BATTLE OF WHITESTONE HILL (ND)
1863

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The Battle of Whitestone Hill

by Clair Jacobson

Introduction

A settler looking for buffalo bones in Dakota Territory in the mid-1880s accidently discovered the remains of a battle fought more than 20 years earlier. What the settler found were the bones of horses and mules instead of buffalo, and a story about the discovery appeared in a St. Paul newspaper. An ex-soldier then helped identify the site as Whitestone Hill, where, in September, 1863, United States cavalry troops fought an important but relatively obscure battle with a large encampment of Indians.*

The significance of the battle of Whitestone Hill is pointed out in Elwyn B. Robinson's *History of North Dakota;* he describes it as "the bloodiest ever fought on North Dakota soil." Indian losses in lives and property were severe, making it the most important battle east of the Missouri River in Dakota Territory. It helped open the way for later white settlement of the area by forcing the Indians closer to accepting reservation status. However, it receives little or no attention in most history books. Dee Brown, for example, does not even mention it in *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee.*

The following article examines the history of the battle of Whitestone Hill in three parts. The first describes the situation and events leading to the battle; included is a brief summary of the Minnesota Uprising of 1862 and the resulting cavalry expeditions into Dakota Territory in 1863. The second part narrates the battle itself and its aftermath. The third portion considers some serious questions about the battle.

Events Leading Up To The Battle

The 1863 battle between the United States Cavalry and a large encampment of Indians at Whitestone Hill in what is today Dickey County, North Dakota, was not an isolated incident, but rather one with its origins in the Minnesota Uprising of 1862. This uprising, in turn, was rooted in Indian grievances dating back to 1851.

Prior to 1851, the eastern branch of the Sioux linguistic family[1] had for centuries dominated parts of Wisconsin and much of Minnesota. Then, in an 1851 treaty, they surrendered much of their tribal homeland to the United States in return for three million dollars in annuities to be paid during the following 50 years. These Indians were left with a 150 mile long, 20 mile wide reservation along the Minnesota River, its boundaries extending 10 miles on each side of the river.[2]

In another treaty in 1858, these Indians were induced to sell the portion of the reservation north of the river to the government, thus cutting the reservation in half.[3] About 6,600 Santee Sioux were living in groups along the Minnesota River in 1862 (the Sisseton and Wahpeton bands on the upper part of the reservation, and the Mdewakanton and Wahpekute along the lower portion).[4] Many Indians came to resent the loss of their land through treaties.

The Indians had other grievances in addition to the loss of their lands. Subsidies were given to Indians who would farm on the reservation, but nine-tenths of the Santees refused to take up agriculture and resented this special treatment which farmer Indians received. Each year white traders defrauded the Indians out of much of their annuity money.

*This information comes from "Whitestone Battlefield: A History from 1863 to 1976" (Prepared by the Whitestone Battlefield Celebration Committee, 1976), and from letters written by J.C. Wilson at the Coteau Hills Historical Society, Forbes, N.D.

[1]The names "Sioux" and "Dakota" are generally used interchangeably to describe the tribes loosely related by linguistic and political ties. The Dakotas were originally divided into seven bands or council fires, but as they moved west a breakdown into three main divisions became more applicable. The Santees, or Eastern Dakotas, lived west of the Mississippi, largely in the Minnesota area. The Middle Dakotas (Yankton and Yanktonais) lived west of the Santees, toward the Missouri River. The Teton, or Western Dakotas, lived on the plains stretching beyond the Missouri to the mountains. The Sioux or Dakota tribes in each division were as follows:

Santee or Eastern Dakotas
- Mdewakanton
- Wahpekute
- Wahpeton
- Sisseton

Middle Dakotas
- Yankton
- Yanktonais (Upper Yanktonais and Lower Yanktonais)

Teton or Western Dakotas
- Blackfoot
- Brule
- Hunkpapa
- Minneconjou
- Oglala
- Sans Arc
- Two Kettle

The English spellings of these tribal names vary, causing some difficulty in identification. "Hunkpapa," for example, is also written "Uncpapa," "Uncapapa," and so on. "Hunkpatina," on the other hand, is another name for the Lower Yanktonais. The "Hunk-pa-ti" were among the Indians at Whitestone Hill, and in this case the author appears to have been referring to the Hunkpatina or Lower Yanktonais, rather than the Hunkpapa. Ethel Nurge, ed., *The Modern Sioux* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), xii-xv; C. Frank Turner, *Across the Medicine Line* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1973), 11-12; John Upton Terrell, *American Indian Almanac* (New York: The World Publishing Co., 1971), 270-271; Jamake Highwater, *Indian America* (New York: David McKay Co., Inc., 1975), 319.

[2]Charles M. Oehler, *The Great Sioux Uprising* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1959), 12. Hereafter cited as Oehler.

[3]*Ibid.*

[4]Robert Huhn Jones, *The Civil War in the Northwest: Nebraska, Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, and the Dakotas* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960), 18. Hereafter cited as Jones.

The Indian agents were believed to be in collusion with the crooked traders.[5] In 1862, the annuities arrived late and then were not distributed immediately when part of them did arrive. This angered the Indians even further.[6]

An incident on August 17, 1862, triggered the Indian uprising in Minnesota. Four young Wahpetons returning from an unsuccessful hunting trip murdered five settlers in Meeker County, Minnesota. News of this spread rapidly through the reservation.[7] Two of the more hostile chiefs called for a council early the next morning, and Little Crow[8] was chosen to lead an uprising to kill and drive out the whites. Shakopee, Red Middle Voice and Medicine Bottle were also among the hostiles. In the days that followed, Indians raided settlements and cabins, massacred whites and unsuccessfully attacked both Fort Ridgely and New Ulm. One-third of New Ulm was destroyed as a result of the attacks.[9]

Forty thousand settlers fled as a result of the Indian attacks, and the white casualties were later estimated to be at least 800.[10] But it soon became apparent to the Indians that they were not going to be able to drive out the whites permanently.

