But many others were quietly murdered, one “savage” at a time by individual settlers or angry soldiers.

Details like that would soon be forgotten, except by the families ravaged. Politicians in Washington D.C. were much more concerned with a non-detail to them called the Civil War which killed more American citizens than any conflict before or since. They were interested, for example, in repopulating the abandoned farms of western Minnesota to grow food for a hungry Union Army. The wars with the Dakota (more commonly called the Sioux by

³ A housekeeper, for example, would be lucky to get \$5 per month for hard labor cleaning, cooking and doing an entire wealthier household’s laundry by hand as well as, of course, her own.

Europeans) would continue for many years thereafter driving them ever further west. Later many of these same politicians would conclude that the long term “solution to the Indian problem” would be a formal program of forced assimilation for those who did not flee west to the Dakota and Montana territories, or north to Canada.

370 years of pre-war period, from 1492 to early 1862.

Everyone in America knows that Christopher Columbus sailed the Atlantic ocean and found “the New World” in 1492. Not everyone remembers that he actually discovered the island of Hispaniola (current home of Haiti and the Dominican Republic) where within about 50 years the native Arawak Indians were rendered extinct by excessive service as slaves. That aspect is vividly recorded in the annals of Bartolome de las Casas (1484-1566) (5). Publishing these candid observations took considerable courage because he did not get permission from the Inquisition which was in force at that time. Once again the joy of discovery by Europeans got much more press than embarrassing or deadly consequences for the previous residents.

Subsequent decades of attempts to colonize what would become Massachusetts and the New England states, mainly by Anglo Saxons and French settlers, and of South America mainly by Spaniards, is an extremely rich mixture of slaughters and “Thanksgivings” with many alliances between this group or that of “Indians” with various European entities. A recurring theme was uncertainly whether any particular alliance would last, or to whom it applied. The Europeans had a hard time keeping Indian tribes distinct in their minds, and no doubt the Indians had a hard time telling British descendents from French or Spanish. Many freebooters represented themselves as agents of governments, traders inflated charges and created debts, and treaties were made and broken with gay abandon.

One of the few absolute constants was large scale immigration from Europe, driven by population pressure, religious repression and resulting wars. This process was barely slowed by the American Revolution, and as the great young nation grew, it also exported its surplus population to the west. This demographic pressure was as important as any legal factor or recorded battle of hundreds of “Indian Wars” most too small to list on the scales noted earlier. About 2.3 million people immigrated to the United States in the decade of the 1860’s alone, plus there were over 3% per year growth rates among the resident population. 3% growth doubles in 23 years even without new immigration. All those new people did not migrate to Minnesota, but it was on the frontier and a tidal wave of people seeking opportunity was encouraged to “go west” in 1862 where the land was free and opportunity abundant.

Demographic pressure in Minnesota was tiny in 1800, but it became a tidal force by the mid-1800’s. One key moment was the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, when President Jefferson bought 828,000 square miles of Indian occupied lands between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains. He purchased this from France, of course, not the Indians.

In late fall of 1805, Army Lt. Zebulon Pike encamped with two groups of Indians on a mile-long island where the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers converge, now called Pike’s Island. He had been sent to find the source of the Mississippi River and to get a treaty signed.

He traded small goods valued at \$200 and “perpetual hunting rights” for signatures from these two small groups on a paper that ceded control of 100,000 acres along these rivers to the U.S. government (6). The fact that the Indians did not read English, understand contracts or even the concept of ownership of land, and the fact that two groups encamped on a river in no way represented the entire Dakota people much less the Ojibwe people to the north was ignored. Lt. Pike did not have to be a ‘bad man’ to do this; he was just an officer with a mission to fulfill, which he did. He got his “X’s” on his paper and went home the next spring.

14 - 20 years later Fort Snelling was constructed about 75 feet up on a bluff with a commanding view of both rivers to control this vital junction, and it was so well built with such impressive crossfires of cannon in all directions that no battle was ever fought there. But it became the headquarters of many things, including development of the Minnesota Territory, and ultimately it overlooked the miserable deaths of hundreds of Indians just a few feet away on the flat banks of the river bottom below in 1862-3, while food, blankets, and other stores were stockpiled above. This was not intended, I think truly, but it happened anyway.

