*FIRE IN THE NORTH*
*The Minnesota Uprising and the Sioux War in Dakota Territory*

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THOMAS D. PHILLIPS
REUBEN D. RIEKE

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# PREFACE

THIS BOOK TELLS THE STORY of the major Indian war that exploded suddenly in the relatively settled region of south central Minnesota in 1862—a conflict that has come to be known as the Minnesota Uprising—and over the months that followed extended far west into the vast reaches of the Great Plains.

Interspersed in that broader tale is the story of three families brought together in the chaos of war by remarkable circumstances that bound them together in a connection that continues to the present day.

The authors are indebted to the Minnesota State Historical Society, several local newspapers, and, most of all, to the Rieke family whose records, personal correspondence, and eyewitness testimony contributed immeasurably to the telling of this story. In the interests of space and readability, we have followed recent convention and confined reference notes to directly quoted material.

The authors wish to express our appreciation to Caxton Press for allowing us to draw material from the work *Boots and Saddles: Military Leaders of the American West* for use in the portions of this book pertaining to John Pope, Henry Sibley, and Alfred Sully. Special thanks also go to Redge Johnson at

*Images II* for his outstanding work restoring the old photographs and creating the maps and diagrams displayed in this book and to Jeanne Kern and Kathleen Rutledge for their usual wisdom, wise counsel, and superb editing skills.

# PROLOGUE

One of the largest and most costly of all of America's Indian wars began as a youthful dare. Before it was over, hundreds had been killed in a conflict that eventually extended over an immense portion of the central and western United States. Though often lost in the shadow cast by the cataclysmic events of the Civil War raging at the same time, the conflict along America's frontier witnessed the largest battle and the most casualties of any Indian war—as well as a mass hanging that surpassed anything similar in the nation's history.

# ACTON TOWNSHIP: AUGUST 17, 1862

AUGUST 17 WAS A SUNDAY. It was a warm, clear day and many of the residents of the new state of Minnesota were enjoying a leisurely Sabbath. Nearing midday, four young Dakota Sioux warriors returning from an unsuccessful hunting trip passed by a farmstead in Acton Township in Meeker County about 80 miles west and a bit north of St. Paul. The four were from Rice Creek, a village 40 miles to the southwest. Noting some chicken eggs lying sheltered against a fence line not far from the farm house, they stopped to pilfer the nest. When one of the youths cautioned against taking the eggs, another questioned his bravery. His pride damaged, the youngster whose courage had been challenged claimed that he was not afraid and he would prove it by killing people who lived at the farm house.

Prodded to carry out his boast, he and the other three approached the dwelling, whose owner, Robinson Jones, and his wife ran a small store and post office on the farm's premises. The details of what followed remain a bit murky but there is some testimony that there may have been an initial period of benign interaction between the braves and

the Jones family during which, by some accounts, the family refused the Indians' request for liquor.

Soon after, Jones, apparently sensing no threat, left to go to the nearby home of his brother-in-law, Howard Baker. The Indians followed. When all had arrived at Baker's place, there was some sort of marksmanship contest, an event not uncommon in the early settlements. Eventually, though—the circumstances are unclear—the four braves suddenly turned their weapons on Jones, killing him instantly. Jones' and Baker's wives, watching the shooting practice from the porch at Baker's house, then came under fire. Seeking to shield them, Baker jumped in front of the women and was killed by a shot to the chest. The braves then killed Mrs. Jones and a friend of the Bakers named Webster who was visiting the farm. As they were leaving, Clara Wilson, a young girl who had been adopted by the Jones family, stepped into the doorway of Jones's farm house. She too was slain.

When the fusillade was over, five people lay dead or dying on Minnesota soil. They would be the first of hundreds to follow.

Before the carnage was over, somewhere between 450 and 800 civilians would be killed with a figure of 757 being a recently cited estimate. In 1919, Minnesota newspaperman Marion P. Satterlee compiled a list 457 civilian and military deaths. Alexander Ramsey, governor of Minnesota at the time of the uprising, cited a figure of 500. President Abraham Lincoln referred to 800 dead in a public remark. Whatever the actual number, until exceeded by the tragic events of 9/11, the figure would represent the highest number of civilians killed by hostile action on American soil.

The conflagration spread quickly across the central and northern frontier. Eventually, much of Minnesota would be engulfed as would almost all of present day North and South Dakota and a sizable slice of eastern Montana. In varying degrees, parts of Wisconsin, Iowa, and Nebraska would be touched as well.