Colonel Henry Hastings Sibley arrived at Fort Ridgely with 1,500 troups ten days after the uprisings began. The hostile Indians were unable to defeat the soldiers in battles at Birch Coulee and Wood Lake. When Sibley reached the reservation, he demanded that the Indians surrender.[11]

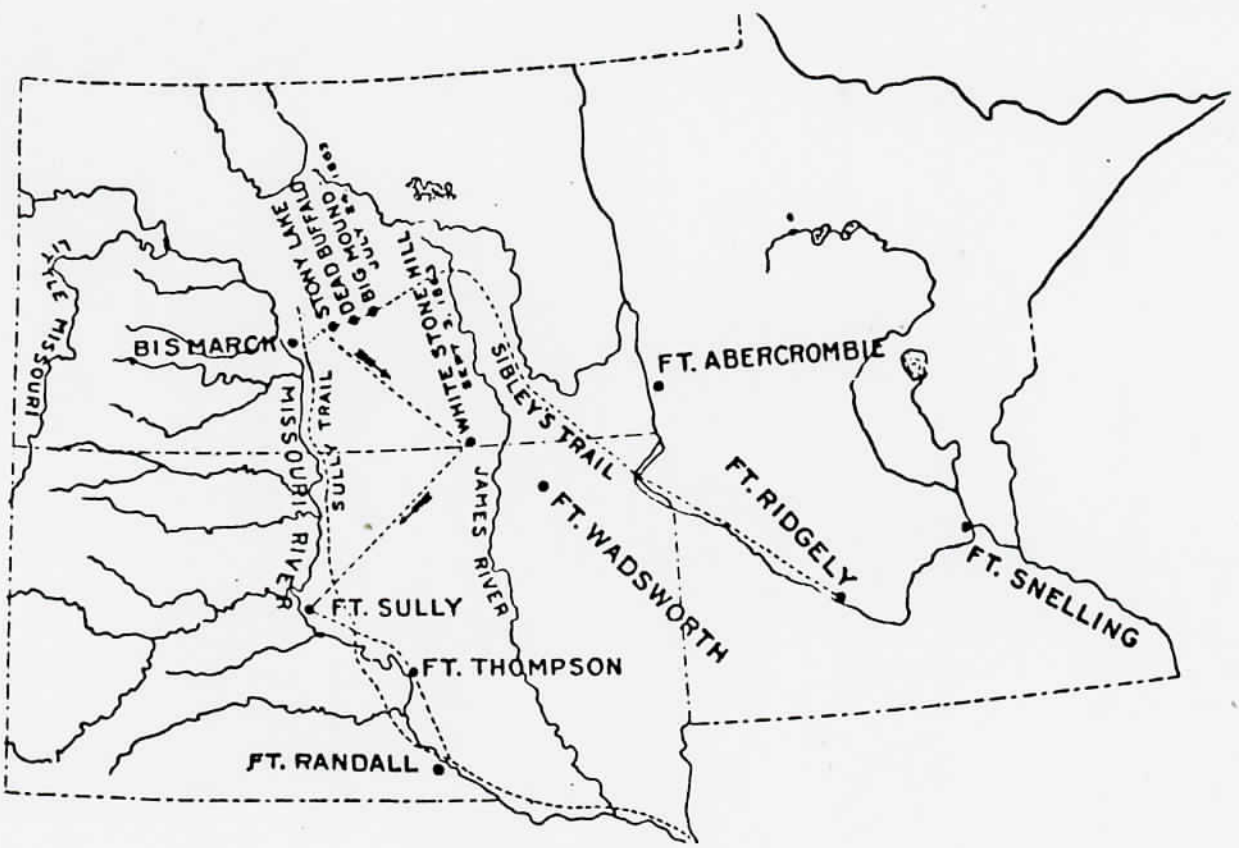
Sibley set up a miliary tribunal which conducted questionable trials for nearly 400 of the Indians who either surrendered or were captured.[12] Three hundred and six were sentenced to hang, but President Abraham Lincoln changed this list and only 38 were hanged in December.[13] Indian prisoners who were not hanged spent three years at a camp in Iowa before they were released. The other Indians from the reservation who surrendered were sent to Crow Creek along the Missouri River in Dakota Territory.[14] Not all of the Santees had been hostile during the uprising. Bands of Sissetons and Wahpetons on the upper part of the reservation did not take part in the massacres.[15]

Many of the hostiles and some of those who had not been,

[5]Oehler, 25.
[6]*Ibid.*, 24-25.
[7]*Ibid.*, 3-9.
[8]Little Crow, a Mdewakanton chief, was the best known leader on the lower portion of the reservation. He had played a significant part in the treaties of 1851 and 1858 and had become a farmer Indian when the Santees moved onto the reservation. Little Crow's prestige and authority prompted his selection as leader of the uprising. *Ibid.*, 17-21, 30.
[9]Oehler, xiii-xiv.
[10]*Ibid.*, xiv-xvi.
[11]*Ibid.*, xv-xvi.
[12]Richard L. Mackie, "The Trial and Execution of Sioux Indian Prisoners after the Minnesota Uprising of 1862" (Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, 1972), 8-16.
[13]Oehler, 208, 222.
[14]*Ibid.*, 239-240.
[15]*Ibid.*, 225.

The campaign of 1863

—State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection



General Alfred Sully

— Barry photo, State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection

but feared reprisals if they remained on the reservation, fled to Dakota Territory and Canada after the battle at Wood Lake. Little Crow and many other hostiles spent the winter in the area around Devils Lake in Dakota Territory.[16]

During the winter of 1862-63, General John Pope, commander of the Department of the Northwest,[17] made plans to send troops to Dakota Territory the following summer in an attempt to catch the Indians in a pincer movement.[18] Under Pope's plan a large military force led by General Sibley (he had been promoted to brigadier general following the Minnesota battles the previous fall) would leave Fort Ridgely in Minnesota and travel in a northwesterly direction into Dakota Territory. His force would engage the Indians near Devils Lake and drive them southwest toward the Missouri River. General John Cook, with another military force, would start from Sioux City, Iowa, and follow the Missouri River north until he was in position to cut off the retreat of Indians encountered by Sibley. The two forces would then be able to crush the Indians between them.[19]

Before the 1863 expeditions could get under way, however, the War Department decided to replace General Cook. Pope wanted to put one of his former staff members in charge of the column going up the Missouri, but was overruled and notified that General Alfred Sully[20] was being sent west to assume this command. Pope appears to have resented this decision.[21]

Sully's troops for the expedition consisted primarily of volunteers from Iowa and Nebraska. Many of these men had joined the army expecting to be sent to fight Confederate troops.[22] Sully's force numbered roughly 2,000 men[23] and did not get started as early as Pope had planned because of the change of command and a delay in the arrival of the Second Nebraska Cavalry.[24] Once underway, the force was delayed even more by exceptionally low water on the Missouri River. The steamboats carrying Sully's supplies up the river had to move slowly and often got hung up on sandbars.[25]

While Sully was delayed along the Missouri, Sibley's expedition entered Dakota Territory in late June and headed towards Devils Lake. The Indians, however, knew about the troop movements and left that area; Sibley's troops found only Wowinapa, the son of Little Crow, who reported that his father had earlier been killed in Minnesota.[26]

Sibley then headed toward the Missouri River and made contact with a large body of Indians. His troops fought minor battles at Big Mound, Dead Buffalo Lake and Stony Lake before the Indians crossed to the west side of the Missouri. Sibley waited for Sully's column along the river for two days and then started back to Minnesota on August 1;[27] his route was later mapped by South Dakota historian Doane Robinson.[28]

[16]*Ibid.*, 224-225.

