Minnesota
In The
Civil + Indian Wars
1861-65.

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NARRATIVE OF THE FIRST REGIMENT OF MOUNTED RANGERS.

BY CAPTAIN EUGENE M. WILSON.[1]

This regiment was recruited in the fall of 1862, on account of the urgent necessity of having cavalry for the purposes of the Indian War then being prosecuted in Minnesota against the Sioux Indians. In the month of August previous this merciless and savage foe had perpetrated a massacre all along the frontier that, for extent of mortality and horrible details, was without a parallel in American history. The Sioux were naturally a fierce and warlike race, as their name "Cut Throat" implies. They undoubtedly were suffering some injustice from the neglect of the general Government, which was then bending its every energy to the suppression of the great Rebellion, and was excusable for failure to carry out treaty obligations with the Indian tribes with the promptitude that had characterized its action in times of peace. But this formed no adequate excuse for an outbreak of war, and not the slightest apology for the fiendish outrages that spared neither infancy, age nor sex, and that followed even death with mutilations so diabolical and obscene that common decency forbids their publication.

The outbreak commenced at Acton. On August 17th Capt. Strout's company was defeated. On the 18th, Capt. Marsh's men, while crossing the river at the Redwood Agency, were surprised and butchered. The fiends spread themselves like prairie fire all along the frontier, from Otter Tail Lake to the Iowa line, and in the course of a few days more than 1,000 persons were slaughtered by the remorseless savages. Some of the more attractive females alone were spared for a fate worse than death.

The great majority of those subject to this terrible attack were foreigners. Knowing nothing of the Indian character, incapable of defense, and without suspicion of danger, they fell easy and unresisting victims to the whirlwind of death that swept over them. Where there were settlements of native-born citizens, and particularly of those acquainted with frontier life, they generally organized a successful defense. The Indians spread eastward with their attacks as far as Forest City and Glencoe, and persons were killed within thirty miles of Minneapolis. Stockades were erected all along the inner frontier line, and the few who had not rushed as refugees to the river towns were in a continual state of siege. The citizens immediately organized irregular relief corps, and went to the aid of the beleaguered places. New Ulm and Fort Ridgley, in imminent danger of capture and slaughter, were relieved. The Indians were defeated at Birch Coolie, and afterward in a much more extensive engagement at Wood Lake. General Sibley had been placed in command, and his knowledge of Indian character, his prudence and ability, led to the victories and the release of hundreds of white prisoners whose lives were in the greatest danger. A large number of Indian prisoners were taken, but the great mass of the bands, and the worst of them, scattered from Wood Lake westward to join with their cousins of the plains, and prepare for a renewal of hostilities.

The experience of the campaign so far had shown that cavalry was absolutely indispensable for the prosecution of offensive war. Infantry could only fight Indians when Indians chose to make the attack. When they chose to get out of

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[1] This narrative was written by Mr. Wilson in January, 1890. His lamented death occurred at Nassau, Island of New Providence (Bermudas), April 10, 1890.

the way there was no difficulty in doing so. Infantry could not patrol the long line of frontier, and were necessarily confined to the various stockades and garrisons. An order was therefore procured from the War Department for the organization of a twelve-company regiment of mounted men, who should not merely be cavalry, but be armed with such long-range guns as would fit them for all emergencies of Indian warfare. No sooner was the order published than recruits began to pour into Fort Snelling, and but a short time elapsed until the regiment was organized. The roster of the regiment follows this narrative.

The privates were citizens of Minnesota, and many enlisted with hearts aching for wives and children and other relatives who had been slaughtered by the barbarous knife and tomahawk. It may well be supposed that they felt more than ordinary interest in the campaign, and had no tender feeling for the Indian. The majority had been out in the citizen organizations that went to the relief of the settlements, and had participated in the battles of the August and September previous. The First Battalion of the regiment was sent out to the frontier as soon as organized, and remained there all winter, guarding and patrolling against incursions of Indians. The remainder of the regiment was stationed later at various places in the state.

INDIAN CAMPAIGN, 1863.

