

A SIOUX STORY OF THE WAR.

THE INDIANS' SIDE OF THE STORY, TOLD BY ONE OF THEIR LEADERS —
THE STORY FROM OUTBREAK TO SURRENDER— WHY AND HOW THE
SIOUX FOUGHT— CAUSES OF THE WAR, COMMENTS ON THE CAMPAIGNS,
AND BATTLE MEMORIES OF FORT RIDGELY, NEW ULM, BIRCH COULIE,
WOOD LAKE, ETC., ETC.

CHIEF BIG EAGLE'S STORY OF THE SIOUX OUTBREAK OF 1862.

The stories of the great Sioux war in Minnesota in 1862 never grow old. They are always new to many and never dull to anybody. Although thirty-two years, nearly a third of a century, have passed since that eventful episode, yet to many it seems but a few months since barbarism rode rampant over a great part of the state, and civilization, gashed and bleeding, was prone on the prairies, with none to bind up the wounds. All over the state are survivors of that terrible contest who remember its incidents and relate them as if the crack of the rifle and the din of the war-whoop yet rang in their ears. The story is always of interest to them.

There are two sides to this as to every other story. The version of the white people ought to be well enough known. But the Indian side, strangely enough, has not been recorded. The soldiers of the Union read no stories of the great Rebellion with more interest than the narratives of the ex-Confederates, and we never got the full and true story of the war until they began to write. So we can never fully understand the Sioux war of 1862 until the Indians tell their story.

In June, 1894, Mr. Robert I. Holcombe of St. Paul (who had become familiar with the history of Gen. Sibley's campaigns against the Sioux in 1862 and 1863, from having been employed several months in examining and classifying the letters and papers of Gen. Sibley for the Minnesota Historical society), made a trip to Flandrau, S. D., to get from Mrs. Huggan and others the Indians' side of the story of the great outbreak of 1862. He there met Big Eagle, a chief, who had taken part with Little Crow in the battles, but had not been engaged in the massacre of whites. His narrative was taken down from his own lips, through Mrs. Huggan, Rev. Mr. Eastman and other competent interpreters. (This story was first published in the St. Paul Pioneer Press, July 1, 1894.)

~~their way to Washington, and which are now in the possession of the Historical society.)~~

"I was born in the Indian village of my father near Mendota, in 1827, and am now sixty-seven years old. My father was Grey Iron, a sub-chief of the Midawa-xanton Sioux. When he died I succeeded him as chief of the band and adopted the name of his father, Wambde-tonka, which, as is commonly called, means the Big Eagle. When I was a young man I often went with war parties against the Chippewas and other enemies of my nation, and the six feathers shown in the head-dress of my picture in the Historical society at St. Paul stand for six Chippewa scalps that I took when on the warpath. By the terms of the treaties of Traverse des Sioux and Mendota in 1851, the Sioux sold all of their lands in Minnesota, except a strip ten miles wide on each side of the Minnesota river from near Fort Ridgely to the Big Stone lake. The Medawakantons and Wacoutas had their reservation up to the Yellow Medicine. In 1858 the ten miles of this strip belonging to the Medawakanton and Wacouta bands, and lying north of the river were sold, mainly through the influence of Little Crow. That year, with some other chiefs, I went to Washington on business connected with the treaty. The selling of that strip north of the Minnesota caused great dissatisfaction among the Sioux, and Little Crow was always blamed for the part he took in the sale. It caused us all to move to the south side of the river, where there was but very little game, and many of our people, under the treaty, were induced to give up the old life and go to work like white men, which was very distasteful to many.

"Of the causes that led to the outbreak of August, 1862, much has been said. Of course it was wrong, as we all know now, but there were not many Christians among the Indians then, and they did not understand things as they should. There was great dissatisfaction among the Indians over many things the whites did. The whites would not let them go to war against their enemies. This was right, but the Indians did not then know it. Then 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. The Indi-

ans wanted to live as they did before the treaty of Traverse des Sioux—go where they pleased and when they pleased; hunt game wherever they could find it, sell their furs to the traders and live as they could.

“Then the Indians did not think the traders had done right. The Indians bought goods of them on credit, and when the government payments came the traders were on hand with their books, which showed that the Indians owed so much and so much, and as the Indians kept no books they could not deny their accounts, but had to pay them, and sometimes the traders got all their money. I do not say that the traders always cheated and lied about these accounts. I know many of them were honest men and kind and accommodating, but since I have been a citizen I know that many white men, when they go to pay their accounts, often think them too large and refuse to pay them, and they go to law about them and there is much bad feeling. The Indians could not go to law, but there was always trouble over their credits. Under the treaty of Traverse des Sioux the Indians had to pay a very large sum of money to the traders for old debts, some of which ran back fifteen years, and many of those who had got the goods were dead and others were not present, and the traders’ books had to be received as to the amounts, and the money was taken from the tribe to pay them. Of course the traders often were of great service to the Indians in letting them have goods on credit, but the Indians seemed to think the traders ought not to be too hard on them about the payments, but do as the Indians did among one another, and put off the payment until they were better able to make it.