# THE SEEDS OF CONFLICT

THOUGH THE KILLING of five settlers ignited the war that followed, the fuse had been simmering for many years. The Sioux had lived in southern Minnesota for generations, waging almost incessant war against the Chippewa tribe in a contest for land and hunting grounds. Treaties signed a decade earlier with the United States had left the Sioux with two agencies in Minnesota. Both were on the banks of the Minnesota River. The first, the Lower Sioux Agency, also called Redwood Falls, was on the south bank of the stream near the present-day city of the same name. The second, the Upper Sioux Agency, was 30 miles distant on the north side of the river near present-day Granite Falls.

The pacts—the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux, signed July 23, 1851, and the Treaty of Mendota, signed August 5, 1851—each allotted areas of about 20 miles wide and 70 miles long to the Dakotas. The agreements involved different bands of the Greater Sioux nation. Through the Traverse des Sioux treaty, the Wahpeton and Sisseton bands of the Upper Sioux ceded lands in southern and western Minnesota Territory as well as parcels in Iowa and Dakota Territory in return for cash and annuities. The Treaty of Mendota, negotiated with the Mdewakanton and Wahpekute bands of the Lower

Sioux, brought much of the southwest corner of present-day Minnesota into the hands of the U.S .government. Altogether, through the treaties the Sioux relinquished about twenty-four million acres. Two years later the prime agricultural land was opened for settlement.

In 1858, under continuing pressure, the Sioux ceded additional land on the north side of the river. Left with reduced parcels of land not ideal for agriculture and inadequate in size and habitat to sustain a hunting culture, the Dakotas became increasingly dependent on treaty payments. In 1862, with the tribe increasingly under duress, the payments—normally distributed in late June or early July —were late once again.

From the outset, there had been periodic issues with the annuities promised to the tribes by the treaties. The money and goods were often late and the payment process was itself fraught with difficulties. Instead of timely compensation paid directly to them, the Sioux had agreed to treaty provisions that obligated them to purchase goods from local traders. The timing was such that the purchases typically occurred before the annuity payments arrived. Thus, when the money finally reached the reservations, much of it went straight to the traders in payment for the debts incurred by the tribesmen.

The Sioux complained, often with justification, about shoddy provisions, unscrupulous traders who plundered money and goods, and poor treatment by government representatives. On extreme occasions when government payments did not arrive, agents repossessed goods and implements they had provided to the Indians on credit and afterward sought payments for "debts in arrears" from

the annuity moneys. When, in 1862, the annuity payments were yet again late in arriving, violence at the Upper Sioux Agency was only narrowly averted when on July 14 the agent, Thomas J. Galbraith — confronted by 500 Sioux warriors and a break-in at a warehouse — reluctantly agreed to issue limited amounts of food and supplies. On August 9, a second distribution defused another confrontation.

Conditions were equally tense at the Lower Sioux Agency where neither provisions of food nor extensions of credit to hungry Indians were immediately forthcoming. Andrew Jackson Myrick, a trader at the agency, an ill-tempered man already frustrated by being prohibited from using "trader's paper" that allowed vendors to be paid directly from annuity funds for what they were owed on credit, was heard to say "So far as I am concerned, if they are hungry, let them eat grass."

Very soon, Myrick would pay dearly for that remark.

As was often the case regarding areas that had been set aside for Native tribes, there was growing pressure on reservation land from increasing numbers of white immigrants. When the treaties were signed in 1851, the white population of Minnesota was about 6,000. Ten years later, it had risen to 200,000. Compounding the seeming perfect storm of misfortunes that befell the tribes was a series of crop failures that afflicted the Sioux agencies.

Added to these general factors were incidents more specific to time and place. In 1857, Inkpaduta, a renegade war chief of the Wahpekute band of Dakotas, and a small party of followers murdered more than 30 settlers and took four white women captive near Lake Okoboji, Iowa, an event

that became known as the "Storm Lake Massacre." Soon after, the band crossed into Minnesota and killed several persons in Jackson County before escaping west into Dakota Territory where they easily eluded capture by the infantry units sent to apprehend them. Among the militant segments of the Sioux population, the government's failure to bring Inkpaduta to justice was seen as an indicator of the army's limited capability to combat fast-striking war parties.

Overshadowing all other considerations, however, was the on-going cataclysm on whose outcome the fate of the American nation depended. The Civil War had caused military forces to be withdrawn from the frontier garrisons, a fact well known to the Indians. At the same time, word was reaching the Sioux that the war was going badly for the Union. These factors provoked a variety of emotions among the tribes. One sentiment was to strike while the Army forces were weak and reeling. Another, apparently acute in 1862 when the payments were again late in arriving, was the considerable apprehension that the war was costing so much that there would be no money left to pay the tribe the promised annuity. A third, though apparently not as pervasive, was the fear that the rebels might indeed invade—or win—and enslave the Indians as they had the blacks. Conceivably, the latter notion may have led some to favor striking in an attempt to achieve some measure of quasi-independence—possible leverage in event of a Confederate victory.

