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Underpinning the Sioux Uprising of 1862: Factors that Fueled the Fire, from a Native Perspective

Fordypningsoppgave i Lektorutdanning i historie for trinn 8-13

Veileder: Tore Tingvold Petersen

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Kunnskap for en bedre verden

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Introduction

The Great Sioux uprising of 1862 in Minnesota was the bloodiest event in a long and disastrous warfare between the Native Americans and white settlers, which led to the biggest public mass-hanging in the history of North America. It was the beginning of many years of intermittent warfare between America and The Sioux, ultimately leading to the tragic Wounded Knee massacre in 1890.

From the perspective of the Native American Sioux people, this uprising was a desperate response to a long history of broken promises, treaties, prohibition, mistreatment of women, and acculturation.

The roots of the Sioux Uprising can be traced back to 1851 when the United States government negotiated a series of treaties with the Sioux tribes. These treaties promised the Sioux people annuities and the right to continue their traditional hunting and gathering practices on the land. However, the government frequently failed to uphold its end of the bargain, often delaying, or withholding the promised annuities and encroaching on Sioux territory.

As government policies changed to promote assimilation and displace Native communities the Sioux people experienced further discrimination and disempowerment. The Sioux were forced to adapt to a sedentary, agricultural lifestyle, which clashed with their traditional hunter-gatherer way of life. This, combined with the government's failure to provide the promised annuities and the growing presence of white settlers, led to a deterioration of the Sioux's economic and social conditions.

In August 1862, tensions reached a boiling point. After the government failed to deliver the promised annuities, the Sioux people found themselves on the brink of starvation. The Sioux people were compelled to split into farmer-Indians and hunter-Indians, where the latter suffered greater because the government favored the farmers. Desperate and angry, a group of young hunter-Indians attacked a group of white settlers, sparking the outbreak of the Sioux Uprising. From the Sioux perspective, this was a justified response to the government's broken promises and the threat to their very existence.

The ensuing conflict was a brutal and bloody affair. The Sioux warriors, led by leaders such as Little Crow, fought fiercely against the U.S. Army and the local militia. However, the Sioux were ultimately outmatched and outgunned, and the uprising was brutally suppressed. Hundreds of Sioux people were killed, and thousands more were imprisoned or exiled. In the

end, there was a public execution of 38 Dakota men in Mankato, Minnesota 1864 as punishment for the uprising.

By unravelling the Sioux uprising through a native perspective we can gain knowledge of what fueled the choices they made. In a topic that has mainly been covered by a euro-centric view, the books by Gary Clayton Anderson shed new light on the matter, as the recollections of the Dakota people involved take the main stage.

Through the recollections and background knowledge of the Dakota lifestyle, this in-depth study will delve into the antecedent treaties of 1851 and 1858, with focus on the factors that fueled the native fire, such as annuities, broken promises, and the soldier's lodge.

The Dakota peoples

The Sioux peoples consist of several tribes, that cover the areas of present-day Minnesota, South Dakota, North Dakota, Nebraska and into Canada. Minnesota is however centered as the birthplace of the Dakota. The people are comprised of four groups: Santee, Yanktonai, Yankton and Lakota, and the Santee consists of four bands: Mdewakanton, Wahpeton, Wahpekute and Sisseton, which are the tribes involved in the Sioux uprising.

The Dakota peoples lived according to the seasons: in the summer they would move from the shelter of the forest to the open plains where they could hunt buffalo, and when winter came, they moved back to the forest.

The Dakota family did not only consist of mother, father, and child. There were multiple generations and relatives, such as cousins, grandparents, siblings and aunts and uncles. Living alone was usually frowned upon, as family and kinship was the most important to the Dakotas. Grandparents usually looked after the children while the father went hunting and the mother tended to the daily chores. The woman had a central role in the tribe, as she oversaw everything. When the man came home from a hunt, she would claim the game and the man relinquished all rights to how it was to be used, although he would occasionally ask her to prepare something for him to share with his friends. Sharing was also common in the tribes: If someone needed water or firewood, they would simply walk in and take it. This was not the case with meat however,

you could only take meat if it was utterly necessary, but it was still shared voluntarily. After a game was skinned and butchered, the woman would cook up generous amounts, and people were expected to come by and eat. ¹

Law and order were present in the tribes, and kinship was the greatest order of them all. It was the principle of kinship that dictated a person's attitude, and tribal leaders were selected because their obedience to kinship was strong, which indicated their worthiness. After the Dakotas came in contact with the white man, and acquired a taste for alcohol, quarrels were in the majority driven by drunkenness. Whenever two women or two men were in a quarrel, it would not stay private for very long. The entire community was a kinsman, no matter the relation. When a quarrel appeared, the tribe felt uneasy, and they wanted to calm the atmosphere. Arguments between quick-tempered men were common enough, and it was usually not taken measures to fix them. It was when a quick-tempered man provoked a good man into quarrel that they then used a peace-maker to try and talk and reason with them. The role of a peace-maker was voluntary, and only initiated if they chose so themselves. They would plead and tell them how much they care about them, and that the tribe bears a heavy heart when they quarrel. Sometimes their kinsmen would offer gifts to show that they are not alone. The Dakotas did not have material wants, so this action was symbolic to show that they cared and wanted what was best for them. In a society where kinship is supreme, one would be a fool to not reconcile, but sometimes their pride was too great to let go, especially if heated words had been exchanged, and the men wanted to stay true to those words because they were not liars. This would occasionally lead to murder, and action would be taken by the council. There were a few different ways to deal with a murderer: the first was reprisal killing, where a relative of the slain man is to kill the murderer. The second is trial by ordeal, where the council lets The Great Spirit, their deity, decide their fate. And the third is adoption of the murderer, where the family of the slain man takes in the murderer as their own, much like a replacement for what they lost.²

As the white man gained influence on the Dakota people through the reservations, some Dakotas changed their way and wanted to adopt the way of the white man. One man had come home from an eastern school with just this goal. He left his tribe and built a house on some land

¹ Deloria, *The Dakota Way of Life*, 59, 69

² Deloria, *The Dakota Way of Life*, 42-45

far from the tribe. With this, he also left all values of kinship behind him, and when his relatives came with gifts, he refused them. Likewise, he refused to give gifts or help other Indians, saying that the white man cares only for himself and his family, meaning his wife and children, and that the Dakotas would be better off if they did the same.³

The Antecedent Treaties

Hundreds of treaties were entered into between the United States and native tribes between 1778 and 1871. This was done so that Indian tribes could be put in reservations, while given promises of peace and money for selling their land, in hopes that they one day would integrate into white society.