In the spring of 1863 General Sibley organized his expedition for following and attacking the Sioux in Dakota, whither they had gone. Six companies went out with the expedition from Fort Snelling, and the First Battalion marched down across the state and joined the main body at Camp Pope, twenty-five miles beyond Fort Ridgley. Nine companies of the regiment thus accompanied the expedition under command of Col. McPhail; the other three companies remained and did patrol duty on the frontier under command of Lieut. Col. Pfaender. The expedition moved out of Camp Pope on the 16th of June, 1863. This was before the day of railroads in Minnesota. There was really nothing but a thin line of settlements along the river. The communities beyond were, before the massacre, few and far between, and by it were virtually obliterated. The west line of Minnesota was further off than the Rocky Mountains of to-day. All provisions and supplies had to be hauled from St. Paul and Minneapolis. Troops could not move until the grass on the plains was strong enough to support the stock of the quartermaster department and the horses of the cavalry. There had been a drought in 1862, and it continued through 1863. The plains of Dakota were so parched and dry that dust rose along the march as from a public highway. The lakes and streams were so alkaline as to cause suffering and sickness to the troops. The dogs that accompanied the expedition died from thirst, or were shot to prevent their becoming mad. Horses and mules became poor and weak, and many died. Prairie fires ran over the uplands late in June. The custom was to have the reveillé sounded at two o'clock in the morning, and a start was made as soon as it was light enough to see, which came very early in that high northern latitude. A march could not be extended beyond noon, as the rest of the day was necessary to allow the stock to feed on the little grass that could be found in the lowlands and around the lakes and marshes. Stock could not be grazed at night, as the Indians would have stampeded it, but had to be tied to the picket rope and fed on grass cut with scythes when any could be found to cut. Often on coming into camp the water was found so bad that the troops had to dig wells, and by sinking ten or twelve feet at the edge of a marsh generally found water which, though far from pure, was not impregnated with alkali. The principal fuel was buffalo chips.

The cavalry, although having the privilege of riding during the march, had really a harder time than the infantry. The latter when in camp had little to do but to rest. The work of the cavalryman had just commenced. He had to graze his horse during the afternoon and cut grass for his provender at night. When night came he was placed on picket guard on a circle far outside the common camp guard. He was in danger from the wily Indian without and the nervous infantry guard within. Indeed, the habit of having the cavalry guard shot at by the camp guard, under supposition of being an Indian, became so frequent that private instructions were given to return the fire, and this reciprocity soon cured the trouble from within.

BATTLE OF BIG MOUND.

The main body of the Indians was not reached until the 24th of July, when the scouts reported them in large numbers. The train was soon brought into corral by a shallow and alkaline lake, under the shadow of a high hill, which was called Big Mound, and gave name to the battle fought that day. The Indians appeared in large numbers on Big Mound, and in larger numbers still to the west of it. Through the interchange of communications between the scouts the Indians expressed a wish to have a conference with General Sibley. He, having been warned of danger, declined. Dr. Weiser, the chaplain of the Mounted Rangers, however, went among the Indians, many of whom he knew, and returned to the camp saying that they only wanted peace. He shortly returned to the top of Big Mound with two or three other persons, and was almost immediately shot and killed. His companions escaped by hard riding and from the bad marksmanship of the Indians. Lieutenant Freeman of Company D of the Rangers had been killed several hours before while out hunting, but this was not then known in camp. As soon as the killing of Dr. Weiser was known General Sibley ordered the First Battalion of the Rangers to attack the Indians, which they did, followed by some companies of the Sixth and Tenth Infantry regiments. Part of the cavalry had to dismount on account of the steepness of the hill, and they fought their way up on foot, driving the Indians before them. A fearful thunder storm came on during this attack, and it seemed as if offended nature was going to participate and destroy the other combatants. One cavalryman only, however, was killed by the lightning, which was playing about with fearful recklessness. Two others, with their horses, were knocked down, but eventually recovered. The Indians retreated soon after the first attack, and, the cavalry following, a running fight was kept up for some fifteen miles, when darkness put an end to the conflict. It was not till next morning that the cavalry returned from the pursuit. It was difficult to tell how many Indians were killed. Several Indian scalps were taken. The taking of these was not noticed by the officers in the heat of the conflict. They were in every instance in the possession of those some member of whose family had been murdered by the savages, or who had been trappers and hunters, and acquainted with Indian habits and customs. They knew how much the Indian felt the disgrace of having any members of his tribe start scalpless to the happy hunting grounds, and the savage superstition as to the improbability of a bald man's success in the next world. Many of them had lost their families by Indian massacre, and it was not surprising that in this instance they forgot the humanities of civilization. Part of the infantry marched in this battle after the cavalry to a distance of some ten miles from camp. The fighting after the first attack was necessarily done by the cavalry.