“Then many of the white men often abused the Indians and treated them unkindly. Perhaps they had excuse, but the Indians did not think so. 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. There was excuse for this, but the Dakotas did not believe there were better men in the world than they. Then some of the white men abused the Indian women in a certain way and disgraced them, and surely there was no excuse for that.

“All these things made many Indians dislike the whites. Then a little while before the outbreak there was trouble among the Indians themselves. Some of the Indians took a sen-

sible course and began to live like white men. The government built them houses, furnished them tools, seed, etc., and taught them to farm. At the two agencies, Yellow Medicine and Redwood, there were several hundred acres of land in cultivation that summer. Others staid in their tepees. There was a white man's party and an Indian party. 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 Wa-sui-hi-ya-ye-dan ('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 this was why he was defeated. I did not care much about it. Many whites think that Little Crow was the principal chief of the Dakotas 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. 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 he died that summer, and was succeeded by his son, whose real name was Ea-to-ka ('Another Language'), but when he became chief he took his father's name, and was afterwards called 'Little Shakopee,' or 'Little Six,' for in the Sioux language 'Shakopee' means six. This Shakopee was against the white men. He took part in the outbreak, murdering women and children, but I never saw him in a battle, and he was caught in Manitoba and hanged in 1864. My brother, Medicine Bottle, was hanged with him.

"As the summer advanced, there was great trouble among the Sioux—troubles among themselves, troubles with the whites, and one thing and another. The war with the South was going on then, and a great many men had left the state and gone down there to fight. A few weeks before the outbreak the president called for many more men, and a great many of the white men of Minnesota and some half-breeds enlisted and went to Fort Snelling to be sent South. We understood that the South was getting the best of the fight, and it was said that the North would be whipped. The year before the new president had turned out Maj. Brown and Maj. Cullen, the Indian agents, and put in their places Maj. Galbraith and Mr. Clark Thompson, and they had turned out the men under them and put in others of

their own party. There were a great many changes. An Indian named Shonka-sha ('White Dog'); who had been hired to teach the Indians to farm, was removed and another Indian named Ta-opi ('The Wounded Man'), a son of old Betsy, of St. Paul, put in his place. Nearly all of the men who were turned out were dissatisfied, and the most of the Indians did not like the new men. At last Maj. Galbraith went to work about the agencies and recruited a company of soldiers to go South. His men were nearly all half-breeds. This was the company called the Renville Rangers, for they were mostly from Renville county. The Indians now thought the whites must be pretty hard up for men to fight the South, or they would not come so far out on the frontier and take half-breeds or anything to help them.

"It began to be whispered about that now would be a good time to go to war with the whites and get back the lands. It was believed that the men who had enlisted last had all left the state, and that before help could be sent the Indians could clean out the country, and that the Winnebagoes, and even the Chippewas, would assist the Sioux. It was also thought that a war with the whites would cause the Sioux to forget the troubles among themselves and enable many of them to pay off some old scores. Though I took part in the war, I was against it. I knew there was no good cause for it, and I had been to Washington and knew the power of the whites and that they would finally conquer us. We might succeed for a time, but we would be overpowered and defeated at last. I said all this and many more things to my people, but many of my own bands were against me, and some of the other chiefs put words in their mouths to say to me. When the outbreak came Little Crow told some of my band that if I refused to lead them to shoot me as a traitor who would not stand up for his nation, and then select another leader in my place.

"But after the first talk of war the counsels of the peace Indians prevailed, and many of us thought the danger had all blown over. The time of the government payment was near at hand, and this may have had something to do with it. There was another thing that helped to stop the war talk. The crops that had been put in by the 'farmer' Indians were looking well, and there seemed to be a good prospect for a plentiful supply of provisions for them the coming winter without having to depend on the game of the country or without going far out to the west

on the plains for buffalo. It seemed as if the white men's way was certainly the best. Many of the Indians had been short of provisions that summer and had exhausted their credits and were in bad condition. 'Now,' said the farmer Indians, 'if you had worked last season you would not be starving now and begging for food.' The 'farmers' were favored by the government in every way. They had houses built for them, some of them even had brick houses, and they were not allowed to suffer. The other Indians did not like this. They were envious of them and jealous, and disliked them because they had gone back on the customs of the tribe and because they were favored. They called them 'farmers,' as if it was disgraceful to be a farmer. They called them 'cut-hairs,' because they had given up the Indian fashion of wearing the hair, and 'breeches men,' because they wore pantaloons, and 'Dutchmen,' because so many of the settlers on the north side of the river and elsewhere in the country were Germans. I have heard that there was a secret organization of the Indians called the 'Soldiers' Lodge,' whose object was to declare war against the whites, but I knew nothing of it.