The Preemption Act of 1841 would allow Americans to settle on public land, even before purchase of said land. This would create issues for the tribes as whites settled on Indian-occupied land, considering it 'public', and treaties were therefore made to solve the issue. In addition to this, the idea of a permanent Indian country was not applicable, as the land was too valuable to give up. The want, and pride, for American expansion was too great, and Indian tribes were forced west. The Dakotas were also frequently at war with the Chippewas, who slowly and steadily forced them further into the west, but when the white man settled on their land in 1849 however, they gave the Dakotas more problems than the Chippewas ever did.⁴

The Treaty of 1851 – Traverse des Sioux & Mendota

Traverse des Sioux was originally a crossroads and meeting place for the Indians to conduct trade and hunt. By 1840, it was heavily used as a trading and exchange point for the fur trade between Americans and Indians. A few years later, a mission was established, which

³ Deloria, *The Dakota Way of Life*, 47

⁴ Michno, *Dakota Dawn : The Decisive First Week of the Sioux Uprising, August 1862*, 2-3

consisted of a school, some cabins of French Voyageurs, fur trading establishments and almost thirty Indian lodges.⁵

On July 23, 1851, at Traverse des Sioux, Minnesota Territorial Governor Alexander Ramsey and the commissioner of Indian affairs, Luke Lea oversaw the signing of the treaty where the Sissetons and Wahpetons sold their lands in western Minnesota and Iowa and would now be placed in a 20-mile reservation along the western Minnesota river. The treaty stated they would be paid \$1,665,000 in cash and annuities, where \$275,000 would go to the chiefs to relocate their tribes and \$30,000 would be used for buildings such as schools, mills, shops, and farms. Of the remaining money they would be paid a five percent interest, where \$28,000 would be used for education, agricultural improvements, provisions, and goods. The crux of the issue was that the two bands would only be paid \$40,000 a year. The treaty was interpreted and read for the Indians several times, and in the end signed by thirty-five of them. Agents and traders believed that the Sissetons and Wahpetons, also called the upper Sioux bands, were more compliant than the two lower bands, Wahpekutes and Mdewakantons, and that they would simply sign the treaty for the gifts.⁶ However, the reoccurring pressure from traders and threats with military force was ever present. In addition to this, overhunting had depleted the bison, which they relied on for food and trade. The Dakotas most likely did not sell their land easily, especially not for gifts, as they did not care much for material wants. Their people were in a dire situation, without food or anything to trade for it, so they saw selling their lands for money and annuities as a way of surviving.⁷

13 days later, on August 5, the upper bands of the Mdewakantons and Wahpekutes were faced with a virtually identical treaty at Mendota. The ordeal was tumultuous since some of the older chiefs had already sold their land east of the Mississippi back in 1837 and claimed their money had still not been paid in full. The Dakotas, The Mille Lacs band of Ojibwe, and several other tribes signed a treaty before Minnesota was even a state. The treaty of 1837 was signed on the condition that they would still have rights to fish, gather and hunt in the ceded territory, although this was not properly upheld, and the State of Minnesota prosecuted many band

⁵ Minnesota Historical Society, <https://www.mnhs.org/traversedessioux/learn>

⁶ Michno, *Dakota Dawn : The Decisive First Week of the Sioux Uprising, August 1862*, 3

⁷ Weber, <http://www.mnopedia.org/event/treaty-traverse-des-sioux-1851>

members for decades.⁸ While there were oppositions to the treaties, there were also those favorable. One of these were Little Crow, or Taoyateduta, who had gained a big influence among the Mdewakantons, and they frequently looked to him as their spokesman. He gained a political view different from his peers, and he knew that to be able to deal with the whites, they would have to adapt to negotiations and accommodation rather than war. Still there were some Indians hesitant to sign, and commissioner Lea and Governor Ramsey promised that the neglected payment from the treaty of 1837 would be included in this new treaty. However, the Indians were not convinced. Little Crow naturally took the side of the Indians, but he also became a middle ground for negotiations. He gained the support of more Indians and eventually the treaty was signed, with Little Crow being the first to do so. As he signed, he said to the people, ‘I believe this treaty will be the best for the Dakotas, and I will sign it, even if a dog kills me before I lay down the goose quill.’⁹

\$30,000 from the old 1837 treaty was handed out all at once, and the Indians spent it immediately on mostly horses and liquor. The exhilaration would not last however, as the money and annuities were going to be distributed much like with the upper bands of the Sissetons and Wahpetons. Only \$70,000 were left to be distributed between the four tribes, consisting of about 7000 people, which resulted in roughly \$10 per person a year. But that was not the end of it. As soon as the Indians signed the treaties, the traders wanted their share. They presented them with a second document to sign, the ‘traders’ paper’, which stated that the Indians will agree to hand over \$210,000 of their annuities to pay for past debts. This seemed only fair to the Indians, and most of them agreed that the traders should be paid, but they also wanted to have control over the distribution so only legitimate debts would be handled. Some of the traders’ claims went back almost fifteen years, and many of the Indians who owed a debt was dead, which then lead to the money being taken from the tribe instead. Many Indians thought the traders ought not to be so hard on them, seeing as when a Dakota had helped another, they would not pressure them to pay back until they were capable to do so.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the Wahpekutes signed the paper, but the Mdewakantons did not agree. The whites again sought out the help of Little Crow, who bribed him, saying the chiefs would get \$3000 each for their cooperation, and so they did. Next, they

⁸ Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, <https://millelacsband.com/home/treaties>

⁹ Michno, *Dakota Dawn : The Decisive First Week of the Sioux Uprising, August 1862*, 4-5

¹⁰ Anderson, *Through Dakota Eyes*, location 456, 483

went to the Sissetons and Wahpetons, who also signed the paper and got paid. Governor Ramsey was now free to distribute the money however he wanted: \$495,000, more than double of what was agreed, had gone to the traders, and Governor Ramsey had taken a 10% fee for himself. Although his actions did not go unpunished, and he was exonerated as governor, the Indians still lost more than double of what they were promised.¹¹