The mistake of the campaign occurred at the close of the battle that day. Lieut. Beaver of Gen. Sibley's staff brought an order to Col. McPhail to return to camp during the night, which was unfortunately obeyed. And the more unfortunately, since it turned out that Lieut. Beaver had mistaken the purport of the order. The cavalry should have waited where they were until the Seventh Regiment came up, and then bivouacked on the ground. The families of the Indians were close by. They could not have escaped. The warriors would not have deserted their families. An end to the conflict could have been made in two days, and more Indian prisoners taken than ever before or since. But the cavalry was marched back. Upon meeting the infantry, it too was turned back, and the whole night was spent in reaching camp. The march of the day before had commenced at three o'clock in the morning, and continued until noon. A little after two the men were again in the saddle, and in the saddle they were kept until the next morning. All they had to eat after leaving camp at Big Mound was dried buffalo meat found in the Indian camp, about as palatable and as tough as a leather saddle-skirt. The long march and fight had exhausted men and horses. A day's rest was absolutely necessary. The Indians thus got two or three days' start for their families, who traveled as only squaws can. The warriors remained behind to fight and delay our troops, and give better chance for the wives and children to reach and cross the Missouri River.

BATTLE OF DEAD BUFFALO LAKE.

On the 26th of July the savages were again found at Dead Buffalo Lake. After our troops had gone into camp, a large number of them made a dash for some hay cutters and mules that were off some distance on the lake shore. One company of cavalry was standing to horse, and immediately started for the rescue. Another saddled at once, and reached the Indians about the same time as the first. A charge was made upon them, and a fight at once developed, which was soon participated in by other cavalry and Indians who came to join their comrades. It was a smoky day, and as the horses of whites and Indians stirred up the dust, and the contestants mingled with each other, it was often difficult to distinguish friend from foe. The Indians were so excited, and their aim so faulty, that they seemed unable to hit anyone twenty yards distant, and after a half hour of this close work they made off as fast as their ponies would carry them, leaving behind a number of dead. The first charge of the Indians in this fight was led by Grey Eagle, a chief of considerable distinction. Although naked, he was finely painted, and his head profusely decorated with feathers. He was a splendid looking fellow, and fought bravely, but was soon killed.

BATTLE OF STONY LAKE.

Again, at Stony Lake, on the 28th of July, the Indians made an attack. As the train was moving along in the morning they were discovered by the scouts, and soon proved to be in great numbers. They were mostly mounted warriors, and must have numbered some 2,500. It was afterward ascertained that they had been reinforced by the Teton Sioux from across the Missouri. They attacked with great boldness, and showed an ability in the management of their forces unusual in savage warfare. Signal men could be seen waving signal flags on certain parts of the field, which was always followed by a rush of Indians to that quarter. They made repeated charges, but were easily repulsed. The light artillery discouraged them very much, and, finding success impossible, they abandoned the field. They evidently intended this for their grand final effort. They were painted for battle, and naked as at the day of their birth, with the exception of shot pouches and knife belts.

This was the last battle, and the next day the Missouri River was reached near the mouth of Apple Creek and some five miles below the present site of Bismarck. The Indians had, however, gotten across the river. As part of the plan of the campaign, General Sully was to march up the Missouri from Sioux City with 3,000 men, and be on the other side of the Missouri before General Sibley and the Indians arrived. His transportation of rations and baggage was to be sent by steamboat. The extreme low water in the river, however, so delayed the steamers that he did not arrive in time, and the nicely laid plan to trap the savages failed because one side of the trap was left open.

It was impossible to continue the campaign further. The transportation was greatly exhausted. There was only left sufficient rations for a return to the supply left at Camp Atchison. So, after waiting three days and hearing nothing of General Sully, the return march was commenced. The campaign had not proven the success desired, which was the complete destruction of the hostile Sioux. But it was a complete success so far as relieving the State of Minnesota from future attack. The bands that had been located in the western part of the state, and all those east of the Missouri in Dakota, were driven west of that river, never to return. From that day Minnesota was as safe from Indians as Massachusetts. Successive defeats and the sufferings of their flight were not to be forgotten and not to be risked again. They had taken the year before, from the massacred settlers, a large number of horses, wagons and other property, and had much of this plunder in 1863. From Big Mound to the crossing of the Missouri their track was strewed by abandoned property; wagons, horses and household goods lined the way. Their tepees were left behind. At the Missouri was found a large number of wagons and a great quantity of abandoned property which in their flight they could not take across. These, with some of our own army wagons that the weakened mules were unable to haul any longer, made a parting bonfire.