[17]Pope had been in command of the Union armies in Virginia when they were defeated at the Second Battle of Bull Run in August, 1862. Soon afterward he was sent west to take charge of the Department of the Northwest which had been created to protect settlements in Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota and the Territories of Dakota and Nebraska. Geraldine Bean, "General Alfred Sully and the Northwest Indian Expedition," *North Dakota History*, 33-3 (Summer, 1966), 244. Hereafter cited as Bean.

[18]Jones, 61.

[19]Bean, 245-246.

[20]Sully, a career army officer, graduated from West Point in 1841 and spent much of the next 20 years on the frontier in Indian campaigns. "He served against the Seminoles in Florida in 1841 and 1842, against the Rogue River Indians in California and Oregon in the late 1840s and early 1850s, against the Sioux in the Northwest in the mid 1850s, and against the southern Cheyenne in 1860. Either in his capacity as a soldier or as a treaty negotiator, he had dealings with most of the plains tribes — the Santee-Sioux, Winnebagoes, Chippewas, Teton Sioux, Omahas, Poncas, Pawnees, Cheyennes, Rees, Mandans, Gros Ventres [Hidatsas], and Crows." He had also distinguished himself while with the Union Army in 1862 by keeping the defeat at the Second Battle of Bull Run from turning into a rout. Bean, 247.

[21]Langdon Sully, *No Tears for the General: The Life of Alfred Sully, 1821-1879* (Palo Alto, California: American West Publishing Co., 1974), 166. Hereafter cited as Sully.

[22]J.H. Drips, *Three Years Among the Indians in Dakota* (New York: Sol Lewis, 1974), 2; Frank Myers, *Soldiering in Dakota, Among the Indians* (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 3. Hereafter cited as Drips, and Myers.

[23]George W. Kingsbury, *History of Dakota Territory* (Chicago: The S.J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1915), Vol. 1, 288. Hereafter cited as Kingsbury.

[24]Bean, 246.

[25]Kingsbury, 289.

[26]Little Crow and his son had returned to western Minnesota in June to steal horses. On July 3, the chief was killed by settlers near Hutchinson. After his father's death, Wowinapa returned to the Devils Lake area on foot and was captured by Sibley's soldiers. Oehler, 229-232.

[27]Jones, 63-66.

[28]Doane Robinson, *A History of the Dakota or Sioux Indians* (Minneapolis: Ross & Haines, Inc., 1967), 321. Hereafter cited as Doane Robinson.

The delay of Sully's expedition along the Missouri drew strong criticism from General Pope. In an August 5 letter to Sully, Pope stressed the need to move north rapidly to meet Sibley's force: "Such a failure as you anticipate must not happen, as it will be impossible for you to explain it satisfactorily."[29] In an August 20 letter to Henry W. Halleck, General-in-Chief of the Union Armies, Pope wrote: "General Sully has not made the progress which was expected of him, and which it was in his power to have made . . ."[30]

On August 21, Sully left the Missouri at the mouth of the Little Cheyenne River and traveled northeast toward Devils Lake. He planned a brief swing because he only had rations for 23 days. On August 26, his scouting party brought in two squaws and some children who said that Sibley had fought Indians near Long Lake.[31]

Sully's force reached the outlet of Long Lake on August 28, found signs of large numbers of Indians, and found an old lame Indian who said that Sibley had fought the Indians some weeks earlier. The Indian said that a few days after Sibley had left the Missouri the Indians had recrossed the river, that they had discovered a Mackinaw boat going down the river and had killed the 24 people on board before sinking it, and that a large portion of the Indians had headed toward Long Lake.[32]

[29]U.S. Department of War, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. XXII, Part II — Correspondence, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1888), 434. Hereafter referred to as *Correspondence*.

[30]*Ibid.*, 464.

[31]U.S. Department of War, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. XXII, Part I — Official Records (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1902), 556. Hereafter referred to as *Official Record*.

[32]*Ibid.*

[33]The Missouri Coteau, or *Coteau de Missouri*, is a range of glacial moraines five to 20 miles wide and 300 to 400 feet high. In the Whitestone Hill area the coteau lies basically in a north-south direction with the land both east and west of it being relatively flat. The uneven terrain of the coteau includes small hills, ravines and many small lakes. The James River is about 30 miles east of Whitestone Hill and the Missouri River is about 85 miles to the west. Frederick B. Loomis, *Physiography of the United States* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran & Co., Inc., 1937), 207; Nevin M. Fenneman, *Physiography of Western United States* (New York and London: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1931), 73-75.

[34]*Official Record*, 557.

[35]*Ibid.*

[36]*Ibid.*

[37]Frank Myers referred to this Indian as "Crazy Dog" while F.E. Caldwell used the name "Fool Dog." The two names probably resulted from different translations of the Indian words.

[38]*Official Record*, 564.

[39]Drips, 53.

[40]*Official Record*, 567.

[41]Drips, 53.

[42]Distances used in the soldiers' accounts often conflict with one another. This was probably due to the difficulty of judging distance in the uneven terrain and to the fact that the soldiers were most likely preoccupied with other thoughts while they traveled. The distance between two points also probably depended on whether the troops were able to maintain the most direct route.

[43]Drips, 54.

[44]*Ibid.*

[45]*Ibid.*

[46]*Official Record*, 564.

[47]*Ibid.*, 559, 566.

[48]Doane Robinson, 327.

Sully's guides were familiar with the area and told him:

> always at this season of the year the Indians camped on the Coteau,[33] near the tributaries of the James, where the numerous lakes or springs kept the grass fresh; here the buffalo were plenty, and the lakes and streams full of fish; and that here they prepared their meat for the winter, moving to the Missouri, where the fuel was plenty, to winter.[34]

On the basis of this information, Sully changed his course and headed southeast through an area he later described in this manner:

> after a march of above 90 miles through a country with no wood whatever, but with good grass and plenty of lakes of the most abominable water, on the 3d of September we reached a lake, where, on the plains near by, were the remains of a very large number of buffaloes killed, some quite recently. Here I encamped to wait the reports of the commands I had out during the march, who every day discovered fresh signs of Indians, their lodge trails spread over the country, but all moving toward a point known to be a favorite haunt of the Indians.[35]

The Battle at Whitestone Hill

Early in the morning on September 3 a scouting party led by Major Albert E. House and consisting of four companies of the 6th Iowa Cavalry (about 300 men) left Sully's camp. Sully had instructed House to keep five miles ahead of the main command as they traveled during the day.[36] A mixed-blood named Frank LaFrambois and an Indian known as Crazy Dog[37] served as guides for the scouting party. House traveled in a southerly direction, stopping to allow the horses to graze for 10 minutes of each hour.[38] LaFrambois kept about five miles ahead of the party and his assistant traveled halfway between the guide and the troops.[39] The area was hilly.