The Yankton Treaty of 1858

More whites continued to settle on Dakota land, encroaching on the reservation. They meant that the Indians were not utilizing the country as they should and took it upon themselves to do it. In the summer of 1854, a group of German immigrants settled on a temporarily abandoned Dakota village. As mentioned earlier, Dakotas lived by the seasons, and would move to the plains during the summer, and come back during the winter. This was exactly what happened with the German settlers. When the Indians came back to their village, they found it occupied by strangers and there was a confrontation. The matter was temporarily put aside so that the government could resolve the issue, and the Germans only survived the winter with help from the Indians, while living in their bark huts. Eventually the matter was settled by territorial Governor Willis A. Gorman, who concluded that the Indians were about nine miles off their reservation, and the Dakotas reluctantly left. As more Germans settled in the late Indian village, it had now become the town of New Ulm.¹²

In 1852 the senate removed a crucial part of the 1851 treaty that guaranteed the Dakotas a reservation in Minnesota, which brought much discontent among the Indians. In 1857 superintendent William J. Cullen spoke with several Dakota leaders and told them that their Great Father, meaning the president, wanted to see them and readjust the treaty. This brought hope, and they were willing to travel to Washington. In the spring of 1858, a twenty-four-man delegation set out for the capitol to meet with acting commissioner Charles E. Mix. Among the delegation were the Mdewakanton chiefs Little Crow, Wabasha, Wakute, Shakopee, Traveling Hail, Mankato, and Black Dog. In addition, there were important names such as Big Eagle, Iron Elk, Tomahawk, and Whale. Little Crow became the central spokesman for the Mdewakantons,

¹¹ Michno, *Dakota Dawn : The Decisive First Week of the Sioux Uprising, August 1862*, 6-7

¹² Michno, *Dakota Dawn : The Decisive First Week of the Sioux Uprising, August 1862*, 8

and on March 27 he told Mix that much of the money from the 1837 and 1851 treaties had not reached the Indians. He continued to air their discontent and Mix assured them that their Great Father would send the funds soon. Roughly a month later, they sat down once again, where Little Crow brought up the same issue and spoke of the government's failures to keep their promises and treaties and wondered where the money had gone. Once again, Mix reassured them that the money was safe and kept in the treasury, and that it would be sent as soon as they saw the money would be properly used. Mix was fond of blaming the Indians for overindulgence on alcohol and was not shy of bullying on the matter. In one of the meetings Little Crow had had enough of his snark remarks and asked him to stop mentioning it. Mix then wanted to move on with the new treaty, but Little Crow stood his ground and had already prepared a long list of complaints. Next on that list was the land issues and relations to the whites, especially the Germans, who crowded onto his land near the Big Cottonwood River, and a man called John Magner, who frequently exploited Dakota women. Mix knew that Little Crow did not have a legitimate paper showing that the government promised the boundary to be as far south as the Big Cottonwood River, but when Mix asked Little Crow to draw said line on a map, he drew it precisely. Mix then brought out a copy of the original treaty and, ignoring what Little Crow said about the office of Indian affairs' promise of a line farther south, pointed to the line that began at Little Rock River, well above the Big Cottonwood River. Besides, the senate had, as mentioned earlier, already removed not only the boundary, but the whole reservation, and the Dakotas were only living there by virtue of their Great Father. Little Crow could say little on the matter, other than show his disappointment toward the promises that were made years ago: He trusted that the men that came to him had honest intentions but was evidently let down.¹³

Little Crow was not the only one disappointed with the government and especially the office of Indian affairs. Reverend Thomas S. Williamson became disgusted with the bickering and went back to Minnesota. He said that the supposed benefactors, the office of Indian affairs, were supposed to have the Indians welfare at interest, but that they were "destitute of religious principle" and are therefore not capable nor reliable to handle the matter.¹⁴

¹³ Anderson, *Little Crow*, location 1797, 1827, 1865

¹⁴ Michno, *Dakota Dawn : The Decisive First Week of the Sioux Uprising, August 1862*, 9

On May 28, they returned to the council chambers, and the mood was strained. Mix had earlier discussed the terms of the new treaty and announced that he wanted to make the Sioux reservations permanent and split them up into individual farming allotments, however, this required them to give up half of their claimed reservation on the northeast of the Minnesota river. Little Crow was furious. He knew now that the Great Father had no intentions of honoring the promise of making good on past mistakes and broken promises. Heated words were said, and he urged Mix that when they meet, they talk like men, not children. Ultimately, Little Crow knew that he had met defeat, and that they had to consider the new treaty, or the government would take the whole reservation. Their hand was forced, and on June 19, they signed the new treaty, which meant they now had a permanent title to the ten-mile strip on the southwest bank of the Minnesota River. What they did not get however, was new annuities or corrections of the not-upheld promises of 1837 and 1851.¹⁵

The Wahpetons and Sissetons received similar treatment from Mix, and signed a new treaty where they relinquished their claimed territory on the northeast side of the Minnesota River. This was however, a significantly smoother process than with Little Crow and the Mdewakantons and Wahpekutes because the upper bands delegation consisted of farmer-Indians, who wanted the allotments.¹⁶

Factors that fueled the fire

There were countless causes to the uprising in 1862 including non-payment of annuities, broken promises, land issues, racial and social differences, trader debts, inexperienced officials, corrupt government, and depredation claims. Bishop Henry Whipple, however, saw the matter as something different: Americans treated the Indians as an independent nation, and thus tried to insert their own rules and government into their, so called, weak structure. By doing so, they destroyed the tribal government and gave power to chiefs who by result became tools for traders and agents to use. The American policies did not strengthen Indians to live by honest labor, but

¹⁵ Anderson, *Little Crow*, location 1892, 1921

¹⁶ Anderson, *Little Crow*, location 1921

instead fostered dormancy. He said they had ‘‘made devils’’ of the Indians by unashamedly giving alcohol to them for trading conveniences, and the trade system was destructive to the Indians and crippling to honest traders. Whipple further stated that the entire nation knew that the office of Indian affairs was corrupt, but people just looked in the other direction. Lastly, he rhetorically asked: who is responsible for the blood of the innocents, and that god will hold the nation guilty.¹⁷

Annuities

Annuities were often, if not almost constantly, an issue between the Dakotas and the government. Not only did the Indians not get what was promised, but the annuities were given out where it did not belong. Traders were always at the ready with their books when the annuities were to be paid, saying that the Indians owed so and so much, but the Indians had no books or papers to show that what the traders claimed was false.¹⁸ Other white settlers could also settle a depredation claim if they felt that some Indians had wronged them. In addition to this, the government officials would often take money from the annuity stash and use it elsewhere in times of need, and some officials took a portion for themselves, much like Governor Ramsey had done. Lastly, annuities could also be withheld if the government so wished, and the incident with Inkpaduta and The Sprit Lake Massacre, as the whites called it, was just such a case.