During this campaign the Indians were tolerably well armed with the trade-gun which they used in killing buffalo and the arms they had taken from troops and settlers. Many still retained the bow and arrows in addition to their guns. At close quarters this was a more dangerous weapon than a revolver. They shot their arrows with great rapidity and precision. Although made of light arrow-wood, they were tipped with iron, and given such velocity that they would go clear through a man and show the barb on the other side from its entrance.

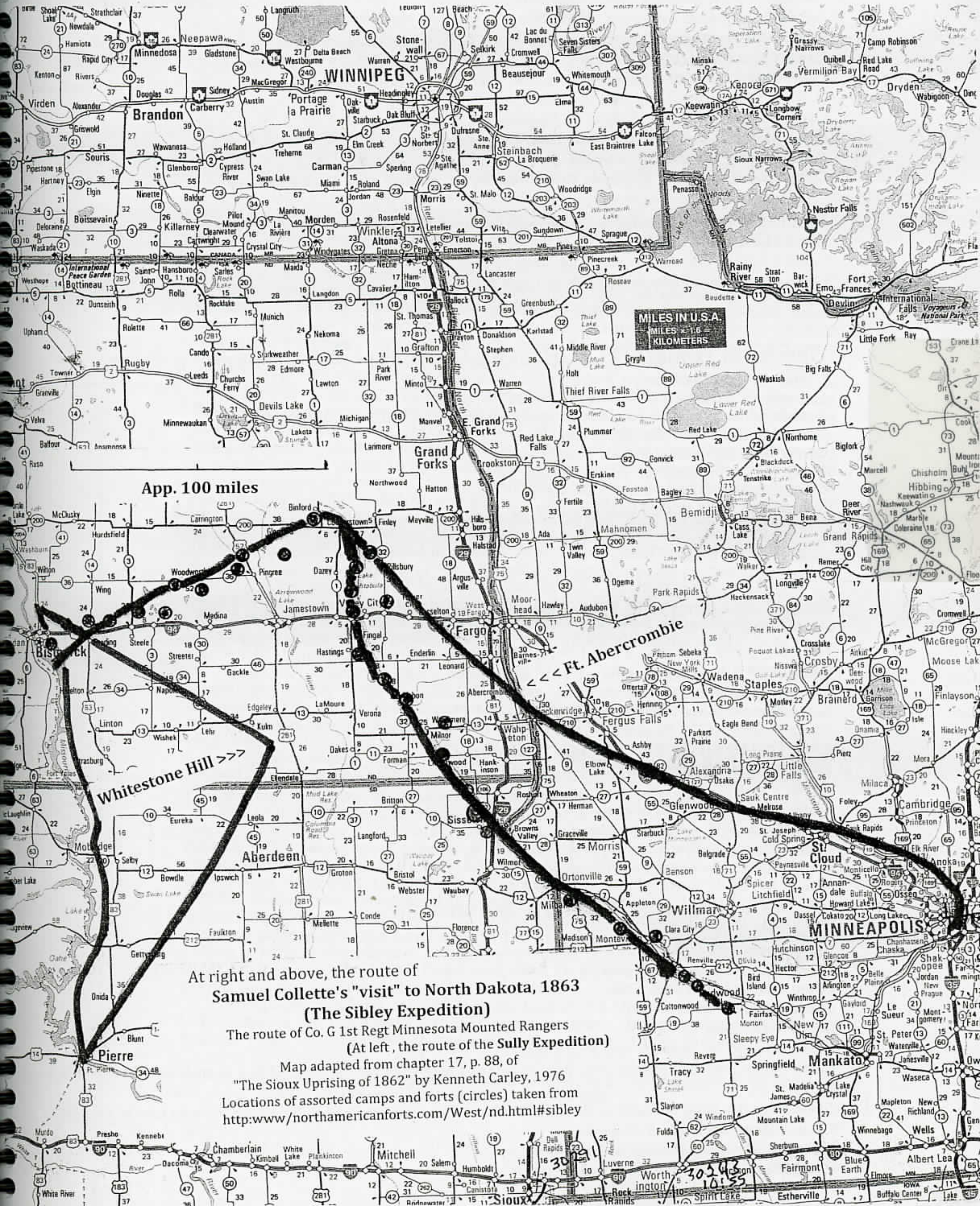
The return march was uneventful except for the suffering on account of bad water, and at Lake Jessie the finding alive of George Brackett, whom we had supposed to have been killed along with Lieut. Freeman. When Lake Jessie, where the invalid corps, surplus supplies and transportation had been left on the way to the Missouri, was reached on the return march, Col. McPhail, with several companies of the regiment, was ordered to return to Fort Ridgley, via Snake River and the Lake Shetek country, and accordingly, August 12th, they parted with the main command, taking up their march in a southeasterly direction, and reaching Fort Ridgley September 1st; while the main column, under the immediate command of the general, resumed its march toward Abercrombie.