To the white soldiers and settlers, 1862 was just a footnote in a much longer history of western expansion, and the big notes of that year for historians were certainly Civil War notes. There was another major development in 1862, passage of the “Homestead Act” which opened much of the west to claims by pioneer settlers, to 160 acres of free land if developed, and more if desired at \$1.25 per acre. In Minnesota that same land had been purchased at 7.5 cents per acre from the Dakota in two 1851 Treaties on the promise of annual annuities. To the Dakota, 1862 was the end of living and the beginning of survival, survival of only a wretched fragment of the whole peoples who had lived there before with cultures and traditions of their own.

The War, or Uprising, Conflict or Rebellion depending on who is labeling the lethal events that changed two nations

I will begin with a fairly standard summary of this 6 week war. First, it was preceded by a crop failure in 1861 and a very harsh winter of 1861-62. The Treaties signed in 1851 (Traverse des Sioux, and Mankato) had ceded vast areas from Indian to U.S. government ownership in return for annual annuities and food. But now, rather than occupying half of modern Minnesota, the Dakota were left with a reservation ten miles on either side of 150 miles of the Minnesota River (reduced by half in 1858). But the U.S. was at war with itself in 1862, the annuities came late and what food there was remained locked in warehouses waiting for arrival of the gold to pay for it. Game was gone, many Dakota were starving, and they noticed white men heading south for the Civil War. The Department of Indian Affairs was widely seen as the most corrupt in the entire government (by whites as well as by Indians) and many people took graft before crumbs appeared at Indian tables. The mood was already dark. When discussing the fact that many were in debt already, a particularly mendacious trader named Andrew Myrick said in an open forum: “So far as I am concerned, if they are hungry let them eat grass or their own dung.” That did not sit well with starving Dakota Indians.

Then, in a tiny town called Acton four young hunters went to steal eggs from a farm, a dispute erupted and one proved his courage by killing the farmer. Within minutes 3 white

men, the wife and a girl of 15 lay dead. A spark had been set to dry tinder and the war parties among the divided Dakota decided this was the time to strike to save their way of life. They forced others to go along, and soon every farmer for miles around was in danger. Andrew Myrick was found dead with grass stuffed in his mouth. Those settlers who were not killed flooded into towns like New Ulm, Mankato and St. Peter. Militias were quickly organized, and the Third Minnesota Volunteers, some of whom had already fought with the Union Army at war, were dispatched to defeat the Indians who were seen as entirely at fault, and barbaric in the way they ambushed innocent farmers.

Some immigrant farmers did not have guns, so they were in special jeopardy. But many settlers in Indian country did have guns to hunt, to deal with bears and wolves, even moose in Minnesota that killed more people than wolves, and the whole repertoire of dangers that certainly included uncertainty when it came to the Native Americans. Deaths at the hand of the Army were often recorded; deaths by individual encounters with settlers usually not.

Now, a local Dakota and honors student at one of our Universities, Scott DeMuth (7), puts the same story a bit more pungently, but his version is consistent with documentaries produced by our public television station in 1992 and 1996 (8, 9).

“The Dakota Uprising of 1862 ... began with the Treaty of Traverse de Sioux and the Treaty of Mendota in 1851. These treaties, which were signed by a few Dakota men intoxicated by whisky, ceded vast amounts of Dakota territory to the United States. The treaty guaranteed the Dakota money, food, goods, and a twenty-mile wide reservation along a 150 mile stretch of the Minnesota River. The treaty became null and void after promised compensation was either never given or stolen by officials in the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

When Minnesota was declared a state in 1858, representatives of several bands of Dakota, including Chief Taoyateduta [Little Crow], traveled to Washington D.C. to make further negotiations. The negotiations resulted in the Dakota losing the northern half of the reservation along the Minnesota River along with rights and access to the sacred Pipestone quarry [in far Southwestern Minnesota]. The ceded land was quickly split up into several townships and farmland for settlers. This resulted in the wild prairies, forest, and wild lands used for traditional lifeways, being destroyed. Traditional lifeways were so devastated by colonial settlement that Dakota people in south and western Minnesota had to sell fur pelts to make a living.

Payments guaranteed by treaties were never made.⁴ The animal populations that had supported Dakota communities were nearly wiped out. Land was being stolen by the United States government and occupied by settlers. Additionally, broken treaties, food shortages, and famine all added to growing tensions.