"At last the time for the payment came and the Indians came in to the agencies to get their money. But the paymaster did not come, and week after week went by and still he did not come. The payment was to be in gold. Somebody told the Indians that the payment would never be made. The government was in a great war, and gold was scarce, and paper money had taken its place, and it was said the gold could not be had to pay us. Then the trouble began again and the war talk started up. Many of the Indians who had gathered about the agencies were out of provisions and were easily made angry. Still, most of us thought the trouble would pass, and we said nothing about it. I thought there might be trouble, but I had no idea there would be such a war. Little Crow and other chiefs did not think so. But it seems some of the tribe were getting ready for it.

~~"You know how the war started by the killing of some white people near Acton, in Meeker county. I will tell you how this was done, as it was told me by all of the four young men who did the killing. These young fellows all belonged to Shakopee's band. Their names were Sungioidan ('Brown Wing'), Ka-om-de-i-ye-dan ('Breaking Up'), Nagi-wi-cak-te~~

~~early next morning and to kill all the traders. When the Indians first came to him 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'; but he soon came around all right and somehow took the lead in everything, though he was not head chief, as I have said.~~

"At this time my village was up on Crow creek, near Little Crow's. I did not have a very large band—not more than thirty or forty fighting men. Most of them were not for the war at first, but nearly all got into it at last. A great many members of the other bands were like my men; they took no part in the first movements, but afterward did. The next morning, when the force started down to attack the agency, I went along. I did not lead my band, and I took no part in the killing. I went to save the lives of two particular friends if I could. I think others went for the same reason, for nearly every Indian had a friend that he did not want killed; of course he did not care about anybody's else friend. The killing was nearly all done when I got there. Little Crow was on the ground directing operations. The day before, he had attended church there and listened closely to the sermon and had shaken hands with everybody. So many Indians have lied about their saving the lives of white people that I dislike to speak of what I did. But I did save the life of George H. Spencer at the time of the massacre. I know that his friend, Chaska, has always had the credit of that, but Spencer would have been a dead man in spite of Chaska if it had not been for me. I asked Spencer about this once, but he said he was wounded at the time and so excited that he could not remember what I did. Once after that I kept a half-breed family from being murdered; these are all the people whose lives I claim to have saved. I was never present when the white people were willfully murdered. 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 some 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 villages were the same way. I was still of the belief that it was not best, but I thought I must go with my band and my nation, and I said to my men that I would lead them into the war, and we would all act like brave Dakotas and do the best we could. All my men were with me; none had gone off on raids, but we did not have guns for all at first.

~~“That afternoon word came to my village that soldiers were coming to the agency from Fort Snelling. (These were Capt. Marsh and his men.) At once I mounted the best horse I had, and, with some of my men, rode as fast as I could to meet them at the ferry. But when I got there the fight was over, and I well remember that a cloud of powder smoke was rising slowly from the low, wet ground where the firing had been. I heard a few scattering shots down the river, where the Indians were still pursuing the soldiers, but I took no part. I crossed the river and saw the bodies of the soldiers that had been killed. I think Mr. Quinn, the interpreter, was shot several times after he had been killed. The Indians told me that the most of them who fired on Capt. Marsh and his men were on the same side of the river; that only a few shots came from the opposite or south side. They said that White Dog did not tell Mr. Quinn to come over, but told him to go back. Of course I do not know what the truth is about this. White Dog was the Indian head farmer who had been replaced by Taopi and who was hanged at Mankato.~~

~~“I was not in the first fight at New Ulm nor the first attack on Fort Ridgely. Here let me say that the Indian names of these and other places in Minnesota are different from the English names. St. Paul is the ‘White Rock;’ Minneapolis is ‘the Place Where the Water Falls;’ New Ulm is ‘the Place Where There Is a Cottonwood Grove on the River;’ Fort Ridgely was ‘the Soldiers’ House;’ Birch Coulee was called ‘Birch Creek,’ etc. I was in the second fight at New Ulm and in the second attack on Fort Ridgely. At New Ulm I had but a few of my band with me. We lost none of them. We had but few, if any, of the Indians killed, at least I did not hear of but a few. A half-breed named George Le Blanc, who was with us, was killed. There was no one in chief command of the Indians at New Ulm. A few sub-chiefs, like myself, and the head soldiers led them, and the leaders agreed among themselves what was to be done.~~