# THE OPPOSING SIDES

THE SIOUX NATION that was about to wage war against the white settlements was divided into two major, related bands. The largest, about 7,000 in number, was settled in groups along the Minnesota River. The second, with a population of about 3,000–4,000, roamed farther west in Dakota Territory. Not all of either group, it must be said, were eager to go to war. There existed a sizable peace element—"friendlies" as they were called—within the tribe that would later play an influential role as the conflict drew to an end. The combined assemblage was believed to have about 1,500 to 2,000 warriors readily available.

While a chief named Little Crow was to a degree the presumptive overall leader, the nature of his authority was—as with the organization of the tribal groups—rather loose. The bands operated semi-independently; there was little resembling a formal chain of command. Decisions were made by consensus and to a considerable extent adherence to them was voluntary. The authority of war leaders was often based on reputation, personal qualifications or some form of moral suasion.

Though notoriously ill-disciplined, Sioux braves were known as fearsome warriors. War was inherent in the tribe's culture. Conflicts of varying severity, scope, and size were a near-perpetual feature of tribal existence before their days on the reservation. Status within a group was often accorded based on success in combat. Tenacious and aggressive, the Sioux would pose formidable opponents for the thinly-spread Army units initially sent to oppose them.

When the uprising began, Army forces in the region—many of whom would soon be withdrawn for Civil War duty and replaced by local volunteers—were primarily garrisoned at four locations. Two were in Dakota Territory: Fort Abercrombie, on the Red River a half-mile east of present-day Abercrombie, North Dakota; and Fort Randall, on the southwest bank of the Missouri River about 45 miles west of present-day Yankton, South Dakota. The remaining posts were in Minnesota. Fort Ridgely was 12 miles northwest of New Ulm on the Minnesota River. Fort Ripley was on the Mississippi River about 40 miles north of St. Cloud. Altogether, the combined garrisons housed 879 soldiers. A third post in Minnesota, Fort Snelling, was at the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers in Hennepin County. Deactivated in 1858, the post was leased back to the federal government during the Civil War. Although the fort maintained a small garrison, it was used primarily as an induction and training center for enlistees in the Union Army.

At the war's outset, Sioux forces were primarily divided into two war parties. One, operating farthest south, would fight major battles at Fort Ridgely and New Ulm. That

force would eventually be involved in a series of raids and skirmishes such as a noted encounter at Birch Coulee. The second band would raid Minnesota's northern counties and attack Fort Abercrombie. Their goal was to exterminate white settlers in the area between the Dakota border and the Mississippi River.

# THE BATTLEGROUND

TWO PROMINENT FEATURES mark the landscape over which the fighting raged during the blood-soaked days that would follow. The first, the Minnesota River Valley, is unusual in its size and depth. Created thousands of years ago by receding glaciers, it is not at all like the shallow depressions that trace the streams on most American prairies. In Minnesota, the glaciers tore at the earth over the millennia carving a valley hundreds of feet deep and several miles across from rim to rim. Steep banks, often 10 to 20 feet high, straddle the wide stream that typically runs about 6 to 10 feet in depth. Though the river was not deep enough for large commercial traffic, in the 19th century shallow draft boats carried settlers and supplies to the recently chartered city of New Ulm. Twenty miles farther upstream Fort Ridgely also became a major destination after its construction in the mid-1850s. Ultimately, steam boats went even farther—20 miles to the Lower Sioux Agency and 70 more miles to the Upper Sioux Agency. Thus, the waterway was significant to the lives of Natives and settlers alike. When the spreading conflagration shut down river traffic and other means of commerce the effects were felt throughout the region.

Elsewhere, the departing ice scraped the soil leaving it relatively flat, exposing some of the most fertile black soil on the continent. Thousands of small bodies of water called sloughs were also left behind. Nourished by the abundant supply of water, the prairie formed a lush, grassy landscape in which plants, waterfowl, and wildlife flourished. Bison, deer, elk and other large mammals ranged the landscape in seemingly countless numbers. The sloughs, surrounded by bulrushes, cattails, and reed grass, provided homes for muskrats, mink, weasels, and ducks. Muskrats were particularly prized for their meat and for the pelts that Natives and settlers alike sold to supplement their incomes.