⁴ Editor's note: Actually, both money and goods were often sent by Washington D.C., but stolen by many middle men including especially the traders authorized to trade with the various Indian groups. Traders were also encouraged to indebt Indians in various ways, and took liberties with arithmetic.

On August 8, 1862, representatives of the Sisseton and Wahpeton bands of Dakota successfully negotiated for food in the Upper Sioux Agency. However, the Wahpekute and Mdewakanton Dakota turned to the Lower Sioux Agency with the same demands and were denied food. Indian Agent and State Senator Thomas Galbraith would not distribute the food without payment, and lead trader Andrew Myrick responded to the Dakota by stating, “So far as I’m concerned, if they are hungry, let them eat grass.”

Three days later, Andrew Myrick was found dead, grass stuffed in his mouth. Chief Taoyateduta had led a band of warriors to attack settlers in the Lower Sioux Agency. Food stores were taken and several buildings were burned to the ground. A militia that was sent to suppress the uprising ended up suffering 44 casualties and losing the Battle of Redwood Ferry. The Dakota band continued to attack the settlement and New Ulm and then mounted an attack against Fort Ridgley on August 22.

[Many details of battles excerpted here] The fighting lasted over six weeks. Most of the major fighting occurred at the Battle of Wood Lake in September, where Taoyateduta attempted to ambush soldiers of the Third Minnesota Regiment marching along the Minnesota River. The soldiers returned fire and were quickly aided by other soldiers from Sibley’s camp. The fight lasted two hours with the Dakota warriors suffering heavy losses. This would be the last major battle fought in the Dakota War of 1862.

Dakota warriors ended up surrendering at Camp Release on September 26. Six weeks later, 303 Dakota prisoners were convicted of rape and murder and sentenced to death.”

This concludes DeMuth’s description of the war. The attitude of surviving settlers is best captured by some quotes from Corrine Monjeau-Marz’s book about the internment camp (4, pages 28-29). In a letter from Rev. John Williamson to his missionary board:

“Perhaps it is not best for me to express it in writing, but I will say, I do not consider that any human court has the right to inflict personal punishment on any one for the sin of some of his race – hence I detest the avowed determination of perhaps a majority of the citizens of this State that they will never rest till the [Indian] race is exterminated by war or sent to a hangman’s or Napoleon’s grave.” ... “On the other hand I am thankful that the Lord has inclined Gen. Sibley to do them as much justice as he had. ... It has been in the heart of many to murder the Indians – men, women, and children without discrimination. So far they have been restrained.”

Finally, on page 69 Ms. Marz records her opinion about the internment and subsequent exile:

“These Dakota, a population of innocent women, children and men would experience horrors associated with government corruption and abandonment but it would be after leaving the Fort Snelling encampment in May of 1863. Destitution, starvation, and debasement were the appalling hallmarks of the 1863-1866 Crow Creek Agency site (at Fort Thompson, Dakota Territory), a true concentration camp and hell on earth.”

Exile, more death and Forced Assimilation

Thoroughly defeated at the Battle of Wood Lake on September 23, 1862 the war was over. 23 counties in southwestern Minnesota had been fairly depopulated of settlers fleeing the raids, but the Indians were driven back and the aftermath had barely begun. As itemized earlier about 2,050 Dakota were divided into two groups, 392 men held for trial and 1658 others who were marched to Fort Snelling to be interned, of whom 1601 arrived. 5-6,000 other Dakota fled north to Canada along the Red River or west to the unorganized Dakota Territories. There were continuing skirmishes and raids from the west, but the war in Minnesota was over.

The white population was very vocal about wanting the Indians either exterminated or driven from the entire state of Minnesota. Their will was expressed by the Commander of the Northwest, Major General John Pope (CO of Lt. General Henry Sibley) who said: "It is my purpose utterly to exterminate the Sioux if I have the power to do so, and even if it requires a campaign lasting the whole of next year. Destroy everything belonging to them and force them out to the plains, unless as I suggest, you can capture them. They are to be treated as maniacs or wild beasts, and by no means as people with whom treaties or compromise can be made." (10)

A line of forts was established along the western borders of Minnesota to Canada and while there were skirmishes and raids the main episodes of future fighting would occur further west. At one point remaining Dakota were 'given' the Black Hills of western South Dakota for their next home in perpetuity. The hills could not be farmed and were framed by badlands that were equally unproductive. That lasted until gold was discovered in the Black Hills in the 1870's. Most surviving Dakota today live on some of the poorest reservations in America, Standing Rock and Spirit Lake in North Dakota, and Pine Ridge, Rosebud, Yankton, Sisseton-Wahpeton, Crow Creek, Lower Brule, Cheyenne River and Flandreau in South Dakota. One tiny band was blessed in later years to own an urban casino (Mystic Lake, owned by the Shakopee Mdewakanton band) so those less than 200 enrolled members now get about a half million dollars each per year in proceeds from that rarely successful business.