LaFrambois bore off much to the left of the general direction of the march[40] and in the afternoon discovered what he believed to be a small encampment of Indians, about 20 lodges.[41] He then returned to notify Major House who was resting his troops about two miles from the Indian encampment.[42]

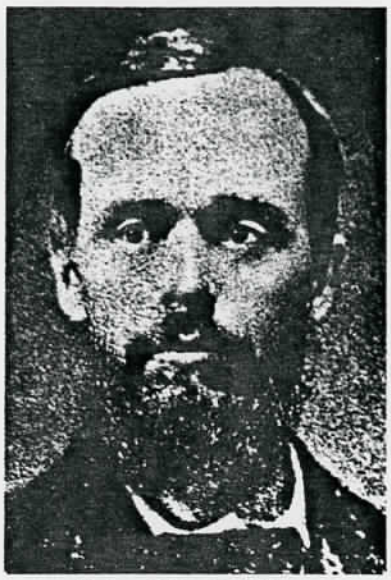
House ordered his troops to load their weapons and the scouting party started toward the Indian camp at a gallop. The troops were cautioned to keep in the valleys so they would not be seen by the Indians. E. A. Richards, an enlisted man in Company F, described the ride:[43]

> Blankets got loose from the saddles and lariat ropes got loose and strung along on the ground, much to our annoyance. We were ordered to cut them loose and go as freely as possible, as we did not know where Gen. Sully and his command were and we might be compelled to fight a fearful battle alone with our small army of about 300 men.[44]

The Indians were "camped on a little lake surrounded by hills."[45] When the scouting party neared the encampment, they discovered that it was much larger than expected. Two officers, sent forward for a closer look, reported that there were 400 lodges.[46] Other estimates vary between 300 and 600 lodges.[47] Figures concerning the number of Indians at the camp also vary, but the estimate of about 3,500 Indians, about 1,000 of whom were warriors, appears the most accurate.[48]

House dispatched LaFrambois and two soldiers to inform

General John Pope



Major Albert E. House

Colonel Henry Hastings Sibley

State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection

Sully of the situation and request reinforcements. While LaFrambois was riding for help,[49] House's troops confronted the Indians who had discovered the scouting party as it approached the camp. House sent two companies to the left of the encampment to determine more closely the Indians' strength and position in the uneven terrain. After these companies had returned, he sent another company to the right of the camp, again to gain more information about the Indian defenses.[50]

When the Indians first saw the troops, "the young warriors rushed to the little lake and taking up some of the blue clay they daubed it over their bodies, marking themselves hideously, as they did not have time to get the regular war paint."[51] Richards said the young warriors wanted to fight the troops immediately, but the older braves insisted that they wait until sundown.[52]

The confrontation between the scouting party and the Indian encampment lasted about three hours. During this time some Indian chiefs approached the troops with a flag of truce and attempted to negotiate. "They offered to surrender some of their chiefs," but House said that since he "did not know who was entitled to speak by authority, he demanded the surrender of all. This they refused to do."[53]

The scouting party stalled for time while waiting for Sully to arrive with the rest of the command. The soldiers stood in front of their horses with their guns ready and shifted their position occasionally to distract the Indians.[54]

LaFrambois reached the main camp in the late afternoon. The bugle was sounded and the troops quickly brought in their grazing horses, saddled up and formed in line. Sully left a small portion of the command behind and then headed for the Indian encampment at a gallop "with the Second Nebraska on the right, the Sixth Iowa on the left, one company of the Seventh Iowa and the battery in the center."[55] The ride took about an hour.

The sun was setting as Sully's force approached the Indian camp from the west. They were less than a mile away when the Indians spotted them and prepared to make a hasty departure:[56]

> Then the squaws and old men began taking down the teepes and loading the ponies with tent poles on either side with a strap over the back and the poles twelve to fifteen feet in length dragging on the ground. The squaws attended to this part. The pappooses were put in baskets and strapped on the poles which run from the ponies back to the ground. The wolf dogs were fixed up the same as the ponies were, only the packs were smaller. The young warriors were now fully aware of the danger and undertook to retreat to the James river, east a few miles.[57]

The Indians abandoned much of their equipment as they retreated.[58]

When Sully saw the Indians departing, he told Colonel Furnas to push his 2nd Nebraska troops forward as fast as

[49]Sully, in his report, states that LaFrambois was then surrounded by about 200 Indians who told him that "'they had fought General Sibley, and they could not see why the whites wanted to come and fight them, unless they were tired of living and wanted to die.' Mr. LaFrambois succeeded in getting away from them after some difficulty, and ran his horse a distance of more than 10 miles to give me information, Major House, with his command, still remaining there."

LaFrambois did reach Sully with the information about the scouting party, but this report of his encounter with the 200 Indians seems to be open to question.

Major House's report does not mention the guide being stopped by Indians. Nor does E.A. Richards include this in his description of the guide's departure: "I can see him yet as he dashed away to the rear so as not to give the Indians any clue as to his mission." If the Indians actually were hostile and had surrounded the guide, it is doubtful that LaFrambois could have gotten away.

[50]*Official Record*, 564.
[51]Drips, 54.
[52]*Ibid.*, 55.
[53]*Official Record*, 564.
[54]Drips, 55.
[55]*Official Record*, 558.
[56]Drips, 55.
[57]*Ibid.*, 55-56.
[58]*Official Record*, 564-565.

possible and to assist Major House's battalion in keeping the Indians surrounded. Furnas reached the scouting party and told House to pursue the left flank (north side) of the fleeing Indians while he went after the Indians on the right flank (south side).[59]

As the 2nd Nebraska Cavalry disappeared over the hills, Sully ordered Colonel Wilson to take the north side of the camp with part of the 6th Iowa Cavalry. Sully, with some cavalry and the battery, then went through the center of the camp where he found a chief named Little Soldier with a few of his people. He placed these Indians under guard. Soon after that Sully came to "the notorious chief Big-head, and some of his men."[60] This group of over 120 Indians surrendered.[61]

By this time the different military commands appear to have been acting independently of each other. The various cavalry forces were spread out while trying to round up the Indians, communications were understandably poor and no one appears to have been coordinating the efforts of the different battalions.