Unlike the dryer soil farther west on the Great Plains, the ground in southern Minnesota seemed capable of growing almost anything. Crops of grains—oats, wheat, and barley—and corn thrived and an extraordinary variety of nuts and wild berries carpeted the landscape. In many ways, the setting seemed ideal to the settlers who arrived in ever-increasing numbers and to the Natives who fondly recalled the time when they roamed without boundaries across the prairie. Neither the settlers with their hopes nor the Natives with their memories would surrender the land or their visions easily.

# THE RIEKE FAMILY

THE RIEKE FAMILY began migrating to the United States in 1853. First to arrive from their ancestral home in northwest Prussia were the two oldest sons of Johann Friederich, a miller in the small town of Osnabruck, and his wife Maria Gertrude. Fred, the oldest, came in 1853 followed two years later by George. Both initially settled in Portsmouth, Ohio, where they worked in the steel mills and mining industry. The two boys saved their money and over the next few years brought the entire Rieke family, their parents, six brothers and three sisters, to the United States.

The Rieke's presence in Ohio was likely never intended to be permanent. If not initially part of their plan, acquisition of land farther west in the growing nation rather quickly drew their attention as word of opportunities and fertile soil along the frontier filtered back to Ohio. Their choice of location seems to have been between Kansas and Minnesota. Because of the pro- versus anti-slavery, bushwhacker versus jayhawker, disputes in what became known as "Bleeding Kansas," the Riekes chose Minnesota. In the days prior to the Homestead Act, federal preemption law permitted the filing of claims for a quarter section (160 acres) and payment of fees at a government land office. Land was available for as

little as $1.25 an acre. The affordable price plus the presence of sizable numbers of German-speaking settlers probably made the choice of Minnesota fairly easy.

The Riekes began their further migration in the spring of 1859. Two brothers having already married and with infants at home to care for, it was decided that George and Victor, both unmarried, would make the initial journey and prepare for the later arrival of the extended family. George, 25, and Victor, 23, boarded a steamboat near Portsmouth in March, traveling first down the Ohio to the Mississippi River and then on to St. Louis. At St. Louis, they took another steamer to St. Paul before heading up the Minnesota River. It seems likely that they would have stopped at New Ulm before continuing up the valley where available land was more plentiful.

Passing through Fort Ridgely they met by chance John Buechro, a recently discharged veteran who told them about his homestead five miles away on Rush Lake (now called Mud Lake). As Buechro described it, the east side of the lake, protected from prairie fires, had ample stands of trees for construction and fire wood. The soil itself was rich and black. The lake provided a nearby source of water and teemed with fish and ducks. With land available near Buechro's property, they decided to take a homestead on the southeast corner of the lake. On July 3, 1859, George Rieke filed papers for the first Rieke homestead in America. The deed for the property was later signed by Abraham Lincoln and became one of George's most prized possessions.

Cash poor for a time due to the price of their steamer passage, George and Victor trapped muskrats and sold their

pelts in New Ulm to supplement their income (a practice that continued for generations). Eventually, that revenue and the produce from the farm enabled them to bring the entire family to Minnesota. They also purchased a team of oxen, a plow, and other essentials. A short time later they began supplying Fort Ridgely with firewood and selling hay for the soldiers' horses.

At the homestead site, the brothers first constructed a lean-to to provide temporary shelter while a more permanent sod house was built. With the arrival of the rest of the family the following summer (1860), the sod house became the residence of the parents, Friederich and Gertrude. The "soddy" later saw service as a stable for oxen until wooden facilities could be built. Soon an impressive 16- by 24- foot log house was completed. The house and all of its furniture were built by hand without the use of nails.

Until they settled in Minnesota, the Riekes knew little about Indians and had no contact with the Sioux. They quickly developed a reputation for friendly interaction with local tribesmen. Deeply religious, the Riekes treated the Indians charitably and were scrupulously fair in their trade transactions with them.

All of the family learned rudiments of the Sioux language and to a greater extent than most of their neighbors were able to communicate with tribal members. When cold weather approached, the Riekes left the door to their home unlocked. Sioux hunting parties passing the house on their return from the Upper Sioux Agency would often enter the house after the Riekes were in bed, sleep on the floor near

the fireplace, and leave the next morning before the family got up.

The depth of the relationship between the family and the Sioux is evidenced by a special gift given the family by a tribal elder. The memento is an ornate pipestone peace pipe, carved from a quarry near present-day Pipestone, Minnesota. The soft red stone was considered sacred, a gift to the Indians from the Great Spirit.