In 1876 General George Custer achieved lasting fame by losing the only pitched battle between a substantial Army force with the Indians of the west, commonly called Custer's last stand. It was actually the Dakota and Lakota Sioux's last stand (the Lakota were the plains tribe, whose life depended on the buffalo which were now 98% gone). The last large conflict involving Lakota was the misnamed Battle at Wounded Knee fourteen years later (Dec. 29, 1890) when over 300 men, women and children were killed in a chaotic massacre on their way to surrender at the Pine Ridge Reservation.

The 1900 census records the population of Minnesota as 1,751,394 whites (99.18%), 9,182 Indians of all tribes (.52%, most Ojibwe of the north) and 5,276 'other colored' (.30%).

Thus did a vast land go from over 99% Indian to over 99% white in just one century.

While missionaries first arrived in Minnesota in 1834, they became instruments of government policy in the 1870's when missionary schools were established to "Christianize" the Indians. In 1887 the Federal government passed the Dawes Act or the General Allotment Act which declared that each cooperative Indian head of household would get 160 acres of land and be taught how to farm it properly. The fact that those acres were often unfarmable badlands was overlooked. But the need to turn hunter-gatherers into farmers was not (9).

Much attention was focused on getting the Indian children into boarding schools run by missionaries, to keep them separated from their parents for 9 months each year. Here they were forbidden to use their native languages. Children who returned said they could not talk the Dakota language because it was illegal, Satan's language, and that they would be punished severely. Even on the reservations powwows had to be held secretly and rituals like the Sun Dance, Vision Quests, and sweat lodges were done clandestinely if at all. In fact, the massacre at Wounded Knee was prompted partly by an effort to stamp out a mystic Ghost Dance which had been the last gasp of the medicine men to maintain power over their dying culture.



Dakota boys and girls at an early boarding school (above); girls only below.

By 1934 in a moment of reform the now Bureau of Indian Affairs recognized that eradication of Indian languages was not really necessary for the education of Indian peoples and this policy was officially abandoned. But most of the damage had already been done.



Conclusions

The polar views on this century of history in and around the state of Minnesota are clear. One camp including many (but by no means all) surviving Dakota is that this was a genocide, started by land theft, usurious lending and broken treaties (which were duplicitous in creation), crystallized by the war of 1862, and consolidated by banishment to barren lands and policies of cultural destruction that separated families, eradicated language and forced Indians to farm instead of hunt. The other polar camp including many (but by no means all) whites viewed the uprising of 1862 as entirely treacherous, uncalled for, and characterized by barbaric slaughter of hundreds of innocent farmers along with their wives and children. The vengeance the Indians harvested was richly deserved, according to this view.

Both polar views focus on blame, and much of the written record focuses on battles, maneuvers and personalities of the day (after whom a great many of the counties, towns and streets of Minnesota are named). For a moment, I want to step back from those perspectives and take a quick and simpler biological view of what happened. Consider these data.

1. The last buffalo seen in Minnesota was seen in 1830.
2. In 1849 a census related to organizing the Minnesota Territory in preparation for a bid for statehood listed 4,535 whites resident, about one third of whom were mixed race French/Canadian Indian residents of the colony of Pembina in the far northwest (and far outside the area of the Dakota conflict).
3. In 1850 the first formal U.S. census was conducted which listed 6,077 whites resident, and the U.S. Department of Indian Affairs estimated 31,700 Indians by tribe of whom 21,500 were varieties of Dakota.
4. A pre-statehood census in 1857 showed a territorial population of 150,037 (whites), an increase of 2,469% from just 7 years earlier.
5. On May 11, 1858, Minnesota becomes the 32nd state of the U.S.A.
6. The 1860 federal census shows 172,023 whites resident, an increase of 14.7% in three years. The Indian population by then was down to about 18,000, a drop of 43% from just ten years earlier.
7. Approximately 1,000 steamboats were landing at St. Paul each year during this tumultuous time, most bringing immigrants seeking opportunity as well as the goods and guns to fuel a vast expansion.