The Spirit Lake Massacre in 1857, led by Inkpaduta, was the result of a chain of provocations on both white and Indian side. Three years prior, a white man named Henry Lott and his son massacred about a dozen Wahpekutes, of whom were mostly women and children. They did this as a reprisal for earlier Indian depredations, and even though the government tried to capture them, although with very little effort, they were never charged or punished. It was also rumored that the white settlers had taken the Wahpekutes weapons just prior to the attack, making hunting during the winter difficult. The reasons for the Spirit Lake Massacre were likely plenty, but at least one of them was shortage of food. After the attack, Inkpaduta and his band had captured four women and fled.¹⁹

¹⁷ Michno, *Dakota Dawn : The Decisive First Week of the Sioux Uprising, August 1862*, 21-22

¹⁸ Anderson, *Through Dakota Eyes*, location 546

¹⁹ Anderson, *Little Crow*, location 1597

There were attempts at chasing after Inkpaduta, but they all failed. Eventually Inkpaduta's son, Roaring Cloud came back to visit his wife, who was a Sisseton. A fight broke out and Roaring Cloud was killed, and his wife was taken captive by Lieutenant Alexander Murray. As they were riding back to the Agency, some Sisseton and Wahpeton warriors surrounded them and snatched the woman. Tensions were high and it felt like there might be an outright war. When the message from commissioner James W. Denver arrived, saying that the Indians will not receive their annuities because of hostile demonstrations, the tension was higher than ever.²⁰ He further ordered the Indians to go and capture Inkpaduta themselves if they were to receive their annuities. The Indians refused, saying it was not their responsibility, and felt the ultimatum was unreasonably unfair considering, years before, they had neglected capturing Henry Lott and his son.²¹

Superintendent William J. Cullen responded to commissioner Denver that the Indians would not go after Inkpaduta. He has withheld the annuities as requested but says that prompt measures are necessary.²² Cullen continued to try and convince the Indians to go after Inkpaduta, but to no avail. Eventually there was a riot, and an Indian boy stabbed a white soldier, although not fatally wounding him. The other Indians sheltered the boy and refused to give him over. The matter continued back and forth between negotiations, and Cullen was afraid that war would break out, in which the whites would not stand a chance.²³ The American camp at Yellow Medicine was surrounded by Wahpetons and Sissetons, and they were backed by about a thousand Yankton and Yanktonai warriors.²⁴

Little Crow had heard about the riot and decided to go and see what he could do to help. He talked with Cullen at the agency, who urged him to calm down the angry bands and meet with their leaders. Negotiations went on day and night for two days, while Murray was preparing an attack on the hostile Indians, ready to give the order as soon as reinforcements arrived from Fort Ridgley. At midnight, just hours before the reinforcements were due, the Sissetons and Wahpetons had accepted Little Crow's council, and they convinced the Yanktons and Yanktonais

²⁰ Annual report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the year 1857, 74

²¹ Anderson, *Little Crow*, location 1629

²² Annual report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the year 1857, 74-75

²³ Annual report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the year 1857, 78-84

²⁴ Anderson, *Little Crow*, location 1629

to leave Yellow Medicine. That afternoon, the Sisseton boy who had stabbed the white soldier surrendered, and after three days of negotiations, the Dakotas agreed to go after Inkpaduta.²⁵

Cullen insisted that the party would be led by Little Crow, to which he agreed. Cullen further complimented the actions of Little Crow in his report to Denver, saying ‘I cannot speak too highly of the services of the chief, ‘Little Crow,’ who, after perceiving the inevitable results (..) gave me his assistance.’ He continued the report saying that they both labored day and night in organizing the party and rode back and forth between the upper and lower agency. Cullen had also agreed to furnish the party with provisions, seeing as the Indians would not receive their annuities before Inkpaduta was caught, they would need some assistance.²⁶

The party went out in search for Inkpaduta on July 22, and roughly ten days later, they found a camp on the shores of Lake Herman, consisting of seven men and some women and children. The party charged at them, killing three Wahpekute men and, unfortunately, some women and children drowned while fleeing into the lake. Inkpaduta was, however, nowhere to be found and the party returned to Redwood, confident that they had done all they could to catch him: Inkpaduta had fled too far west for them to continue after him. Commissioner Denver was, nevertheless, not in agreement. He did not budge and would not send the annuities until Inkpaduta himself was captured or killed. Agent Pritchette and superintendent Cullen plead on the Indians behalf, saying they had done everything in their power and proven their willingness by killing men of Inkpadutas band, and that their ‘annuities be paid with propriety’.²⁷ Eventually, when commissioner Denver went on leave, and acting commissioner Charles E. Mix stepped in, he sent a telegram to Cullen asking for the reasons as to why they should be paid. Pritchette sent a detailed answer, stating that the friendly manifest of the Indians should not be trampled upon, but rather kept, and that if the annuities were not paid now, their winter would be terribly harsh, and it would tempt them toward depredations. He also stated his opinion that the only way to catch Inkpaduta would be to enforce the entire Sioux nation, which was impossible because they have no common nation like the United States: ‘They are divided into separate bands under their own chiefs, without any common allegiance, consequently there can be no

²⁵ Anderson, *Little Crow*, location 1629

²⁶ Annual report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the year 1857, 81-82

²⁷ Annual report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the year 1857, 92

union of action to a common end.” Mix responded that the annuities can now be paid, “provided the public officers you designate agree with you that it can be done with propriety.”²⁸