The Indians scattered as they fled east attempting to escape. But as the troops gained on them, a large group of Indians gathered in a ravine about one-half mile from the Indian camp.[62] This is where the battle took place.

When Col. Furnas, with the 2nd Nebraska, came upon the Indians in the ravine, he formed his troops in a battle line. He had then intended to wait for further orders from Sully, but changed his mind, as he explained:

> As it was then nearly dark, I felt that time was precious, and if anything was to be done that night it must be done speedily, and made up my mind to attack the enemy immediately.[63]

Furnas positioned his men in two lines which formed an obtuse angle and moved them forward:

> When within 400 yards, I ordered my men to dismount, and after advancing 100 yards nearer, ordered the Second Battalion to open the battle by a volley from their Enfields, which they did with precision and effect, creating quite a confusion in the enemy's ranks.[64]

Major House, with the Third Battalion of the 6th Iowa, also formed his troops in a line of battle when they arrived at the ravine. He then discovered the 2nd Nebraska on his left flank, preparing to fight on foot. House's troops advanced, were fired on by the Indians and returned the fire.[65]

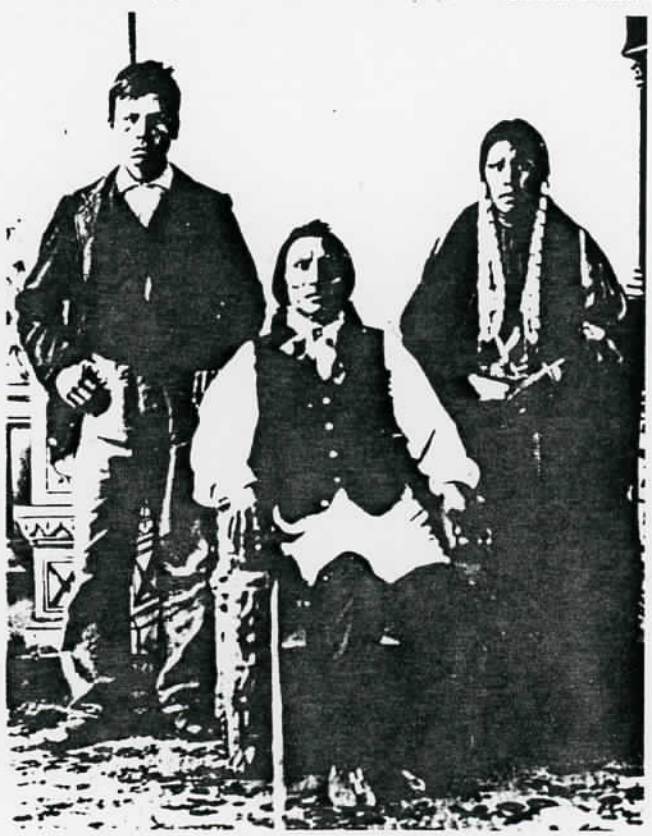
Colonel Wilson, commanding the First Battalion of the 6th Iowa, arrived at the ravine opposite the 2nd Nebraska[66] and formed his troops parallel to the 2nd Nebraska line. While moving his troops forward, Wilson got "detached from the First and was thrown into the Third Battalion."[67] Wilson apparently led some of his troops into battle with empty weapons[68] and during the battle his horse was shot out from under him.[69] Wilson believed the Indians started the battle by firing first.

After Sully had placed a guard around the Indian prisoners who surrendered, he positioned his troops and the battery, which was not used in the battle, on a small hill near the Indian camp.[70] The Second Battalion of the 6th Iowa was held in reserve during the fight.[71]

The battle at the ravine continued for about one half

Sioux chief Two Bears and his children

—Barry photo, State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection



[59] *Ibid.*, 566.
[60] *Ibid.*, 558.
[61] *Ibid.*
[62] Carol G. Goodwin, "The Letters of Private Milton Spencer, 1862-1865: A Soldier's View of Military Life on the Northern Plains," *North Dakota History*, 37:4 (Fall, 1970), 251. *Official Records*, 558.
[63] *Official Record*, 566.
[64] *Ibid.*
[65] *Ibid.*
[66] Drips, 44.
[67] *Official Record*, 562.
[68] Both Sgt. Drips and Pvt. Spencer mentioned the incident of the unloaded weapons. Drips wrote: "Some of the Sixth went into the ground with their arms unloaded, whose fault it was remains to be seen yet, as I do not blame anyone." Spencer wrote: "Just as we had all got our places, Colonel Wilson came up and took command of the Third Battalion. He foolishly ordered the men to mount their horses, and then, without giving the order to load their pieces, he marched them up to within thirty feet of the enemy, one company with their rifles unloaded." Drips, 45; Goodwin, 251.
[69] In his report Wilson described the loss of his horse: "It was at this fire of the enemy, when riding some little distance in advance of the battalion, that my horse was shot with a slug, fatally wounding him. He lived long enough to carry me about 30 rods."
Drips recorded this incident in a slightly different light: "Some times a small accident or occurence changes circumstances so as to bestow glory and renown where it does not belong and sometimes withholds true merit where it ought to be bestowed. As an illustration of the former at the White Stone Hill fight some historian writes that Col. Wilson led the charge in person until his horse was shot from under him when he mounted another horse and continued the charge till the Indians were totally routed and driven from the field. The fact was that as the Colonel was getting away from the fight a soldier dismounting touched the trigger of his gun with his heel. The gun discharged, the bullet going through the stifle of Col. Wilson's horse and as a matter of course the horse was ruined." *Official Records*, 562; Drips, 56.
[70] *Official Record* 560.
[71] Drips, 44.

hour[72] while darkness was setting in. The noise and confusion made the cavalry horses difficult to control, and many of the Indians were finally able to escape through the 6th Iowa line when the soldiers' horses became unmanageable.[73]

It then rapidly became so dark that Col. Furnas became convinced that Major House's troops were firing into his men, mistaking them for Indians.[74] Night forced the cavalry to withdraw from the ravine and allowed the Indians to escape.