Before arriving at Fort Abercrombie the First Battalion of cavalry was sent through the northern part of the state to Fort Ripley, and the remainder of the command marched to Fort Snelling. The various companies of the regiment of Rangers were mustered out of service during the late fall and early winter. A large number of them re-enlisted in various regiments, and particularly in the Second Cavalry Regiment, which was engaged, under General Sully, in a further Indian war beyond the Missouri.

The men who formed the First Mounted Rangers were as fine a class as ever enlisted. The roster of the regiment shows names connected prominently with the history of Minnesota from its earliest days to the present time. They have been chosen to fill the various offices of the state from governor on down. They have held high rank in the state senate and house of representatives. They have represented Minnesota in the federal Congress. They have graced the bench and bar of the state, and in the various avocations of life been among the chief promoters of the great and rapid progress of the commonwealth. Many, ripe in years and honors, have been gathered with the harvest, but their memory is still green with their comrades and fellow citizens. The survivors cannot, in the common course of human life, expect many more years of service. But those years will still be years of usefulness. And as, one by one, the final order comes for mustering out, it will be obeyed with the same calm courage that has characterized their lives.

NOTE.—The following account of the service of Company M in the battle of Dead Buffalo Lake is taken from "A Journal of Sibley's Indian Expedition," by Arthur M. Daniels of Company H, Sixth Regiment, Minnesota Infantry, and published at Winona in 1864: "We left camp this morning about five o'clock and came rapidly forward southwest. It was very cold; we had on our overcoats or blankets, and we could stand it to march fast. We came upon the Indian camp in about an hour and a half, and halted a few minutes. Many relics were secured. Every conceivable article of Indian apparel and paraphernalia was strewn all along the track of their retreat for six or seven miles, indeed as far as we have come. It was not long before Indians were reported in our advance, and the train was put in a solid mass. Companies A and B of the Sixth Regiment, which was in advance, deployed as skirmishers, others being the reserve. We advanced thus. The cavalry were also in line behind us, and other regiments on either flank, and everything was in perfect order to receive an attack from any direction. We moved on in this manner until we had made some ten miles more and were probably fifteen miles from this morning's camp. We, the advance, had then passed a lake called Dead Buffalo Lake, selected as the site for camp, and halted.

"Indians were immediately in our front, on ponies, riding backward and forward and evidently trying to feel us a little or draw us on. Guns were fired occasionally by them, and once in a while a response was made by our skirmishers. Thus the farce went on for an hour and a half,—a sort of a play fight. The reserve skirmishers were ordered back to camp. Just before we returned, a section of a battery came up. and when the Indians had huddled together a shell was dropped among them; then, as soon as they saw the smoke—before the shell reached them, they made another beautiful 'skedaddle.' We had hardly reached camp and stacked arms on the color line, when Indians were reported coming over the bluff to the northwest. The cattle and horses and some men were out on the prairie away up to the bluff. All who were on the bluff presently came rushing in, and soon the Indians appeared within half a mile of camp. There seemed to be no one left to guard camp, and there appeared to be danger, for a few minutes, that they would capture some cattle and horses; one, in particular, rode clear down the hill and fired his gun; we were immediately ordered up as skirmishers, but Company M of the cavalry (First Regiment, Mounted Rangers) beat us, rushed up the hill, and finally, after a few minutes, made a charge, killing five of them. Companies A and L were also in line, and charged over the hill after the savages. We laid down just behind the brow of the hill, and then the cavalry retreated, hoping to draw them onto us, but they kept a respectful distance from us. We laid thus for an hour or two and then came back to camp. One man of the cavalry was wounded in the charge." Company M, during the Indian expedition of 1863, was commanded by Lieutenant Daniel B. Johnson, Jr.



At right and above, the route of

Samuel Collette's "visit" to North Dakota, 1863

(The Sibley Expedition)

The route of Co. G 1st Regt Minnesota Mounted Rangers

(At left, the route of the **Sully Expedition**)

Map adapted from chapter 17, p. 88, of

"The Sioux Uprising of 1862" by Kenneth Carley, 1976

Locations of assorted camps and forts (circles) taken from

http:www/northamericanforts.com/West/nd.html#sibley