“Let them eat grass”

After the new treaty of 1857, as we have already seen, the Indians were only left with a ten-mile-wide strip of land on the south side of the Minnesota river. The selling of the ten-mile strip on the northern side, was a great dissatisfaction for the Indians, and Little Crow was blamed for his part in it. The south side had very little game and Indians were forced to become farmers, as was part of the treaty with farming allotments. The Indians did not know how to adapt to this, and nor did they want to. Big Eagle said in his recollection “If the Indians had tried to make the whites live like them, the whites would have resisted, and it was the same with many Indians.” They wished more than nothing to go back to before the treaty of 1851, where they could live as they used to, hunt as they used to, and sell the fur to traders as they used to.²⁹

In 1861, Abraham Lincoln became president, and there was a change of party, which meant that the previous democratic agents were now replaced with the republican agent Thomas J. Galbraith and superintendent Clark W. Thompson. The previous agents were not happy with the situation, and neither were the Indians: They “did not like the new men”, as Big Eagle recalled.

Thompson nor Galbraith was equipped with the knowledge or fortitude to handle the Indians in their current state. As Thompson was touring the Indian reservation, he reported that he was glad to see that so many Indians had adapted to being farmers and were wearing the “garb of civilization”. He was an overambitious man with high goals to prove himself. At the end of his annual report, he wrote that he wanted to “change the disposition of the Indian to one more mercenary and ambitious to obtain riches”. He continued that they would soon put behind them the tradition of the scalp lock, which is a long tuft of hair on the crown of a shaved head, and throw aside their blankets as inconvenient work attire. He finalized the report with the cruel statement that “their tribal relations would be broken down, and, of necessity, they would

²⁸ Annual report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the year 1857, 93-94

²⁹ Anderson, *Through Dakota Eyes*, location 456

become industrious.” Thompsons view of the Indians was clear: they are only worth something if they are useful to us, if they are like us, and if we can make profit on them.³⁰

Thompson's inexperience had made the Dakotas weary, and he started to feel overwhelmed and threatened. Like a cornered animal he did all he could to save his own skin, and he made a false promise that the new Republican administration was going to treat them very well and give them a substantial bounty in the autumn. Where this bounty would come from, he could not divulge, but he said that the Great father would make them very happy. The Sissetons and Wahpetons believed Thompson and had not made sufficient food plans for the winter. The Mdewakantons and Wahpekutes, however, were suspicious of where this bounty would come from. A drought in 1860 carried over into 1861 and left all the Dakotas with very little food. In addition to this, cutworms arrived, destroying much of what was left.³¹

The responsibility landed on Galbraith, who had to take immediate action, and from mid-December 1861 until April 1862, he and Reverend Riggs fed over 1,500 Dakotas, using \$5,000 from a special fund, emptying his own storage, and buying flour and pork from the traders on credit. In late February a snowstorm hit, delaying hunting, and intensifying the Dakotas suffering, which resulted in the starvation and death of children and elderly.³²

All Dakotas were in a desperate state of potential starvation, but the government only helped the farmer-Indians. The Indians were, as Big Eagle tells it, ‘envious of them and jealous, and disliked them because they were favored.’ The farmers also felt superior to them, saying that if they had become like them, and tended to the earth, they would not be starving.³³ As we saw earlier, Dakotas put kinship in the highest regard and Ella Cara Deloria tells of a man who adopted the white man’s ways: ‘These are new times. Consider how the white man looks out first and only for himself. That’s what I am doing, for it is the only sensible way. If all Dakotas would do the same, then everyone would be better off.’³⁴ One thing is clear: white influence had changed the value of the new farmer-Indians, and Thompsons goal of industrializing the Indians seemed to creep closer.

³⁰ Annual report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the year 1861, 70, 73

³¹ Michno, *Dakota Dawn : The Decisive First Week of the Sioux Uprising, August 1862*, 19, 25

³² Michno, *Dakota Dawn : The Decisive First Week of the Sioux Uprising, August 1862*, 25

³³ Anderson, *Through Dakota Eyes*, location 513

³⁴ Deloria, *The Dakota Way of Life*, 47

In the spring of 1862, there was to be an election for a new chief speaker. The Indians were split into traditionalists and progressives, or as Big Eagle recalled it: “a white man’s party and an Indian party.”³⁵, with the progressives being backed by the government. The traditional Indians had no candidate at that moment, since their previous leader, Red Owl, had died the previous year, and they now looked to Little Crow to represent them. Little Crow, as mentioned earlier, was blamed for his part in the treaty of 1858, but at least he remained a traditionalist, and was the only choice likely to be accepted by the Indians.³⁶

The other candidates were Big Eagle and Travelling Hail. Big Eagle said himself that he did not care about winning, but it was an exciting contest with much feeling. Travelling Hail was representing the progressive farmers, with the backing of Galbraith, and won the election.³⁷

After his defeat, Little Crow felt sore. In a conversation he had with Galbraith, shortly after the election, he indicated that he was open to becoming a “white man”. Little Crow was still determined to have political influence, and he realized he had to conform to the contemporary paradigm if that was going to happen. By late June, Little Crow was attending church services, digging a cellar for his new brick house, and installed a cookstove and furniture. He hoped that by doing this, the government officials would once again need his services, and it did not take long before his wish came true.³⁸

Hunger was still ever present in the reservation, and there was trouble with the annuities. The office of Indian affairs had to work around the blunder of Thomspon the year before and decided that the money lost would be subtracted from the 1862 annuities. In addition to this, they told the Indians that future payments might be in goods instead of gold. The Indians were furious. Realizing what they had just done, not daring to put the plan into action, the office pleaded for help, but the only solution would be to take money from the 1863 annuities. After months of amendments, the bill was approved July 5, 1862. Furthermore, the government now wanted to pay the annuities in “greenbacks”, paper money, which was cheaper than gold. This would have been sent quicker, but the Indians did not want the paper money, seeing as it had half the value of coin. The Treasury authorized the payment in gold as late as August 8, 1862. The

³⁵ Anderson, *Through Dakota Eyes*, location 483

³⁶ Anderson, *Little Crow*, location 2219

³⁷ Anderson, *Through Dakota Eyes*, location 483

³⁸ Anderson, *Little Crow*, location 2250

traders kept up to date with the events unfolding and, not trusting that the government would send enough money to cover the Indians debts, they cut off their credit.³⁹