So, more simply put than even polar views, a hunter gatherer culture was basically overwhelmed and replaced by an agrarian culture with better weapons and vastly more people.

In the summary words of Rhoda Gilman of the Minnesota Historical Society (11) in “How Minnesota Became the 32nd State” in Making Minnesota Territory: 1849 – 1858:

“By 1854 the Euro-American population of the territory was more than 30,000, and just 3 years later it topped 150,000.”

Later, Ms. Gilman characterizes this period of dramatic change. “The nine territorial years had set the stage for transforming the natural and cultural landscapes of the upper Mississippi country into those of a ‘civilized’ Euro-American community. The undisturbed systems of plant and animal life that Americans called ‘wilderness’ were converted into commodities subject to ownership and exchange. A way of life that regarded them as eternal and necessary for human existence was ruthlessly eliminated. As a result, the scene was also prepared for the tragic drama that drenched Minnesota’s western prairies in blood when the Dakota made a last desperate effort to take back their country in 1862.” (11, page 19)

Civilizationalists should take note that the concept of “civilization” was a driving force during this period. The Europeans and descendents thereof were there to “civilize” a continent seen as wasted on unproductive savages. This was the age of “Manifest Destiny” and beliefs like this were more public in an era of agrarian racism untempered by civil rights movements to come.

One of the great ironies of the moment was that the largest execution in American history (38 Dakota on December 26, 1862) occurred within one week of the Emancipation Proclamation which legally freed the slaves in the south (January 1, 1863). In fact, a black man named Dred Scott whose case went to the U.S. Supreme Court where he pleaded a right to be free since he had lived in a free state for seven years, lived with his surgeon owner at Fort Snelling during the 1830’s and early 1840’s.

It is certainly possible to become overly romantic about Indians. They were not saints; they warred with each other often then, and fight among each other now. The Dakota were traditional enemies of the Ojibwe who lived to the north, and as many as a third of the men died violent deaths of one kind or another according to a pioneer doctor who lived with and observed them for 40 years. After being introduced to alcohol, alcoholism was rampant among native people. This contributed to the depression and despair of youth who lacked role-models they had known before the white men came and the game disappeared. Some Indians adopted western ways more willingly than others when they saw the benefits of civilization like stable food sources, warmer homes for fearsome winters, and medicines that sometimes worked. Even today many Native Reservations are very rough places to raise a family, with high rates of violence, alcoholism and poverty and low rates of education and employment.

None of that justified the betrayals of treaties and robbery by agents that characterized the mid-1800’s in this area. But in the final analysis, demographics seems the key rather than who was most to blame how. In the end the Indians were overwhelmed by a high-birthrate agrarian culture. I am utterly amazed by this case of civilizational encounter as I learn about the history of ground I walk on daily. So I will close with one last thought from the Dakota language. When the ISCSC came to the University of St. Thomas for its 35th annual meeting in 2005, I hung a banner to welcome you. It said “Mitakuye Oyas’in” which means “We are all relatives” in the language of the Dakota people. That is a thought to ponder on a fragile planet with pressing needs, plenty of ethnic conflict, and nuclear weapons all about.