Each of the cavalry commands camped separately that night, and the troops remained ready in case of further fighting:

> We were ordered to lay on our arms, which we did until morning, but such an awful noise as was kept up during the night, the dogs howling, and the squaws squalling, there was not much chance to sleep. We put out a heavy picket guard and the different companies gathered up their dead and wounded as well as they could.[75]

The scene of the battlefield and Indian camp the next day was recorded by F.E. Caldwell, a soldier with the 2nd Nebraska Cavalry, as he remembered it almost 40 years later:

> Tepees, some standing, some torn down, some squaws that were dead, some that were wounded and still alive, young children of all ages from young infants to 8 or 10 years old, who had lost their parents, dead soldiers, dead Indians, dead horses, hundreds of dogs howling for their masters. Some of the dogs were packed with small poles fastened to a collar and dragging behind them. On the poles was a platform on which all kinds of articles were fastened on — in one instance a young baby.[76]

Reports of army casualties vary, but it has been generally accepted that 20 soldiers died and 38 were wounded.[77] These figures include two soldiers who were killed during a scouting party on September 5. Some of the soldiers were killed outright during the battle and some died from serious wounds a short time later.[78] Between 600 and 700 troops were engaged in the battle.[79]

Indian casualties from the battle can only be estimated because their bodies were scattered over a wide area. Some of the Indians killed in the fighting were probably carried from the battle site by other Indians during the night, and some wounded may have died at a later time and place. Sully estimated the number of Indians killed at 100, and commented: "My officers and the guides I have with me think 150 will not cover their loss. The Indian reports make it over 200."[80] Sgt. J.H. Drips estimated the Indian casualties at "300 killed and wounded."[81] In addition to the dead and wounded, 156 Indians were taken prisoner: 32 men and 124 women and children.[82]

The morning after the battle, Sully established his camp at the abandoned Indian camp.[83] Troops were sent out to look for the Indians who had fled and to round up horses, mules and ponies.

The cavalry scouting parties did not engage the Indians in battle again until September 5, however. At that time a 27-man detachment led by Lieut. Charles Hall ran into about 300 Indians several miles from the camp. Two soldiers were killed by the Indians and the rest were "so closely pressed by the enemy that the men increased the rapidity of their retreat, without orders."[84]

The most severe defeat for the Indians came when the soldiers destroyed their food and equipment. According to Caldwell:

> Sully ordered all the property destroyed, tepees, buffalo skins, and all their things, including tons and tons of dried buffalo meat and tallow. It was gathered in wagons, piled in a hollow and burned, and the melted tallow ran down that valley in a stream. Hatchets, camp kettles and all things that would sink were thrown into a small lake.[85]

Estimates of the amount of dried buffalo meat destroyed range widely, but the figures of 400,000 to 500,000 pounds probably come as close as any.[86] This supply of meat "represented more than one thousand slaughtered buffalo."[87] Drips described the quantity of Indian property destroyed in another way: "To show the extent of their loss in a measure I will just say that it took a party of 100 men two days to gather up the stuff and burn it."[88]

The soldiers buried many of their dead on a knoll near the Indian camp on September 5.[89] Sgt. Drips recalled that:

[72] *Ibid.*, 45.
[73] "Whitestone Battlefield," 14, 16; Drips, 56; Goodwin, 251.
[74] *Official Record*, 567.
[75] Drips, 45.
[76] "Whitestone Battlefield," 14.
[77] *Official Record*, 561.
[78] Drips, 46.
[79] *Official Record*, 561.
[80] *Ibid.*, 560.
[81] Drips, 45.
[82] *Official Record*, 561.
[83] Drips, 46.
[84] *Official Record*, 611.
[85] "Whitestone Battlefield," 14.
[86] Estimates of the amount of dried buffalo meat destroyed vary greatly, as would be expected when such a large quantity is involved. Sully estimated 400,000 to 500,000 pounds; House placed the amount at 400 tons, which would be 800,000 pounds; Spencer said about 100 tons (200,000 pounds). Sully's estimate has the advantage of being the median amount of these three. Sully, being an officer of considerable experience, was also probably able to estimate more accurately than the younger men.
[87] Clement A. Lounsberry, *North Dakota, History and People* (Chicago: The S.J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1917), 290.
[88] Drips, 45-46.
[89] Most firsthand accounts of the battle do not specifically mention the burial of the soldiers. Drips, however, provides some interesting insight into this matter, particularly in the case of Lieutenant Leavitt's grave.

Lieut. Thomas J. Leavitt of Company B, 6th Iowa Cavalry, was mortally wounded, but not killed outright, during the battle on the 3rd. On the 5th two soldiers, Quartermaster Sergeant Rodgers and Private Killsa, were killed while on a scouting party. A detail sent out later on the 5th recovered the body of Rodgers but could not find that of Killsa. This detail returned to camp around 8 p.m.

When the expedition left Whitestone Hill on the 6th, they "had along the remains of Lieut. Leavitt and Sergeant Rodgers." They headed in a southerly direction and marched about 18 miles. In the evening they "deposited the remains of Sergeant Rodgers and another soldier from Company G in their last resting place, right under the horse line to fool the Indians. This man from Company G died on the march today." The man from Company G buried with Rodgers appears to have been Private Stephens.

Drips does not indicate that Lieut. Leavitt was buried with the other two men that evening, nor does he mention the officer's burial in following entries in his diary. It therefore seems highly probable that Lieut. Leavitt was buried sometime during the march that day (between Whitestone Hill and the camp site 18 miles to the south).

Many years ago an unidentified soldier's grave was discovered by local farmers seven miles south of Whitestone Hill. This was concluded to have been the grave of an officer because it contained a silk handkerchief and other accessories of an officer's uniform. It appears highly probable that this was the grave of Lieut. Leavitt.

Maps showing the military campaigns in Dakota Territory do not indicate that any other expeditions passed through this area. This would also seem to indicate that the officer buried seven miles south of Whitestone Hill had been a member of Sully's expedition. Lieut. Leavitt was the only officer who died as a result of the battle of Whitestone Hill. Drips, 48; and information supplied by Iver Tweit, Forbes, N.D.

> The fatigue squad was busy all day in buring the dead and in burning up the Indian stuff, part of which was piled on the graves of our lost comrades and burnt in order to keep the vandals from despoiling the last resting place of the departed.[90]

Sully's expedition left the Whitestone Hill camp on September 6 and headed south toward Fort Pierre along the Missouri River. The Indian prisoners were taken along and left at the Crow Creek reservation.[91]

Although Sully's expedition had been delayed along the Missouri and therefore arrived too late to trap the Indians in the pincer movement with Sibley's troops as planned, it was nevertheless considered a success by the military. Sully believed that he had dealt the Indians camped at Whitestone Hill "one of the most severe punishments that the Indians have ever received."[92] Pope, in a letter written October 5, congratulated Sully:

> The results are entirely satisfactory, and I doubt not that the effect upon the Northwestern Indians will be, as you report, of the highest consequence. Whilst I regret that difficulties and obstacles of a serious character prevented your co-operation with General Sibley at the time hoped, I bear willing testimony to the distinguished conduct of yourself and your command.[93]

[90]Drips, 47.