Andrew J. Myrick was a trader at the lower Redwood Agency and had done like all the other traders. He was visited by some angry Indians who argued: "You have said you had closed your stores ... and that we should eat grass, (...) we warn you not to cut another stick of wood nor to cut our grass." This continued throughout early July, where the traders commonly responded by telling the Indians to go "eat grass" or "wild potatoes".⁴⁰

Indians flooded the upper Yellow Medicine agency on the morning of August 4, heading for the warehouse. They began to unload the supplies and had taken about 100 sacks of flour before Lieutenant Sheehan managed to line up his severely outnumbered men outside the warehouse. Trying to keep a cool head, he realized that the Indians were only taking food, and if they meant harm they would have done so already. He went to Galbraith who negotiated with the Indians: he would give them two days' worth of pork and flour if they agreed to vacate, and their chiefs return the next day for a council. The Indians agreed, and bloodshed was avoided.⁴¹

Again, Little Crow rose to the political occasion as he heard of the trouble at the upper agency, and he joined, on August 5, Galbraith, the chiefs, several store clerks, Andrew J. Myrick, and a young missionary John P. Williams for council. The Indians made clear their desperate need for help, and asked when they would receive their annuities so they could feed their family. Galbraith had only vague answers.⁴²

The day after, Little Crow became the council's spokesman for the Indians. He told them of their troubles and tried to work his way toward a solution. He pointed out that the annuities have been delayed repeatedly, and since Galbraith's warehouse was scarce, he should make arrangements with the traders so that the Indians could be fed until their money arrived, as had been done before. Little Crow expected Myrick's support in this, seeing as he had transferred his trading account to Myrick's store some years earlier, and had a reputation to take traders' side when it came to payments of debts. Little Crow concluded, however, with a remark: "When men

³⁹ Michno, *Dakota Dawn : The Decisive First Week of the Sioux Uprising, August 1862*, 27-28

⁴⁰ Anderson, *Little Crow*, location 2250

⁴¹ Michno, *Dakota Dawn : The Decisive First Week of the Sioux Uprising, August 1862*, 32

⁴² Anderson, *Little Crow*, location 2314

are hungry they help themselves.” Weather this was a threat to the traders, or a rationale for the warehouse raid, was not indicated. Although that did not matter: When the statement was translated, Myrick darkened. He rose up and slowly walked from the council, but Galbraith demanded an answer as to what they should do. Myrick turned and said disdainfully: “So far as I am concerned, if they are hungry, let them eat grass.” War whoops followed from the Indians as the insult, that had circulated around the Redwood agency traders, were now aimed at Little Crow and the Sissetons and Wahpetons present. Captain Marsh arrived at just the right moment and diffused the tension by ordering Galbraith to open his warehouse to the Indians. He further promised that if any trader continued to cause dissatisfaction among the Indians, he would arrest them.⁴³

They continued the council without the traders for two more days, where Little Crow asked Galbraith to send some food to the lower Redwood agency as well, to which he agreed. By August 12, it seemed the crisis had passed, and Galbraith went on with other business, neglecting his promise to send food to the lower agency in faith that better times were soon to come.⁴⁴

The Soldier’s Lodge

The soldier’s lodge was originally a hunter group. It consisted of experienced men who organized and set boundaries for the hunting-excursion of the day. They gave every man a fair chance and organized the movement of the village from one location to another. They also always shared the animal taken during the hunt, giving the successful hunter some extra meat and the hide, and announcing all the names of hunters, who had been fruitful, to the entire camp.⁴⁵

Over the years, the soldier’s lodge changed and, by the 1860s, it had become a militant institution for young warriors, or braves as they called them, to resist acculturation. These braves consisted still of hunters and traditionalists, and it was a place where they could gather and discuss tribal issues, conditions, and seek options which often resulted in violence.⁴⁶

⁴³ Anderson, *Little Crow*, location 2339

⁴⁴ Anderson, *Little Crow*, location 2339

⁴⁵ Anderson, *Little Crow*, location 258

⁴⁶ Michno, *Dakota Dawn : The Decisive First Week of the Sioux Uprising, August 1862*, 26

The soldier's lodge became the answer for the traditional Indians who felt wronged by the whites and refused to assimilate like the farmer-Indians had done. Furthermore, the farmers were not allowed into the soldier's lodge, and it did not matter if the farmer had been generous and shared his crops or not. They viewed them as traitors to their own kind.⁴⁷

The braves were dissatisfied with numerous acts by the whites, but the prohibition of war against the Chippewas was a frequent complaint in the lodge: War against an enemy tribe was an honored tradition. Isaac Heard recalled that the Indians did not pride themselves in art or literature, but that his "crown comes from the red hand of war." A young Indians ambition is to acquire the "feather", of which you must scalp an enemy to receive. Furthermore, there was much grievance when the Civil War broke out, and the Indians questioned why white men were allowed to fight each other but the Indians were not: "Our Great Father, we know, has always told us it was wrong to make war, yet now he himself is making war and killing a great many. (...) We do not understand it."⁴⁸

The Dakotas rarely thought anyone was better than them, especially the braves. They would act humble in council with the whites, but by themselves they would call them fools, which is precisely what the white party would do as well. Gregory Michno explained it very plainly: "When two ethnocentric peoples try and co-exist there is little chance for compromise."⁴⁹ Big Eagle also tells in his recollection, that the whites would often treat them unkindly and say their manner of: "I am much better than you." He also said there was excuse for the Dakotas pride, but then the white men would abuse Indian women "in a certain way, and disgraced them, and surely there was no excuse for that."⁵⁰

The soldier's lodge was particularly unhappy with the way agents handled annuity distributions. The agents never really counted the money sent from the government, and the amount was never correct: the government kept breaking their promise repeatedly. Moreover, when the agent handed out the annuities the traders would step forth, demanding their credit paid, and showing their books with names of those who had received advances. As previously established, the Indians did not keep books like the traders, so they never knew if they were