Notes and References

- A. I happen to live approximately one mile from Pike's Island at the confluence of what are now called the Minnesota and the Mississippi Rivers so I have walked or run there thousands of times since the early 1980's. At that time, the only overt sign that Indians ever lived there was a 4 x 6 inch brass plaque at the base of a decayed, long abandoned flag pole on a small rise of the island. This plaque noted Zebulon Pike's mission to get a treaty establishing rights to 100,000 acres around this island for the U.S. Government in 1805. Now, due to persistent efforts over many decades by the Indians with support from historians at the Minnesota History Center, there is an interpretive center nearby with much more detail on who died there why in 1862. The 1900 census listed 9,182 Indians left in Minnesota among 1,751,394 white and 5,276 other 'colored' people. Access that data at: <http://www.demography.state.mn.us/documents/centuryo.pdf>
- B. "Minnesota" means, roughly, 'sky-tinted or murky waters' in the language of the Dakota, which was their name for what is now the Minnesota River where most of these disputes occurred. What is now Pike's Island was believed to be the actual spot (B'dota) where Wakan Tanka (The Great Spirit, or Great Mystery) created the first grandmother and grandfather who, in lore, gave birth to all human beings on earth. One does not need to be romantic about Indians to recognize that this island would be a sacred place to any nature based peoples. I am a biologist not an historian and was drawn to the island by its abundant nature. It has far more wildlife than the vast majority of places surrounded by major metropolitan cities. Minneapolis is 4 miles upriver, St. Paul 4 miles down, the international airport is a mile away and suburban and urban communities are all around it. Yet I have seen and shown my neighbors as many as 39 deer on this small island at one time.
- C. I am told that "Sioux" means "snake" in the language of the Dakota people, and there is a dialect of the Dakota language groups called "Siouan." Somehow these terms got confused very early in the relationship between whites and the Dakota which echoes to this day. Parenthetically, the Lakota people are a linguistic sub-group that maintain significant distinctions. They were the western, plains tribe that killed buffalo as a main game source, while the Eastern Dakota lived in wooded areas and hunted deer. Both groups saw their main prey species depopulated by hoards of immigrant whites during the early-mid 1800's. In biological terms, their habitat was destroyed.
- D. I am indebted to Stephen Osman, Senior Historian of the Minnesota History Center for making original material available to me in addition to his deep perspective which was invaluable. Deep perspective and data were also obtained from Cynthia Zumwalt of Fort Snelling State Park, and Joseph Fitzharris of the History Dept at the University of St. Thomas. By deep perspective I mean widely sourced and long considered, because the raw data on this topic is so mixed and subject to such different interpretations. The same events are seen quite differently depending on these views, so it was invaluable to have help from these professional scholars of the subject.

1. Minnesota Historical Society, Archive of Manuscripts related to the Dakota Uprising of 1862. At: http://mnhs.mnpals.net/F/?func=find-c&ccl_term=palsn%3D900024366
2. Eckhardt, William. Civilizations, Empires and Wars: A Quantitative History of War. McFarlane, 1992.
3. “Turn of the Century: Minnesota’s Population in 1900 and Today”, a publication of the MN Planning State Demographic Center, editor Martha McMurray, esp. page 7, Nov. 1999.
4. Monjeau-Marz, Corrine L. The Dakota Indian Internment at Fort Snelling, 1862 – 1864. St. Paul, MN: Prairie Smoke Press, 2005. This book includes substantial quotes from a wide variety of original sources, and ten appendices that include the daily logs of residents at the internment camp, baptisms and so forth.
5. Bartolome de las Casas, “Historia de las Indias,” “The Destruction of the Indies” and “Apologetica Historia de las Indias.” The Destruction of the Indies was published in 1552. Accessible at: http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/philosophers/las_casas.html
6. Pike, Zebulon Montgomery. “Journal of a voyage to the source of the Mississippi in the years 1805 and 1806.” American Philosophical Society; gift of Daniel Parker, July 18, 1817.
7. “The Struggle is Our Inheritance: A History of Radical Minnesota,” published in July, 2007 by the Jack Pine Community Center on Lake Street in Minneapolis, MN. Pages 4-8 were written by Scott DeMuth, on “The Dakota Uprising of 1862.”
8. KTCA, Twin Cities Public Television, producer Kristian Berg. The Dakota Conflict. 1992. 60 minutes, VHS documentary.
9. KTCA, Twin Cities Public Television, producer Kristian Berg. Dakota Exile. 1996. 60 minutes, VHS documentary.
10. Letter from Maj. Gen. John Pope to Lt. Gen. Henry Sibley of September 28, 1862, accessible at: http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/dakota/Dakota_excerpts.html
11. Kaplan, Anne R. and Marilyn Ziebarth, editors. Making Minnesota Territory, 1849 – 1858. St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1999. The quotes offered in text were from Rhoda Gilman’s article, “How Minnesota Became the 32nd State.”
12. Photo references can be found at the archives of the Minnesota Historical Society <http://collections.mnhs.org/visualresources/search.cfm?bhcp=1> or at other sites maintained by Native American groups, or at the Twin Cities Public Television site which preserved some of the digital photos used during their 1996 documentary at: <http://archive.tpt.org/dakota/images/>