[91]Zena Irma Trinka, *Out Where the West Begins* (St. Paul: The Pioneer Company, 1920), 73.

[92]*Official Record*, 559.

[93]*Correspondence*, 608.

[94]An earlier Cut Head chief, Waneta, had gained a "reputation of being the most powerful Indian upon the continent." Waneta, the Rushing Man, distinguished himself while fighting on the side of the English in the War of 1812. He was born and made his home along the Elm River, some miles south of Whitestone Hill. Doane Robinson, 101-106; Nurge, xiv.

[95]*Official Record*, 558.

[96]*Ibid.*, 567.

[97]Doane Robinson, 324-326.

Questions About the Battle

Several aspects of the Battle of Whitestone Hill must be considered before it can be seen in its proper perspective. First is the question of who the Indians at Whitestone Hill were. Since the expedition was designed to punish hostile Santee Sioux who had fled from Minnesota after the 1862 uprising, identification of the Indians at Whitestone Hill is essential to determine whether the battle was necessary or justified. Yanktonais appear to have made up a large portion of the Whitestone Hill encampment. Several sources list them and the Cut Heads, a sub-band of the Upper Yanktonais,[94] among the Indians at the camp. According to General Sully, the Indians involved were:

> partly Santees, from Minnesota; Cut-heads, from the Coteau; Yanktonais, and some Blackfeet who belong on the other side of the Missouri, and, as I have since learned, *Uncapa-pas*, the same party who fought General Sibley and destroyed the Mackinaw boat.[95]

Colonel Furnas identified the Indians as "Santees, Brule, Yanktonais, and Blackfeet Sioux, and Cut-head Indians."[96]

Doane Robinson's *History of the Dakota or Sioux Indians* identifies the tribes somewhat differently than Sully and Furnas. He declares the Indians at Whitestone Hill had been part of the large band Sibley had chased across the Missouri River in July. At the time Sibley had encountered them, these Indians had included Yanktonais, Uncapas, Blackfeet, bands of peaceful Santees and some hostile Santees. But only "the remnant of the hostiles from Minnesota and the Yanktonais" returned east across the river after Sibley left, according to Robinson.[97]

General Sully's depiction of the Battle of Whitestone Hill.

—State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection

Army scout Francois LaFramboise and his children (l-r) Fannie, George and John.

— State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection

Aaron McGaffey Beede, in presenting the Indian tradition of the battle in a play called *Heart-in-the-Lodge*, tells a third story. He calls the Indians camped at Whitestone Hill "Hunk-pa-ti."[98] This is a spelling variation of "Hunkpatina," another name for the Lower Yanktonais. Beede indicates that there were only two Santees at the Indian camp: both were old men who had fled from Minnesota and were found starving near the James River.[99]

Other indications that the Yanktonais comprised a large portion of the Indian encampment come from the identification of two of the chiefs who were there. Big Head, who surrendered to Sully at Whitestone Hill, signed the treaty of Laramie in 1868 for the Cut Heads;[100] Chief Two Bears, also a leader at Whitestone Hill, signed the treaty of Laramie in 1868 as a Yanktonai and is listed in an 1869 government report as one of the leaders of the Upper Yanktonais.[101]

The number of Santees, if any, at the camp is not clear. Most of the hostile Santee leaders were either dead or in Canada by the time of the Whitestone Hill engagement; C.M. Oehler lists the following:

> Red Middle Voice had been killed by Chippewas. Little Crow had been shot by Chauncey Lamson, assisted by his father. Mankato had been killed by an artillerist at Wood Lake. Cut Nose, willing to die, had been hung at South Bend. Only Shakopee, of the massacre's major instigators, remained alive.[102]

Shakopee, Medicine Bottle and hundreds of others had crossed into Canada earlier in the year.[103]

A second historical problem regarding the battle involves the renegade chief Inkpaduta.[104] Historian Doane Robinson identifies him as the leader of the Indians in the three battles with Sibley and also places him in the forefront in the battle with Sully's troops at Whitestone Hill. According to Robinson, Inkpaduta delayed the attack on Major House's battalion so the Indians could "prepare for a mighty carnival," and "was ready for the execution of his captives when Sully appeared."[105]

Inkpaduta's presence at Whitestone Hill, however, is open to question. So many post-1862 hostile activities have been attributed to the Santee leader that Robinson says Inkpaduta's "ubiquity was amazing. He was everywhere from the Canadian line and the Bad Lands down to Nebraska and central Minnesota and wherever he appeared, murder and theft marked his trail . . ."[106] Robinson also admits that Inkpaduta may have sometimes been used as a scapegoat and received credit for offenses that he did not commit.[107] This probably was the case at Whitestone Hill; none of the accounts left by the soldiers even suggests that he was there.

Since many of the Indians camped at Whitestone Hill were probably Yanktonais, another question arises: Could the battle have been avoided?

The evidence indicates that it could have been. Sully entered the situation expecting any Indians to surrender or be attacked.[108] When House did negotiate, he refused to accept the partial surrender offered by some of the chiefs and eliminated the possibility of a peaceful settlement with at least some of the Indians. When Sully arrived with the main force, the charging cavalry undoubtedly appeared threatening to the Indians, and it is not surprising that they chose to flee. Had the camp been approached in a more peaceful manner there might still have been a possibility for negotiation. The battle at the ravine might also have been avoided if Colonel Furnas had not decided to open fire before darkness set in. Since even Sully considered the 6th Iowa Cavalry's officers unqualified,[109] the leadership apparently left much to be

[98] Aaron McGaffey Beede, *Heart-in-the-Lodge* (Bismarck, North Dakota: Bismarck Tribune Co., n.d.), 5.

[99] *Ibid.*, 14.

[100] Doane Robinson, 387.

[101] *Ibid.*, 392.

[102] Oehler, 233.

[103] *Ibid.*, 228.

[104] Inkpaduta, the leader of a renegade band of Santees, was considered an outlaw by both the Santees and the whites. In 1849 his band killed 18 Wahpekute warriors in their hunting camp while they slept. Inkpaduta gained lasting fame from the Spirit Lake Massacre of 1857 when his band killed 42 white settlers in two neighboring settlements near Spirit Lake, Iowa. The government threatened to stop the payment of annuities to the Santees unless they brought in Inkpaduta. Little Crow even went after Inkpaduta but was unable to capture him. Inkpaduta appears to have spent more time with the western Sioux tribes after he became an outcast in Minnesota. Daniel Buck, *Indian Outbreaks* (Minneapolis: Ross & Haines, Inc., 1965), 32-38; Doane Robinson, 342-347.