⁴⁷ Anderson, *Through Dakota Eyes*, location 300, 326

⁴⁸ Heard, *History of the Sioux War and massacres of 1862 and 1863*, 31-32

⁴⁹ Michno, *Dakota Dawn : The Decisive First Week of the Sioux Uprising, August 1862*, 24

⁵⁰ Anderson, *Through Dakota Eyes*, location 483

being honest. Several of these trader credit books have survived, and they show that traders gave Indians credit based on how many dependents they had, which in most cases resulted in traders taking all the money. Lastly, most of the food annuities were prioritized for the farmers as rewards, which, as a result, fueled the hatred toward them.⁵¹

After the traders cut off credit to the Indians, the braves were furious. They had previously arranged that they would take advantage of the trader's credit, buying as much as they could and, when the annuities payment came, not give anything to the traders. The traders were, however, warned about this from three Indians, and was one of the reasons they cut off the credit and told them to "go eat grass". The braves found what they believed to be the three Indian traitors and punished them: they cut up a horse belonging to one of the men and destroyed all his possessions. The last two they caught in the streets of the agency and cut the clothes from their backs, stripping them naked in public.⁵²

One would ask why the chiefs did not interfere with the actions of the soldier's lodge, but for its entire existence, the lodge was traditionally administered by the soldiers, or the "brave warriors", not chiefs. Moreover, the young braves likely no longer trusted the chiefs with their problems, seeing that they would rather deal with the government and lacked sympathy for the braves' traditional ways, which had also been their tradition in the past. Even Little Crow, whom the traditionalists had chosen as their speaker candidate, did not support them openly, even if he probably sympathized with them.⁵³

As more white settlers arrived at the agency, mostly from Germany and Scandinavia, they brought with them an egocentric way of life. The Indians, including the braves, had a friendly tone with many of the white settlers because they kept sharing with each other: Indians could come and warm themselves by the fire and get food, while the whites could receive assistance or fur. This changed with the new settlers. During the early 1860's, relations between Indian and white deteriorated, especially with settlers just outside the reservation borders. The white settlers would hunt most of the remaining game in the Big Woods and the Big Cottonwood River and sell the furs to traders. This destroyed what little economy and food the hunter-Indians had, and

⁵¹ Anderson, *Little Crow*, location 2189, 2219

⁵² Anderson, *Little Crow*, location 2250

⁵³ Anderson, *Little Crow*, location 2219

they came to identify these trespassers as greedy hoarders. The Indians attitude towards the whites deteriorated in 1862 and Anderson tells of a girl's recollection of how the Indians had been friendly prior, but they had now become "disagreeable and ill-natured". She continued saying that "They seldom visited us and when they met us, passed by coldly." The traditionalists, especially braves, were beginning to put all whites in the same category as the farmer-Indians, where, as Anderson said, neither group had any regard "for the sacred Dakota obligation to work for the betterment of the group rather than the individual." This deteriorating relationship would prove to be the match that lit the fire, as four braves were out hunting for food on August 17, 1862, in Acton, Minnesota.⁵⁴

"Ta-o-ya-te-du-ta is not a coward"

As the Civil War continued down south, the army was in need of more soldiers. The Indians noticed this, and as Big Eagle recalls it "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."⁵⁵

Galbraith had managed to recruit a company of soldiers he called "The Renville Rangers", consisting of nearly all half-breeds. Whispers went about the Indians that this would be an opportune time to strike back and reclaim their ancestral lands, and before the whites could recall the troops, the Indians could "clean out the country."⁵⁶

Big Eagle tells the story of the four braves, of which he personally talked to after the event, who ignited the spark of the uprising. He recalls that, on Sunday, August 17, Brown Wing (Sungigidan), Killing Ghost (Nagi-wi-cak-te), Breaking Up (Ka-om-de-i-ye-dan), and Runs Against Something When Crawling (Pa-zo-i-yo-pa) went out to hunt in the Big Woods, along with a number of other Dakotas from Shakopee's band. As they split up, the four men eventually came to a settler's fence. On the other side was a hen's nest with some eggs in it. As one of the

⁵⁴ Anderson, *Little Crow*, location 2369

⁵⁵ Anderson, *Through Dakota Eyes*, location 513

⁵⁶ Anderson, *Through Dakota Eyes*, location 483, 513

men took the eggs, the other warned him “Don’t take them, for they belong to a white man and we may get into trouble.” The man angrily threw the eggs on the ground and replied: “You are a coward. You are afraid of the white man. You are afraid to take even an egg from him, though you are half-starved. Yes, you are a coward, and I will tell everybody so.” Offended, the other answered “I am not a coward. I am not afraid of the white man, and to show you that I am not I will go to the house and shoot him. Are you brave enough to go with me?” The man replied: “Yes, I will go with you, and we will see who is the braver of us two.” As they started off, the remaining two men said: “We will go with you, and we will be brave, too.” The four braves arrived at the house, which belonged to an older man named Robinson Jones. Jones had seen the Indians coming and fled to his neighbor, Howard Baker. There the Indians killed five people: Jones, Baker, one Mr. Webster, Mrs. Jones, and a girl of fourteen, before they stole some horses and hurried back to Shakopee’s village.⁵⁷

As the four braves returned, they shouted “There is a war with the whites and we have begun it!”⁵⁸ Excitement was at an all-time high and spread like fire. They realized they had to do something, because the whites would seek revenge: annuities would be cut, depredations would be claimed, and Indians would be killed. They decided to seek the help of someone whom they thought could bring the bands together for war.

Little Crow was abruptly awoken from his sleep in the early morning of August 18. He sat up in his bed and listened to the braves as they told their story. They continued listing all the grievances the whites had caused them: failures of promised annuities, trader’s debts and thievery, prohibitions, and the debauchery of their women. When Little Crow realized what their intention was, he told them to go to Travelling Hail, who they had elected as speaker, but seeing as he was one of the farmer-Indians, they knew that would be pointless. Then one of the braves called Little Crow a coward, and this he could not stand for. Little Crow’s young son, Wowinape, stood beside his father that morning and memorized his speech: “Ta-o-ya-te-du-ta is not a coward, and he is not a fool!” he started. “When did he run away from his enemies? When did he leave his braves behind him on the war-path and turn back to his teepees? (...) he walked behind you (...) and covered your backs as a she-bear covers her cubs!” He continued to point to his feathers

⁵⁷ Anderson, *Through Dakota Eyes*, location 686

⁵⁸ Michno, *Dakota Dawn : The Decisive First Week of the Sioux Uprising, August 1862*, 52

hanging on the wall, ‘Is Ta-o-ya-te-du-ta without scalps? (...) Behold the scalp-locks of your enemies hanging there (...). Do they call him a coward?’ He then repeated himself: ‘Ta-o-ya-te-du-ta is not a coward, and he is not a fool. Braves, you are like little children; you know not what you are doing.’ He stood up in front of the flock and continued: ‘You are full of the white man’s devil-water. You are like dogs in the Hot Moon when they run mad and snap at their own shadows.’ He tried to reason with them, saying that no matter how many whites you kill, there will always be more, and they will kill them. He acknowledged that, yes, they do fight among themselves, but if you fire at one, you and your family will face their army. ‘Braves, you are little children – you are fools. You will die like the rabbits when the hungry wolves hunt them in the Hard Moon. Ta-o-ya-te-du-ta is not a coward: he will die with you.’⁵⁹

Summary

There were countless causes to the uprising in 1862 including non-payment of annuities, broken promises, land issues, racial and social differences, trader debts, inexperienced officials, corrupt government, and depredation claims.

The treaty of Traverse des Sioux and Mendota was the start of the inevitable uprising in 1862. The Santee bands of the Sisseton, Wahpeton, Mdewakanton, and Wahpekute were forced to the treaty table on July 23, and August 5, where they signed the right to a 20-mile reservation on either side of the Minnesota river. They would be paid for the land they sold in annuities, which, after being distributed to various other projects on the reservation, amounted to \$10 per person. As soon as the Indians signed the treaties, the traders wanted their share. They presented them with a second document to sign, the ‘traders’ paper’, which stated that the Indians will agree to hand over \$210,000 of their annuities to pay for past debts. This issue would persist throughout the years, where traders kept books over who owed them, but the Indians did not. Traders would often abuse the system to get more of the annuity money, leaving the Indians with virtually nothing.

⁵⁹ Anderson, *Through Dakota Eyes*, location 765, 778

The Yankton treaty of 1858 was the result of the government's corrupt removal in the previous treaties of the part that guaranteed the Sioux their reservation. In the years between 1851 and 1858, the Indians had been allowed to live on the reservation by the grace of their "Great Father", but as more white people settled in Minnesota, they would encroach on Dakota land and create unrest. Acting commissioner Charles E. Mix welcomed several Dakota chiefs to Washington, where the negotiations took place. Little Crow exemplified himself as the leading negotiator for the Dakotas but was ultimately put down by Mix who left them with an ultimatum they could not refuse: if they did not sign the treaty, they would lose their land. Little Crow was furious and had previously aired the Dakotas' discontent with the government's unfulfilled promises regarding annuities, but to no avail. The treaty was signed, and the Dakotas lost half their reservation and hunting ground, with the treaty making the reservations permanent, but split up into individual farming allotments. They neither received their lost annuities from the years before, nor did they receive new ones.

Annuities were a continuous issue between the Dakotas and the government. Not only did the Indians not get what was promised, but the annuities were given out where it did not belong. White settlers could file depredation claims if they felt an Indian had wronged them, agent officials would take a cut for themselves, and traders were always on hand with their credit books. Lastly, annuities could also be withheld if the government wished, like the incident with Inkpaduta. The Spirit Lake Massacre resulted in the withholding of annuities for the Indians and would only be paid if they themselves caught and punished Inkpaduta. The Indians refused, saying it was not their responsibility, and felt the ultimatum was unreasonably unfair considering the government had neglected capturing Henry Lott who massacred a dozen Wahpekutes, of whom were mostly women and children. In the end Little Crow managed to convince the bands to go after Inkpaduta, convincing them that it was the best possible solution.

When Abraham Lincoln became president in 1861, there was a change of party, and the new agents and superintendent was not favorable among the Indians. They did not have the right knowledge or experience to handle the delicate issues that plagued the Indians. Thompson made false promises of a great bounty with the new annuities, and some Indians believed him, which led them to neglect their crops and not prepare enough for the winter. The responsibility to clean

up Thompsons mess was put on Galbraith, who had to feed over 1,500 Dakotas through the winter, of which he favored the farmer-Indians.

The Indians were now split into traditionalists and progressives, with the latter being backed by the government. This made an internal division in the Indian community, and the traditionalists started to hate the progressives. To make matters worse, the progressive farmer-Indians would tell the traditional hunter-Indians that if they had done as them, they would not be starving.

The traditionalists went on to become members of the soldier's lodge, which had transformed from a hunter society to a political opposition to resist acculturation. They consisted mostly of young warriors or "braves". These braves opposed the government, but especially the traders and farmer-Indians. They were plotting to buy as much goods as they could from the traders on credit, and not pay them back when the annuity money arrived. The traders were told of this and cut off credit to all hunter-Indians, saying they should go to the soldier's lodge for credit, or they could go and "eat grass" if they were hungry.

Hunger was worse than ever, and several children and elderly died as a result. In a desperate attempt to secure food, Indians went to raid the warehouse at Yellow Medicine, but were soon stopped. Negotiations with Galbraith, Little Crow, several chiefs, trader's clerks, and Andrew J. Myrick commenced, where Little Crow again became the spokesman for the Indians grievances. After a poorly thought-out comment from Little Crow, Myrick darkened, and, when asked to speak, said that if the Indians were hungry, they could go eat grass.

The relation between hunter-Indians and white settlers deteriorated and became filled with hatred. As four Indians were out hunting, they came into an argument about cowardice, and to show courage, they killed 5 white settlers, which ignited the uprising.

Superintendent Clark Thompson wrote in his annual report, January 27, 1863, that the previous year has been a "strange and eventful one in the history of the agency of the Sioux of the Mississippi." He continues: "It began in hope, apparent prosperity, and happiness, and closed amid disappointments and blood."⁶⁰ From the perspective of the Sioux, however, the year

⁶⁰ Annual report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the year 1863, 266

did not begin in hope, prosperity, or happiness. It was filled with hunger and grievance, internal struggles, inequality, anger, and most of all, the wish for change.

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