[105] Doane Robinson, 327-328.

[106] *Ibid.*, 344.

[107] *Ibid.*, 346.

[108] *Official Record*, 557.

[109] Goodwin, 252.

desired. This may well have been one reason for the onset of the battle.

The question of the long-term effects of the battle also should be considered. When Sully's troops destroyed the food and other provisions of the Indians, "this was considered the best part of the victory because it took away all their winter supplies, including teepees and everything that we could get hold of."[110] The battle therefore forced these Indians closer to accepting the reservation guarantees of food and clothing and in effect encouraged them to become dependents of the government. It also made these Indians more aware of the disastrous effects that any future attempt to resist white control might bring. While the struggle between the Indians and whites on the Great Plains continued until the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee Creek,[111] Whitestone Hill marked the end of major problems between the Indians and whites east of the Missouri River. Sully's campaign of 1864 was conducted west of the river.[112]

The Whitestone Hill battle helped open the way for white settlement in eastern Dakota Territory since settlements there "were no longer in danger of being attacked by large war parties and the threat that white inhabitants would abandon the region was eliminated."[113] Within 20 years the town of Ellendale was well-established about 19 miles southeast of Whitestone Hill.

One of the most difficult questions about the battle involves the motivations behind the cavalry attack. Here, General Pope's criticism of General Sully's slow progress during the campaign may have been a factor. Sully may have thought that his career as a military officer would be in jeopardy if he did not produce a military success on the expedition; he could well have decided to attack the first Indians he found and then refer to them as hostiles in his report to cover up any mistakes he might have made. This, however, is pure speculation.

Why did the battle of Whitestone Hill take place? The answer seems to be more general, and more subtle, than the possible motives already mentioned. The soldiers did not require the identification of Indians before taking action. Nor do they appear to have had a policy for attempting to negotiate before resorting to force. The officers were apparently dealing with each situation as it arose. There seems to have been little doubt in the minds of the officers that they would either attack or demand the surrender of any Indians they encountered. The crucial decision at Whitestone Hill on September 3, 1863, was to attack.

A Note On Sources

In describing the battle eleven firsthand accounts by soldiers were used: five were reports submitted by officers and six were personal accounts written by enlisted men. The officers' reports are from *The War of The Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* and provide an overall view of the engagement, plus a significant amount of pertinent detail. These reports by Gen. Sully, Col. Wilson, Col. Furnas, Maj. House and Lt. Hall are understandably biased to the extent that the officers wished to present their own actions and those of their men in the best possible light.

Other firsthand accounts were provided by enlisted men who were at the battle. Of these, the records left by Sgt. Drips and Pvt. Spencer are of particular interest; both Drips and Spencer were with Company L, 6th Iowa Cavalry, and both appear to have been relatively accurate and unbiased.

Sgt. J.H. Drips kept a personal diary during his military service "without any idea of ever publishing it, but I thought it might at sometime be interesting for members of my family to read how I had been employed during those three eventful years." This journal was published in 1894 as *Three Years Among the Indians in Dakota*. Conversely, Pvt. Milton Spencer wrote his account in the form of letters written home to his family and friends. In 1970, his edited comments were published in *North Dakota History*, 37-4 (Fall, 1970), 233-269.

Drips and Spencer did not have access to all the information available to the officers of the expedition, and their accounts are subject to a certain amount of rumor and secondhand information. But, on the other hand, they did not expect their accounts to be published or submitted to the government (as the officers knew their reports would be). Neither Drips nor Spencer had anything to gain by distorting the facts of the battle as they saw them.

Other accounts by soldiers who took part in the battle include one by A.E. Richards (Co. F, 6th Iowa Cav.) that Drips included in *Three Years Among the Indians in Dakota*, one by Frank Myers (Co. B, 6th Iowa Cav.) in *Soldiering in Dakota, Among the Indians, in 1863-4-5*, a letter written in 1901 by F.E. Caldwell (2nd Nebraska Cav.), and a speech read at the battlefield dedication in 1909 by Z.T. Mullin (Co. L, 2nd Nebraska Cav.). These accounts help create a clearer picture of the battle at Whitestone Hill, but also contain a certain amount of error. Both Richards and Caldwell, for example, indicate that Little Crow was at the Whitestone Hill camp.

Indian accounts of the battle are not available, but *Heart-in-the-Lodge*, a play written by Rev. Aaron McGaffey Beede, an Episcopal missionary who lived among the Indians in later years, does present the Indian tradition. Beede was born in 1859, held a Ph.D., and was president of Fargo College in North Dakota in 1900; in 1902 he became supervisor of Indian religious affairs at Fort Yates in North Dakota. He wrote two other books, *Sitting Bull-Custer* in 1913 and *Toward the Sun*, a book of poems, in 1916. The introductory material in Beede's books indicates *Heart-in-the-Lodge* must have appeared in either 1914 or 1915.

Heart-in-the-Lodge is limited as an historical source. First, over 50 years passed between the battle and publication of the play and many of the Indian participants at Whitestone Hill were already dead before it was written. The Indian accounts which Beede used were only as accurate as the memories of the Indian participants and their descendants,

[110]Drips, 46.
[111]Ochler, 242.
[112]Kingsbury, 291.
[113]Bean, 256.

and a certain amount of literary license had to be used in writing the drama. Yet, *Heart-in-the-Lodge* is not to be dismissed as having no value and it does present the Indian tradition of the battle.

Doane Robinson's comprehensive *History of the Dakota or Sioux Indians* provides valuable information for identifying the Indians at Whitestone Hill although his account of Inkpaduta's role appears open to question. *The Great Sioux Uprising* by C.M. Oehler, *The Civil War in the Northwest* by Robert Huhn Jones, *North Dakota, History and People* by Clement A. Lounsberry and *History of Dakota Territory* by George W. Kingsbury also yield considerable background material. Two other sources, *No Tears for the General* by Langdon Sully and "General Alfred Sully and the Northwest Indian Expedition" by Geraldine Bean in *North Dakota History*, deal with the apparent conflict between Pope and Sully in some detail. Finally, the Coteau Hills Historical Society at Forbes, North Dakota, holds information about the battle site and papers written by two early area ranchers, T.R. Shimmin and Lewis Tveit.

The Whitestone Hill battlefield is presently a North Dakota State Historic Site. Largely sparked by area residents, the movement to preserve the site led to the initial dedication of a monument with appropriate ceremonies on October 13, 1909; Governor John Burke accepted the gift of the historical park on behalf of the State.

—State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection