

# They Tell Their Story: The Dakota Internment at Camp McClellan in Davenport, 1862–1866

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IN 1805 AND 1858 representatives of the Dakota tribe signed treaties with the U.S. government relinquishing their land between the Des Moines and Missouri rivers, spanning most of what today is Minnesota and North Dakota. In exchange, they were forced onto a small reservation and were promised an annual annuity, provisions, and money for schools and other facilities. More than a century of cooperation between Dakota and whites ended. White settlers, missionaries, and government representatives sought to eliminate the Dakota presence in the United States. Dakota communities were torn apart by physical and cultural invasion. Settlers were encouraged to move onto what little bit of land the Dakota had left. The government used the annuity to control the Dakota people, making it a privilege and not a right. Traders refused to give the Dakota food on credit, food for which the Dakota could not pay because their annuities did not arrive on time or traders would claim much of what did

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I owe acknowledgments to many people, especially Lendol Calder, Steve Warren, Allan Carlson, Anna Carlson, Jamie Nelson, and Nathan Marchese. I also wish to thank the Augustana Historical Society for the grant that made this research possible. My heaviest debt, however, is owed to all of the tribal members of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Reservation, especially Clifford Canku and Bill Iron Moccasin. Through stories and thoughts, they taught me what it means to have a Dakota heart. I am humbled by their spirit.

THE ANNALS OF IOWA 63 (Summer 2004). © The State Historical Society of Iowa, 2004.

arrive as recompense for their "just debts." Children were starving, though the reservation stores were full.

This context was created by government policies and by the cultural idea that the Native American must vanish in the face of civilization. As a result, about 200 desperate and starving members of the Mdewakanton and Wahpekute tribes and a few members of the Sisseton and Wahpeton tribes (collectively called Dakota) sought to call the U.S. government's attention to their plight in a way that Dakota communities still mourn today.<sup>1</sup> In the fall of 1862, that faction killed somewhere between 350 and 800 men, women, and children across southern Minnesota. That story is well documented in scholarly works from Isaac Heard's 1864 book to Roy Meyer's writings in the 1960s and Gary Clayton Anderson's more recent account.<sup>2</sup> Historical markers found in towns across southern Minnesota perpetuate the telling of this story.

Left untold within this literature and through these markers is what followed the conflict. As Carol Chomsky explains, for the first and only time in American history, the U.S. government did not, as it should have, treat Native Americans as a sovereign nation defeated in war, but tried them before a military commission (not civilian courts) and executed or interned them as civil-

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1. Scholars also refer to the four tribes relevant here as the Santee Sioux. These Santee Sioux tribes were politically distinct, though culturally and socially linked. The Native Americans I interviewed for this article refer to themselves as Dakota because *Sioux* was a derogatory name coined by their enemies, the Sauk and Meskwaki. Out of respect, I refer to the four tribes as Dakota.

2. Isaac V. D. Heard, *History of The Sioux War and Massacres of 1862 and 1863* (New York, 1864); Roy W. Meyer, *History of the Santee Sioux: United States Indian Policy on Trial* (Lincoln, NE, 1967); Kenneth Carley, *The Sioux Uprising of 1862* (St. Paul, MN, 1976); Gary Clayton Anderson, *Kinsmen of Another Kind: Dakota-White Relations in the Upper Mississippi Valley, 1650-1862* (Lincoln, NE, 1984); Duane Schultz, *Over the Earth I Come: The Great Sioux Uprising of 1862* (New York, 1992). History books generally refer to "The Sioux Uprising of 1862." In 1997 Minnesota's governor renamed the Uprising the "U.S.-Dakota War" in an effort to recognize the Dakota Nation's sovereign right to declare war on the United States. Calling it a war may have dispersed the negative connotations implied by the term *uprising*, but it also conveniently removed the government's culpability for pushing an oppressed people to such desperate extremes. This paper refers to the Conflict of 1862 because *conflict* implies both agency and asymmetry without implying either deleterious historical contexts or the language of forgetting.

ian criminals deemed guilty of "murder, rape, and robbery" committed in warfare.<sup>3</sup> After 38 Dakota were executed, hundreds of Dakota who probably had not violated rules of warfare or, in some cases, had not participated at all were interned within Camp McClellan in Davenport, Iowa. Perhaps as many as half of the prisoners died during the internment. Hundreds of Dakota women and children also died in South Dakota during the same period.

In 1867 the U.S. government created the Sisseton-Wahpeton Reservation in South Dakota because it wanted to reestablish a treaty relationship and civilizing efforts with the Sisseton and Wahpeton tribes. The earliest reservation residents were those who had not participated in the Conflict of 1862, but fled Minnesota for fear of retribution. Some had helped protect settlers.<sup>4</sup> Based on their tribes' experiences, tribal members on the reservation have their own story of the Conflict of 1862.

On the reservation, the less well-known story of the internment remained oral, private, and limited (some on the reservation had never heard it) until tribal members recently began translating a unique collection of about 150 letters. The letters, written by Dakota individuals to Presbyterian missionaries Stephen R. Riggs and Thomas Williamson, were tucked within the Riggs and Williamson collections at the Minnesota Historical Society. Scholars of the Conflict have carefully combed these public collections again and again. But because previous scholars failed to translate this material obviously written by Dakota hands, they reconstructed a story of the conflict based entirely on the testimony of white Americans. In March 2002 a group of Dakota obtained copies of the letters, providing the first substantial documentation of what happened during the internment and the only material written by Dakota.<sup>5</sup> In 2003, Dakota let me share in their attempts to reconstruct an internment story.

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3. For a longer discussion of the legal and historical issues behind this statement, see Carol Chomsky, "The United States-Dakota War Trials: A Study in Military Justice," *Stanford Law Review* 43 (November 1990), 13-15, 90.

4. Meyer, *History of the Santee Sioux*, 199.

5. All the prison records from Camp McClellan were destroyed in a fire, and the National Archives could not produce a single document about the internment after countless efforts on my part to acquire any.

While translating these letters for me and then discussing them with me, tribal members wove new insights from the letters into their oral narratives, both personal and communal. When combined with other available materials, the letters, as Dakota understand them, reveal how about 300 men, women, and children interned at Camp McClellan courageously chose to assimilate themselves in an effort to preserve their most basic social units—especially their families—and to protect the individuals who were most endangered and least likely to survive the internment.

The men and women I met in South Dakota are the voices that shape this article, in both content and structure. For Dakota, telling their history involves fighting two propensities in public and academic accounts of their past. First is the tendency to look at the Conflict in isolation, separate from the causes of the event and the tragedies that followed it. Second is the inclination to focus on the negative, failing to capture their ancestors' courageous deeds in the face of an oppressive government. The collective result is a sense of personal and communal disempowerment. Telling the Dakota internment story addresses these two propensities. It redirects our attention from the Conflict to what followed: an internment story that shows the true Dakota spirit.

ASK A DAKOTA to comment on the Conflict of 1862 and, if he or she has heard of it, you will probably receive a response shrouded in anger for its causes, guilt that it happened, and frustration with its lingering effects. Clifford Canku, the Dakota language specialist at the Sisseton Wahpeton Community College, described the missionaries' vision of a utopia—that point where Christ and civilization coincide—that they were promised. To him, the Conflict was due to "a lack of coming through with utopia." William Iron Moccasin, a Lakota Indian who moved to Sisseton 30 years ago to help with correctional programs, called the conflict "unconscionable." Michael Simon, whose grandfather was one of those who helped the white settlers, went so far as to call it a "curse" or "black cloud" that follows the Dakota but to which they have become "habituated."<sup>6</sup>

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6. Clifford Canku, Dakota Elder, and Michael Simon and Bill Iron Moccasin, Dakota translators, interviews by author, 3/6 and 3/7/2003, Sisseton, SD.

The historical beginning of this tragic chain of events dates back to President Andrew Jackson's 1830 Indian Removal Act, which allowed for the resettlement of all Native Americans to areas west of the Mississippi River. By 1858, Dakota were living on a strip of land 120 miles long and 10 miles wide, along the upper Minnesota River in southwest Minnesota. The U.S. government established two administrative centers: the Upper Sioux Agency near Granite Falls, where the Sisseton and Wahpeton lived, and the Lower Sioux Agency near Morton, where the Mdewakanton and Wahpekute tribes lived. It was just a matter of time before they, too, would be moved farther west.<sup>7</sup>

There on the reservations, external intervention continued to destroy Dakota culture, society, and economy, creating the context that pushed a faction of Dakota into believing that taking up arms was their only hope of being heard by the U.S. government and surviving. Starting in 1837, the government promised the Dakota a cash annuity that barely kept them from starving to death. The government agents used the annuities to control and reform the Dakota: the agents gave the money to traders, who made unverifiable claims that the Dakota owed them money for goods distributed on credit; they would give more to those Indians who adopted American ways; and they would give the money directly to family heads, not the chiefs, so as to weaken the traditional political structure. In 1857, the Indian agent withheld the annuity until some Dakota braves hunted down a Dakota who had killed a number of settlers, a decision that increased hostility between white settlers and Dakotas and resulted in the confiscation of guns, leaving the Dakota unable to hunt and feed their families.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, missionaries continued efforts begun in 1833 to Christianize and "civilize" the Dakota. Most important to the Dakota were two Presbyterian missionaries with the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Thomas S. Williamson and Stephen R. Riggs. Riggs and Williamson tried to convert the Dakota into self-sufficient farmers as the first step towards assimilation to the ideal Euro-American identity. The

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7. Meyer, *History of the Santee Sioux*, 21.

8. *Ibid.*, 101

result would be a loss of their indigenous identity. Before the Conflict of 1862, only a few Dakota had converted to Christianity and become literate. Their crops repeatedly failed. And violence and threats toward "farmer Indians" (those who adopted Euro-American traditions) by the still "blanketed Indians" (those who retained their Dakota traditions) were such a problem that Riggs and Williamson had to close the few farming communities they had succeeded in establishing.<sup>9</sup>

On August 17, 1862, four young Dakota killed five settlers in Acton, Minnesota. Fearing retribution and considering their desperate situation, a group of Dakota assailed what historian Rebecca Kugel has called the "obvious symbols of their deteriorated status": traders, settlers, and the agency that symbolized a foreign culture and government destroying their traditional ways. The group's leader was Little Crow, chief of a Mdewakanton band who was responsible for many previous concessions to the U.S. government and knew the futility of fighting. On August 27, Fort Ridgely welcomed a military expedition led by Colonel Henry Sibley, whom President Lincoln had appointed brigadier general of the U.S. Volunteers in charge of the U.S. Military District of Minnesota. After the Dakota suffered several defeats by Sibley's troops, Little Crow fled west with the 200 most culpable Mdewakantons and their families. The Conflict lasted only six weeks.<sup>10</sup>

The Dakota who remained behind delivered 270 captives to Colonel Sibley on September 26.<sup>11</sup> Sibley then took into custody

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9. Frederick E. Hoxie, *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880-1920* (Lincoln, NE, 1984), 24-37, esp. 24; Robert F. Berkhofer Jr., *Salvation and the Savage: An Analysis of Protestant Missions and American Indian Response, 1787-1862* (Westport, CT, 1965), 66, 150; Charles S. Bryant and Abel B. Murch, *A History of the Great Massacre by the Sioux Indians, in Minnesota* (1863; reprint, Millwood, NY, 1977), 28; Meyer, *History of the Santee Sioux*, 67, 107; "Chief Big Eagle's Story" (interview by Return I. Holcombe [1894]), in "As Red Men Viewed It: Three Indian Accounts of the Uprising," ed. Kenneth Carley, *Minnesota History* 38 (1962), 132.

10. Rebecca Kugel, *To Be the Main Leaders of Our People: A History of Minnesota Ojibwe Politics, 1825-1898* (East Lansing, MI, 1998), 76-77; Chomsky, "United States-Dakota War Trials," 19; Meyer, *History of the Santee Sioux*, 117, 122; Heard, *History of The Sioux War*, 181.

11. There were 4 captive white men, 104 captive white women and children, and 162 captive mixed bloods. Daniel Buck, *Indian Outbreaks* (Minneapolis, 1965), 183. Heard, *History of The Sioux War*, 185, reported 250 captives.

2,200 Dakota men, women, and children. They believed that Sibley would punish only those who had murdered women and children, while the rest would be held briefly as prisoners of war. Instead, between September 28 and November 3, Sibley appointed six Minnesota men to a military commission. They tried 392 Dakota for the murder of innocent men, women, and children, sentencing 303 to death and 20 to imprisonment based on testimonies given by surviving settlers and mixed bloods, especially Joseph Godfrey (half Native American and half African American), who received clemency from a death sentence in exchange for his testimony against others (receiving instead a ten-year prison sentence). Even in 1862, people questioned Godfrey's truthfulness.<sup>12</sup> President Lincoln learned about the intended hangings and personally reviewed the transcripts. On December 6, he issued a handwritten order to Sibley commuting the death sentences of all but 39 Dakota, who were condemned to be hanged, two for violating women and the rest ostensibly for participating in massacres. In the days before the execution, Catholic and Protestant missionaries baptized all but two of those sentenced to hang.<sup>13</sup>

On December 26 at 10:30 a.m., the largest hanging in U.S. history occurred. After one last-minute commutation, 38 Dakota were hanged in Mankato, Minnesota.<sup>14</sup> On January 31, mission-

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12. Chomsky, "United States-Dakota War Trials," 21, 27-28; Buck, *Indian Outbreaks*, 183, 227-39; Heard, *History of The Sioux War*, 266-67; "Chief Big Eagle's Story," 141, 143. According to Chomsky, the composition of the commission itself was legal, but it was an unlikely instrument of just punishment; the men on the commission were Minnesotans, had fought against the Dakota, and therefore were biased against the defendants. But it was illegal in the sense that Colonel Sibley did not have the authority to establish a military commission, because he was only in charge of a district and not a department. The prison sentences ranged from one to ten years in length. The commission acquitted the other 69 prisoners they tried.

13. *New York Times*, 12/12/1862; Daniel W. Homstad, "Lincoln's Agonizing Decision," *American History* 36 (2001), 28-36; Meyer, *History of the Santee Sioux*, 129. Chomsky, "United States-Dakota War Trials," 89, notes that one Dakota was hanged not for rape or direct participation in the massacre but for distracting a soldier with conversation, and another was convicted for killing a soldier (no explanation was given in the testimony).

14. *New York Times*, 1/4/1863. One victim was hanged by accident, though Sibley would deny this. One document still unexamined by scholars is the journal of Dakota and future Presbyterian minister John Flute. In it Flute re-

aries baptized 300 Dakota who remained under guard in Minnesota while politicians decided their fate.

The Conflict proffered the long awaited excuse to remove all Native Americans from Minnesota. U.S. Congressmen made the unparalleled choice to do so by enacting a statute as opposed to the previously used system of treaty signing. The statute unconditionally removed the Dakota and eventually the Winnebago from Minnesota.<sup>15</sup> After much debate, Congress sent the women, children, and men who had not been convicted of wrongdoing to a reservation eight miles above the mouth of Crow Creek in South Dakota.

A different fate awaited both those men whose death sentences had been commuted and those who had been sentenced to one to ten years in prison for participating in plundering. In accordance with Sibley's recommendation, the government created a military prison called Camp Kearney within Camp McClellan in Davenport, Iowa, where the convicted men and a few women and children were sent, remaining there until the spring of 1866. Some of the men were never charged with specific crimes that would have violated the law of war. Rather, they were sentenced for fighting, even if that fighting was limited to battles with or raids against U.S. soldiers.<sup>16</sup> In their letters from the prison camp, some of these men recognized the horror of the actions committed by those who had fled west, actions for which many would give their lives during the imprisonment. Perhaps as many as 150 prisoners died satisfying not justice but the cries for revenge driven by a deeply rooted cultural perception of Native Americans as the antithesis of civilization.

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corded that two more were hanged the next day and then twelve more at a later date. There is no mention of this in any other documents or any scholarly works. Also, Flute never talked about the event to his family, nor mentioned it again in his journal. Therefore, it is difficult to discern who these unaccounted twelve were. John Flute, journal in the possession of Doris Robertson and her niece, Sisseton, SD; Doris Robertson, interview by author, 8/12/2003, Sisseton, SD. John Flute was Robertson's grandfather. Two more Dakota were hanged at Fort Snelling on November 11, 1865, nearly three years after the first execution. Chomsky, "United States-Dakota War Trials," 46.

15. With the precedent set, seven years later the U.S. government ended the treaty system with Native American tribes. Meyer, *History of the Santee Sioux*, 141.

16. Chomsky, "United States-Dakota War Trials," 27-28.



TO REDISCOVER the largely forgotten memory of these tragic events—and to do so in Dakota terms—the Sisseton-Wahpeton Community College began a project in 2002 to translate from Dakota 150 letters written during the years that followed the Conflict. The story of how I learned about the letters and their efforts is one of chance, persistence, and circumstance. After again interrogating a librarian on the phone, refusing to end yet another conversation without any progress in my research, I secured the telephone number of a Dakota who had made similar inquiries a few weeks earlier. The correspondence that followed led to my first visit to this Dakota's reservation in March 2003, with a follow-up trip in July. At the time of my arrival, only about ten of the letters had been translated. One of the translators, Bill Iron Moccasin, orally translated to me the remaining letters written by those imprisoned in Camp Kearney.<sup>17</sup>

Given the beautiful handwriting and what we know about a few of the authors, probably only those prisoners who could write before the Conflict wrote to Riggs. Those who were already literate had the best handwriting, the highest level of literacy, and a precedent of cooperation with the missionaries that made them influential liaisons between the community and the missionaries. The others did write letters to their families, though none appear to have survived.<sup>18</sup>

Finding a Dakota story requires some consideration of earlier accounts. Other writers have argued that the humiliation and suppression of "uprisings" or the loss of political autonomy shattered morale and offered the best occasion for assimilation. In his early and influential book on Euro-American "civilizing" efforts, Robert F. Berkhofer Jr. suggested that such was the case

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17. The 150 letters were written to the Presbyterian missionaries Stephen R. Riggs and Thomas Williamson and are from the Riggs and Williamson collections at the Minnesota Historical Society. We know that at least 22 of the letters were written by prisoners at Camp Kearney, because we know the authors were imprisoned there or the letters make specific references to Davenport, Camp McClellan, or Camp Kearney. At least seven writers can be identified. There are also a few letters with unknown authors and ones without reference to the author's location that, based on content, probably were written by prisoners.

18. Meyer, *History of the Santee Sioux*, 136. Riggs's and Williamson's letters refer to transporting letters from prisoners to their families. Yet to be discovered is whether letters in the collection from later years reveal additional authors who may have been in Camp Kearney.

after the Conflict of 1862. "The connection between coercive power, conversion, and civilization," he wrote, "is most dramatically demonstrated in the mass baptisms and huge reading classes conducted by the missionaries in the prison camp of the captives after the victorious white expedition in late 1862."<sup>19</sup>

This assimilation argument does not illuminate the struggle for the survival of person and tradition within the context of increasing assimilation. Further, those on the reservation who are translating the letters from the prison camp to reconstruct the story of the internment embody both the memory and the continuation of that struggle. Thus, not only are the letters themselves of interest, but also how this community is currently constructing a shared story—so long suppressed in public memory—based on these letters. The community is attempting to understand its place in American society, both in the past and today, using a story that captures the deeply personal and lasting nature of that short period in their history. The story reveals the destruction of a particular way of life within just three years—a way of life that the Dakota had been fighting for decades to preserve. That destruction represents a courageous sacrifice, chosen by the prison community to protect their women, children, sick, and, in some cases, new faith. This is their story.

ON THE NIGHT OF APRIL 21, 1863, 278 Dakota furtively boarded the steamship *Favorite* at Mankato. The passengers included most of the Dakota who had received commutations and 19 other men sentenced to one- to ten-year prison terms. Most of these prisoners were young men; some were no more than 16 years old. Also on board were about 16 Dakota women who were to work in the prison and their four children. The *Favorite* followed the Minnesota River to Fort Snelling, which confined many Dakota women, children, and men who had not

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19. Meyer, *History of the Santee Sioux*, 53; Henry E. Fritz, *The Movement for Indian Assimilation, 1860–1890* (Philadelphia, 1963), 163; Rebecca Kugel, "Religion Mixed with Politics: The 1836 Conversion of Mang'osid of Fond du Lac," *Ethnohistory* 37 (1990), 127; Berkhofer, *Salvation and the Savage*, xviii, 127, 151. The effects of that earlier period of missionary activity live on: When I attended the reservation church where Clifford Canku and Michael Simon minister, we sang out of the same hymnal that Riggs and Williamson compiled.

been convicted of wrongdoing before their departure for South Dakota. There those men who had been acquitted and 15 to 20 women who had served in the prison in Mankato were left. The remaining prisoners stood on deck and waved across the water to their weeping families.

The *Favorite* docked in Davenport four days later.<sup>20</sup> A small group of people watched as the prisoners walked "chained two and two" down the gangplank, between two rows of soldiers, and along the "plank road" to the camp on the hill.<sup>21</sup> Within thirty minutes after their landing, the soldiers had locked the prisoners within their quarters, called Camp Kearney in Camp McClellan. Camp McClellan was one of the many camps constructed across the North to hold Civil War prisoners of war. It sat outside the city limits about 100 feet above the Mississippi River within a grove of oak trees. To delineate the new incarceration camp's borders, military personnel drew a line with a stick along a wagon road running down the middle of Camp McClellan. Camp Kearney consisted of a guardhouse and three barracks pressed closely together (two for men and one for women, children, and the sick) within an enclosure surrounded by a 12-foot-high board fence. About 140 men shared a barrack meant for 100.<sup>22</sup>

The barracks had been hastily built of green lumber; cracks between the green planks welcomed and then trapped inside the unusually oppressive heat that first summer and the cold that inevitably followed. The prisoners were badly treated. They remained chained together in the barracks. Soldiers taunted the prisoners; using their hands to make a throat-cutting motion,

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20. *Rock Island Weekly Argus*, 4/29/1863. Many other places were considered first, including Isle Royale in Lake Superior (where they were to be left to die), Dry Tortugas off the Florida coast, and Key West. Meyer, *History of the Santee Sioux*, 142.

21. It was called a "plank road" because planks had been laid along where a swath of trees had been cut out to the camp. Planks were used because lumber was cheap. Bill Bolt, interview by John Hauberg, 1/31/1927, transcript, Special Collections, Augustana College Library, Rock Island, IL.

22. Karen Anderson, interview by author, 8/18/2003, Davenport, Iowa; *Davenport Daily Democrat*, 12/11/1863; Thomas Williamson to Stephen Riggs, 5/9/1863, box 1, Riggs Papers (hereafter cited as RP), Minnesota State Historical Society, St. Paul, MN.

they led the prisoners to believe that they, too, would die on the scaffold. The camp commander publicly conveyed his lack of respect for the Dakota prisoners by allowing Davenporters, after repeated requests from children, to view Dakota prisoners for two hours every afternoon except Sunday. That opportunity must have been especially exciting for Davenporters because viewing Confederate prisoners on Arsenal Island was not allowed; such viewing "out of mere curiosity" violated a prisoner of war's rights. One journalist described visitors "petting" the "animals" of which the gallows had been "cheated," an opportunity that he eschewed.<sup>23</sup>

Within the few pages in history books devoted to the internment, the women taken to the camp receive little attention. Yet their plight became an important issue for the letter writers and, one might assume, for the other prisoners. Very little information on their prison lives exists. The missionary Stephen Riggs mentioned how the Dakota women labored arduously around the camp. Ten cooked. Four were launderers. Two worked in the camp hospital. One Sunday in the winter of 1864, wrote Riggs's fellow missionary, Thomas Williamson, while many prisoners were worshipping, the women were busily carrying water to the camp from the river. Their barracks also functioned as an infirmary, so among their other duties they attended sick prisoners (though not those with smallpox, who were placed in a special ward), probably without medical supplies or help.<sup>24</sup>

During the early months of the Dakota's imprisonment, Thomas Williamson stayed with the Dakota and continued efforts to "civilize" them.<sup>25</sup> Riggs and Williamson formally called the prison camp the "church in prison," a "religious educational training school" to turn proselytes into the first Dakota ministers when released (a few did become these hoped for ministers).

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23. Bill Bolt, interview; Stephen Riggs, *Ta'h-koo wah-ka'n; Or, The Gospel among the Dakotas* (Boston, 1869), 370; Eldon Lawrence, interview by author, 8/13/2003, Sisseton, SD; *Rock Island Weekly Argus*, 4/29/1863; *Davenport Daily Democrat*, 5/6/1863, 12/11/1863. Local newspapers occasionally reminded citizens that they could not view Confederate prisoners; see, for example, *Rock Island Weekly Argus*, 1/27/1864.

24. Riggs, *Ta'h-koo wah-ka'n*, 370; Thomas Williamson to Stephen Riggs, 2/13/1864, box 1, RP.

25. Of all the missionaries, Williamson spent the most time with the prisoners.

Williamson also tried to enforce respect for the Sabbath, abstinence from drink, monogamous relationships within Christian marriage, and the end to traditional medical practices. Later letters suggest that many Dakota diligently amended their lives to yield to Williamson's requests. Williamson held two to three religious meetings daily, spending one to four hours in worship. The number attending services increased dramatically over the summer—from 70 to 120. These numbers impressed Williamson, who attributed his success in part to the prisoners' seclusion from the tribe. Such seclusion destroyed the traditional social and cultural systems, leaving the prisoners alienated and vulnerable.<sup>26</sup>

Considering these successes, we can only imagine Williamson's consternation when the camp commander refused to let him enter the camp through most of the late summer and early fall.<sup>27</sup> However, Williamson was allowed to view the prisoners from above the enclosure. He noticed that they "looked very badly. . . . The confinement and hot weather was very detrimental to their health, which pleases [the commander] who wishes them to die of sickness seeing he cannot hang them." The unbearably hot summer left three Dakota dead within the first two weeks of their confinement. In June one of the four children died, and the death toll reached eight in August. The dead were buried in the woods east of the camp. The sick received little assistance from the camp doctor, who, according to Williamson, also wished their deaths.<sup>28</sup>

After the brutal summer, winter proved even crueler, taking 20 more lives in early December. On the eve of the New Year, four Dakota died within 30 hours, probably freezing or starving to death. The prisoners were so cold and poorly clothed that they buried their dead naked to save the clothes for the yet living. The prisoners burned wood and something that they described as "brown earth" (probably coal) in little stoves, though

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26. Thomas Williamson to Stephen Riggs, 3/13/1864, 8/18/1863, 5/9/1863, 3/23/1864, box 1, RP. Riggs wanted the prisoners "prepared to carry the gospel to the regions beyond." Riggs, *Ta'h-koo wah-ka'n*, 374-75.

27. Thomas Williamson to Stephen Riggs, 8/18/1863, 3/23/1864, box 1, RP.

28. Thomas Williamson to Stephen Riggs, 8/18/1863, 9/11/1863, box 1, RP; John P. Williamson (Thomas's son) to Stephen Riggs, June 1863, box 1, RP.

the supply usually lasted only part of the day. When Williamson read to the Dakota, after the camp commander let him reenter the camp, he could only hold the book with one hand for a few minutes before shifting hands and placing the exposed one under his clothes to keep it from freezing. Since the food provided was inadequate, the prisoners gave Williamson money (made from selling trinkets to visitors) to buy food for them in town.<sup>29</sup>

That winter many also suffered and died from smallpox. What became a plague in Camp Kearney began when one prisoner was quarantined due to suspicious "pimples" (Williamson's word). After a few days, he was again interned with the others under the supposition that he did not have smallpox. That decision was either a case of intentional maliciousness or tragic misdiagnosis because, a few days later, smallpox spread through the barracks. Again Williamson was barred from the prison, this time for his own safety, and the sick were quarantined in a hospital ward reserved for the prisoners a quarter-mile from the other hospitals. Smallpox and measles remained such noxious threats that this ward could no longer hold all the patients, and, in April 1865, a seventh hospital was erected at Camp McClellan entirely for Camp Kearney patients. The hospital was conveniently built next to the Native American cemetery outside the camp.<sup>30</sup>

Moved by what he witnessed, Williamson went to great lengths to vie for the prisoners' release. He had great sympathy for them and wrote to Riggs about the need to remove them from the prison "on about any terms." "I feel that they should be liberated," he wrote, "not only for their own sake and that of their families, but because I think this imprisonment is bringing guilt on our nation and doing much to prolong the Indian war by making the other Dakotas hostile." At one point, Williamson proposed that the army use Dakota prisoners as scouts. When that proposal failed, he traveled to Washington in March 1864 and asked President Lincoln outright to release one-third of the prisoners. And when Lincoln required the consent of Minnesota legislators, Williamson called for an investigation into the pris-

29. Thomas Williamson to Stephen Riggs, 6/12/1864, box 1, RP.

30. Thomas Williamson to Stephen Riggs, 3/3/1864, box 1, RP; *Davenport Democrat and Leader*, 8/7/1927.

oners' trials. He and the Minnesota legislators knew full well the injustice that an investigation would reveal. Thus, the legislators used delaying tactics that kept his proposal unfulfilled.<sup>31</sup>

The missionaries' efforts, in response to the pleas from the Dakota prisoners, did, however, bear some fruit when President Lincoln offered special pardons to about 60 male prisoners. At the behest of Williamson and Riggs, he pardoned 29 in April 1864 and 27 more sometime in mid-August 1864.<sup>32</sup> Once released, these men had great difficulty reaching their families since the army did not provide them with supplies or a means of transportation. One pardoned prisoner, Chief Big Eagle, did reach Crow Creek, where he told Williamson's brother that he was "not indebted to God for his release and so we need not expect his assistance."<sup>33</sup>

SOMETIME IN 1864, after a change of command, the male prisoners began to hold menial jobs, some previously performed by the Dakota women and some of which occasionally took them outside the camp. They brought water from the river, cut wood, and cleaned the camp grounds. They were sent out of the camp to help nearby farmers with hoeing and harvesting. Around town, the prisoners performed work details. Dakota men went swimming in the Mississippi River and, with one soldier accompanying them, on hunting expeditions. Dakota gathered mussel shells from the river and made trinkets that the women sold in Davenport. However, they remained chained when in their barracks and, at least in theory, were constantly accompanied by guards when they left the camp.<sup>34</sup>

Irritated "taxpayers" complained to the *Davenport Daily Gazette* about these unwanted visitors. The paper encouraged all Davenporters to tell military officers at Camp McClellan of any

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31. Thomas Williamson to Stephen Riggs, 12/1/1863, 11/20/1863, 2/13/1864, 3/23/1864, box 1, RP.

32. Lincoln to Camp McClellan, 4/30/1864, Putnam Museum Collection, Davenport; *Davenport Daily Gazette*, 8/20/1864.

33. Chomsky, "United States-Dakota War Trials," 40; John Williamson to Stephen Riggs, 7/15/1866, box 4, RP.

34. Seth J. Temple, "Camp McClellan During the Civil War," *Annals of Iowa* 21 (1937), 44-45; *Davenport Daily Gazette*, 3/30/1865.

future annoyances so that they could remedy the situation appropriately. Despite the complaints, prisoners apparently continued to roam (though, as the *Gazette* itself noted, Davenporters could have mistaken other Native Americans for prisoners). Whereas Davenporters once went to watch Dakota prisoners, now prisoners came to watch them. One Davenport native remembered the stories her mother told of these curious prisoners. She said that the prisoners would walk into houses uninvited and scare unsuspecting women while they were mixing dough. According to the story, the women in town were livid on account of the many good bowls they dropped and broke out of fear. Another favorite story involved Ella Jenkins, a local woman famous for her pies, who had to stop cooling her pies on the back porch railing because the prisoners supposedly would steal them.<sup>35</sup>

Despite the change of command, neither the severe conditions for the women nor the potential for more children and elderly dying that winter were adequately addressed. Thus, these were dominant themes in the letters that the prisoners would write to Riggs. The letters also included accounts of faith struggles and the prisoners' decision to accept Euro-American traditions. Prisoners included these latter two issues because they exemplified the sacrifices that they were making in exchange for the missionaries' support. Such exchanges were integral components of kinship relations in Dakota tradition.

Concern for the women is most prominent in the letters written by Robert Hopkins Caske. The prisoners seem to have accepted him as ipso facto leader of the prisoners in Camp Kearney. Riggs described him as "impulsive" and in possession of "a great deal of energy." Caske had been an elder in a church that Williamson had started on the reservation. He was a man whom "blanketed Indians" would have ostracized and seen as a traitor before the Conflict. He had been opposed to fighting, guarding Williamson and his family and then helping them to escape. Nonetheless, he was originally condemned to hang, but Williamson's sister saved him when she wrote to inform Lincoln that Caske had killed an ox, not a man. His relationship

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35. *Davenport Daily Gazette*, 8/20/1864; Karen Anderson, interview.



with the missionaries placed him in a unique position within the prison, a reality apparently accepted by prisoners and missionaries alike. Riggs referred to him as the prisoners' "religious leader." "God, who makes no mistakes," wrote Riggs, "had work for him to do in the prison, as he had for Joseph in the land of Egypt."<sup>36</sup>

At first, Caske seemed unwilling to accept that his place was in the prison. In a letter to Riggs, Caske asked to be sent to Crow Creek to preach. He continued, "you sent me a letter again and told me it was not like I had nothing to live for. My heart is really sad, very sad for my younger brother. If they release him, I shall be very thankful."<sup>37</sup> Concern for his wife, debilitated with consumption yet caring for their two sons, probably drove his desire to go to Crow Creek. Riggs noted Caske's internal struggle. "He thought it hard that for no crime he should be condemned and imprisoned, and so long separated from his wife and boys; but it was the Lord's will, and the work he did for his people was the Lord's work; and he was comforted thereby."<sup>38</sup>

On April 27, 1864, Caske's request was answered: President Lincoln pardoned him, leaving him free to return to his family. He suddenly realized that he had to choose between the obligations he felt to his family and those he felt to his prison community. He chose to stay. In the months that followed, Caske wrote a number of letters that exhibit his heroic resolve to serve his people first.

The need for such a cultural liaison grew in the summer of 1864, when 90 more Dakota, including women and children, arrived in the camp. These families had never been tried or convicted of any misdeeds or involvement in the Conflict; they had simply delivered themselves into the hands of the U.S. army.<sup>39</sup> Yet they, too, were imprisoned.

The prisoners first asked military personnel to remove the women and especially the elderly to the Crow Creek reserva-

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36. Riggs, *Ta'h-koo wah-ka'n*, 347-50.

37. Robert Hopkins Caske, undated [undoubtedly before he received his presidential pardon on April 27, 1864], letter 023, Sisseton Collection, Sisseton Wahpeton Community College, Sisseton, SD (hereafter SC).

38. Riggs, *Ta'h-koo wah-ka'n*, 373-74.

39. *Ibid.*, 370.

tion, where they seemed to believe that conditions were better. After months of vague promises from soldiers, the prisoners turned to Riggs. Two letters from unknown authors asked Riggs to help the elderly. One expressed distrust that the promised relocation would occur. Another correspondent sent Riggs the names of the oldest men living in the camp.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, Caske began asking Riggs for help, expressing greatest concern for the women and children.

In his first letter, written in August 1864, Caske noted all the changes the prisoners had made in their daily lives. They were trying hard to live according to what the missionaries preached, and their past behavior would now be impossible. They did not drink. In the absence of a minister to teach them and strengthen their new faith, especially through communion, they preached to each other. They used the money from their trinket sales to buy Dakota New Testaments with "expensive bindings" for one to two dollars each and hymnals for a dime. Elias Ruban also wrote that the women made Bible covers to protect these precious books. Their efforts did not go unnoticed; Riggs later noted how central religious items were to their activities.<sup>41</sup>

In a second letter written in the same month, Caske requested that the women prisoners be released and sent to his father's older sister. Her whereabouts are not given, though she probably was located at Crow Creek. Caske complained that the women suffered from hunger and sleepless nights, perhaps fearing for their children's or their own safety. Two months later, Caske pressed Riggs again. "They will be taking the women they said but I think they are not speaking the truth. Then at this time this winter, one by one, we will probably freeze to death we think." He also recommended specific Christian prisoners for early release. "I never said to you to set free one man," he wrote, "but lately some men who depend upon that which is sacred those I tell you about. . . . If you free or re-

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40. Unknown author to Riggs, 10/24/1864, letter 86, SC; unknown author to Riggs, 2/25/1865, SC (no reference number at time of this translation); Elian Ohanwanyakapi to Riggs, 4/1/1865, letter 029, SC.

41. Robert Hopkins Caske to Riggs, 8/15/1864, letter 102, SC; Caske to Riggs, 8/20/1864, letter 010, SC; Elias Ruban to Riggs, 1864 (oral translation to author by Bill Iron Moccasin), SC; Riggs, *Ta'h-koo wah-ka'n*, 372.

lease one then you shall make me glad."<sup>42</sup> Despite his efforts, Caske was not successful in securing the women's release.

That autumn of 1864, according to one letter of unknown authorship, the soldiers played a cruel trick on the prisoners. The soldiers told the prisoners that new stoves would soon arrive, so they ought to remove the old ones. But as the cold settled on Davenport, the prisoners were still without the new stoves. Upon realizing that the soldiers had duped them into a scheme that presaged their freezing to death, the prisoners sought and recovered their old stoves.<sup>43</sup> The incident was a cruel reminder that many would soon die or fall sick from the cold.

One man who fell sick and begged Riggs for relief was the half-breed Joseph Godfrey. Rock Island's *Weekly Argus* called him a "regular cut throat." According to Davenport's *Daily Democrat*, he had killed 16 men, then "turned States evidence and thus saved his neck, thus showing himself a coward as well as a most atrocious scoundrel." At age 74, Davenport Bill Bolt recollected that as a 10-year-old, he had known that "Godfrey was about as mean a man as there was. He'd get drunk and made brag that he killed eleven people in the massacre and bragged he'd kill eleven more. The soldiers of Iowa were pretty bitter and the officers had a hard time to keep the soldiers from getting him and hanging him."<sup>44</sup>

Godfrey's letter from the camp evokes a quite different image. The man in his letter is godly, emotionally repentant, and physically weak. "I am very sick. Maybe God will have pity on me," he began. Then he asked Riggs to come and baptize him. "My relative, you are one man that has compassion. You are the one. That is why you are the only one that I depend on. Make me holy." Although Godfrey probably knew that Riggs was well aware of how he had avoided hanging, he confessed, "Nobody knows the things that I did bad. Maybe God is the only one that knows."<sup>45</sup>

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42. Robert Hopkins Caske to Riggs, 8/20/1864, letter 010 (trans. Hildreth Venegas), SC; Caske to Riggs, 10/24/1864, letter 012, SC.

43. Unknown author to Riggs, 10/24/1864, letter 086 (trans. Doris Robertson), SC. The letter does not explain where they found the stoves.

44. *Rock Island Weekly Argus*, 4/29/1863; *Davenport Daily Democrat*, 12/11/1863; Bill Bolt, interview.

45. Joseph Godfrey to Riggs, 1/21/1865, letter 016 (trans. Bill Iron Moccasin), SC.

The following spring, Caske finally left the prison, and tensions rose among the remaining Dakota prisoners. The more some prisoners committed themselves to the Christian faith, the more they struggled to reconcile that faith with their Dakota traditions. One practice that Riggs and Williamson worked hard to curb was polygamy. They pressed the women to determine who would remain with the man in Christian wedlock and who would seek a new husband. The women at Crow Creek made concerted efforts to comply, though their distant husbands desperately struggled to keep their families together. In one instance, a prisoner told his wife that he would kill any new husband she found, a culturally appropriate Dakota response if he viewed her new marriage as an adulterous affair.<sup>46</sup>

In Camp Kearney, a number of men and women maintained their traditional relationships, and the women would visit their partners at night in the male barracks. This greatly angered Joseph Wicinca Maza (Old Man Iron), who wrote to Riggs:

I want them to do right. I want you to tell them they must do things right. They do not listen to the things that we say. . . . Those that are not doing right, if they go to a different place their behavior will get much worse. And then they will be a bad influence on all the young men. From now on whoever is with a woman should have a Christian marriage I think. I want all of us to completely make right all of the bad behavior we grew up with.

Since his reprobation was to no avail, he included in his letter the names of 14 men and women, organized so that Riggs knew who was involved with whom. Another prisoner shared his frustration. In October 1864 the elderly Mowis Ite Wakanhdiota wrote to Riggs: "I aggressively [or industriously] preach to them and then I always think about the word that you preach. See your work. You teach us, giving us your mission to the common man. I diligently think on it."<sup>47</sup>

Wakanhdiota also sided with the missionaries on another sensitive cultural issue. In the early months of 1865, some Dakota had a sweat lodge and healing ceremonies for the sick, probably

46. John Williamson to Riggs, 1/15/1866, box 4, RP.

47. Joseph Wicinca Maza to Riggs, 2/1/1866, letter 059 (trans. Bill Iron Moccasin), SC; Mowis Ite Wakanhdiota to Riggs, 10/24/1864, letter 112 (trans. Michael Simon), SC.

because the white doctors offered little aid and the prisoners saw their traditional methods as the only hope available.<sup>48</sup> Despite the practical necessity for the prisoners to do something, this action perturbed Riggs and Williamson to such a degree that they refused to aid the sick unless the healing ceremonies ceased. Wakanhdiota shared the missionaries' view of these traditions as "sinful behavior" that was contrary to the Christian faith. He wrote to Riggs, "I will always have courage. I think that whatever happens I will not let myself be discouraged, that I will hold in my heart." Setting himself against the other prisoners probably worked in the community's favor; his words probably gave the missionaries hope and kept them close when other prisoners discouraged and distanced them.<sup>49</sup>

The prisoners' complicated relationship with the missionaries fits with the Dakota tradition of creating what Gary Clayton Anderson has called "reciprocal relations." Anderson explains how the Dakota created kinship bonds with white foreigners through real or "fictive" marriages. As a symbol of their fictive ties with Missionary Riggs, they gave him a Dakota name: Tamakoca or "His Country." Fundamental to "reciprocal relations" were "reciprocal exchanges," the exchanging of goods as gifts without concern for their market value. As gifts were exchanged physically, they animated the more important kinship bonds. According to Anderson, the Dakota animated these bonds up until the Conflict of 1862, by which time these relationships had become dysfunctional. The letters represent the Dakota prisoners' attempt to reanimate the "kinship bonds" by adapting their method of "reciprocal exchanges"; they exchanged their engagement in Christian rituals and "civilized" education and activities—symbolically marrying the missionaries into the prison community—in the hope for the release of some of the prisoners.<sup>50</sup>

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48. At least since the first smallpox outbreak in the winter of 1864, prisoners had turned to traditional medicines. Williamson to Riggs, 3/3/1864, box 1, RP.

49. Ite Wakanhdiota to Riggs, 2/5/1865, Letter 017, SC.

50. Anderson, *Kinsmen of Another Kind*, xv, 38; Kugel, *To Be The Main Leaders of Our People*, 119. According to my Dakota informant, Bill Iron Moccasin, "Christianity was the most devastating thing that happened to Native Americans." Nevertheless, he claimed, "If I was a prisoner and Riggs was giving help as a friend, I would go to services because it was fulfilling an obligation." Bill Iron Moccasin, interview, 8/11/2003. Clifford Canku, a minister at the reservation

Not only was preserving reciprocal relations important, but much of the prisoners' approach depended on the missionaries having someone to whom they could carry their case. That man had been President Lincoln. Thus, it was with heavy hearts that the prisoners received the news that stunned the nation: Lincoln was dead. Elias Ruban wrote that the prisoners mourned losing the man who had spared their lives two years before, released many since then, and sought food for them when they had none. The elderly Wakanhdiota made similar expressions of gratitude to the man he called "Grandfather": "Grandfather had compassion for us and so we are still alive. We were told he was killed and we are saddened."<sup>51</sup> These words may exemplify how the assimilating process left some of the prisoners feeling guilty and accepting the necessity of the internment to teach them lessons.

One later letter addressed not the missionaries, but "Mr. President," who at the time of writing would have been President Andrew Johnson. The author referred to the prisoners' belief that the president will "finish it well for us," suggesting that confusion had grown up because "they have fooled the Dakota" and that the chiefs grieved because they could not discuss these issues with the president. Then the author proposed a meeting between the chiefs and the president.<sup>52</sup>

The three letters suggest that the prisoners might have avoided directly blaming Lincoln for their plight, giving him the name "Grandfather" to represent symbolic kinship. The kinship names that Dakota gave to Lincoln and Riggs stand in contrast to the derogatory name—"Long Purchase"—they gave to General Sibley, whom they detested.<sup>53</sup> After all, Sibley was

church, agreed with Iron Moccasin that their ancestors' acquiescence to religious "imperialism" represented an unquestioned obligation to recreate the traditionally based Dakota-white relations that had thrived in the 1700s. Canku, interview, 8/11/2003.

51. Elias Ruban to Riggs, 4/17/1865, letter 031, SC; Mowis Ite Wakanhdiota to Riggs, 4/17/1865, letter 030, SC.

52. Simon Anawangmani to Mr. President, 2/1/1867, letter 065 (trans. Michael Simon), SC.

53. Sibley is referred to as such by Joseph Kawanke, 6/10/1865, letter 038, SC. This letter was not written in the internment camp. In another letter to Riggs, Kawanke wrote, "Now we heard them say that you were going to abandon us

the one who broke his promise, tried, and then hanged 38 Dakota. He was the one prisoners blamed for the internment that followed. The reason may have been that, as with their relationships with the missionaries, they were seeking to exchange something for the freedom U.S. presidents could give. This time it was continued expressions of respect and trust.

The price they paid for these kinship exchanges was a certain acceptance of guilt and the necessity of their imprisonment, as seen in the letters. Letter writers made declarations of innocence beside references to wrong done for which they now suffered. Such juxtapositions suggest their acceptance that they deserved punishment for upholding Dakota traditions, whether expressed in unchristian thought or action. The necessity of accepting that burden would only have caused further psychological, social, and cultural damage.

This juxtaposition occurs perhaps most clearly in the letters of Antoine Provincalle (half French, half Native American) and Elias Ruban. Despite individual innocence of killing women or children—or even participating in the Conflict—at least these two prisoners came to believe that their previous rejection of Christianity was enough of a crime to deserve punishment. Provincalle told Riggs, “I am very sick. But perhaps God has pity on me. . . . You know the bad things that the Dakotas did. I did not do anything like that. But now I have suffered a long time for that. Now, maybe, it is God’s will for this to happen.” Provincalle asked Riggs to visit him because his thoughts were again becoming “disorganized” and he did “not want to do those things again,” meaning have unchristian thoughts.<sup>54</sup>

In an early letter, Ruban wrote, “The Holy One’s word we paid no attention to. Therefore we are having a hard time now.”<sup>55</sup> Yet, in a later letter, Ruban also declared his innocence of the

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and our hearts are very sad. . . . And you have always helped us with General Sibley.” Joseph Kawanke to Riggs, 9/4/1865, letter 049, SC.

54. Antoine Provincalle to Riggs, 8/22/1864 (oral translation to author by Bill Iron Moccasin), SC.

55. Elias Ruban to Riggs, 5/1/1864 (oral translation to author by Bill Iron Moccasin), SC. In an oral statement that Chief Big Eagle gave after the internment, he also attributed their punishment to not yet being Christians. “Chief Big Eagle,” 129.

charges brought against him. When a soldier asked him if he had taken anything from a store, he explained that he had been on a hunting trip and "did not know of any behavior like that." "At no time did I point a gun at a white man," he claimed, "and nowhere did I say that I killed a white man. I say perhaps that is the only reason I am here in prison and for that I want you to help me this winter." Less than ten days later, he wrote a letter expressing entirely different sentiments:

I have told you the bad things that I did. For what I did bad the Holy One has punished me for it. Therefore my heart feels very bad now for the bad things that I have done. Only if I had not done what I did. My life would not be like it is now I think. So therefore, although they put me in prison from that I have learned several things. That is good and I like that. If I was not in prison, I would not have had the opportunity to do this.

These statements probably refer to the Dakotas' failure to see murder as a capital crime (boasting of such acts instead) and, especially, the legitimacy of targeting women and children in war. Acting on such beliefs—actions committed by others—resulted in the Dakotas' imprisonment.<sup>56</sup>

With the arrival of summer again, prisoner Sagekitun was able to report another accomplishment fulfilled at Riggs's behest: "you told us to go and teach which we did. All of them know how to read and write Dakota. That is something you should have done. But you told us to do it. We finished what you told us."<sup>57</sup> As their conversions had done, becoming literate fulfilled their kinship obligation to missionary Riggs. When the prisoners achieved complete literacy, they accomplished something extraordinary. When they were first taken prisoner, only eight prisoners were literate; now the number surpassed two hundred.<sup>58</sup>

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56. Elias Ruban to Riggs, 2/14/1865, 2/23/1865, letters 019–021, SC; Chomsky, "United States–Dakota War Trials," 47–48, 88; Lawrence, interview.

57. Sagekitun to Riggs, 6/2/1865, letter 037, SC. It is interesting to note that all the letters referring to their rate of literacy were written in 1865. However, placing any importance on these dates at this point would be premature since many letters remain to be translated.

58. These men paid for their own writing materials and even for Riggs's assistance. When John Icahape tried teaching himself to count, he asked to know how much he must pay Riggs to write "with a pen how they count." John Icahape to Riggs, 3/6/1865, letter 026, SC.



BY 1866, the Dakota prisoners had not seen their families in four years; most had probably not heard anything either. Worry and sorrow consumed Walks in the Middle of the Clouds, who wrote these distraught words to Riggs:

Well, I am going to tell you something. Upon the earth, I like to see my relatives. This is what I would like to see because I do not know what is going to happen to her [his wife]. Even so, I am broken hearted because I have these feelings for my family and people. But then, even so, if I could go home to them . . . this would be very nice. How is my father doing? Where are they at? Where are these people at? This is what I am thinking of while I am sitting here. . . . I have a longing to be with them, to know if they are doing okay or what is happening to them. I would like to hear. . . . And this is what I am thinking about all of this time.<sup>59</sup>

Were their families still alive? Would they ever see them again? For a socially minded people, who believed a man was nothing without a family and a tribe, these questions tore at their very Dakota identities.<sup>60</sup>

Davenporters' patience was also dwindling. An editorial in the *Davenport Daily Gazette* suggested that if the prisoners were guilty, they should be confined to hard labor in the state penitentiary, where they could earn "enough to pay for their keeping" instead of "idling away their time in making bows and arrows for the little boys." If they were innocent, then they should be set free.<sup>61</sup>

On April 9, 1865, Confederate General Robert E. Lee had surrendered to Union General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House. After four years of fighting, the Civil War had ended. So, too, had ended the need for Camp McClellan. On August 30, a fire destroyed the camp's headquarters. About a month later, Camp McClellan and the camp's general hospital closed and all government stores were removed. Only some Veteran Reserve Corps kept guard while the Dakota prisoners

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59. Walks in the Middle of the Clouds to Riggs, 8/6/1866 (oral translation by Bill Iron Moccasin), SC.

60. Clifford Canku and Bill Iron Moccasin, interviews.

61. *Davenport Daily Gazette*, 6/2/1865, quoted in Temple, "Camp McClellan During the Civil War," 53.

waited. They waited for another seven months, receiving numerous announcements of their imminent departure. But political bungling invariably prevented their release. Finally, on April 5, 1866, Riggs received a letter from Washington, D.C., informing him that "the Indians are to be unconditionally pardoned and immediately released and sent off. Tell my friends the Dakotas there is *no mistake this time*. It is only a little *delay*. They are no more to be treated as enemies but as friends."<sup>62</sup>

A month later, in May 1866, Riggs was in Davenport to watch the prisoners leave for the Santee Reservation in the western part of Nebraska near its border with the Dakota Territory. Only one month after that, the Dakota were moved again to the Dakota Territory, this time because the citizens of Nebraska objected to their presence.<sup>63</sup>

Within a matter of decades, the memory of the internment was all but gone in Davenport. In 1880 a fire on the nearby Arsenal Island destroyed all records of Camp McClellan. When the city built a road—Hillcrest—that runs directly through the cemetery, a number of skeletons were exhumed. These were carefully studied and exhibited at the Davenport Academy of Science (now the Putnam Museum) in the Presbyterian Church at Seventh and Brady Street in downtown Davenport. There they remained at least until the late 1920s. Local citizens also dug up Native American remains in search of relics, but found nothing more than naked bones.<sup>64</sup>

Generations of residents have removed what was anathema from the historic realities of the neighborhood's past and replaced the unthinkable memories with more benign and iconic images. Within the residential neighborhood where the camp stood, the internment became a legend, a ghost story that local children tell in school and adult neighbors pass on while standing in front yards. When a new family moved into a home located near the old cemetery, their neighbors' introductory remarks included, "did you know your house was haunted by an

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62. Letter to Riggs, 4/5/1866, box 4, RC (emphasis in original). The Dakotas' release had been postponed a number of times already.

63. *Davenport Daily Democrat*, 5/18/1866, 5/19/1866.

64. Bill Bolt, interview. Some Dakota are questioning whether the bones were Dakota bones and whether the site was where the cemetery actually was.

Indian?" Their sloping front yard casually resembles an Indian mound, which the neighbors claimed it was. But no one mentioned Camp Kearney and its cemetery. The children heard the same stories at the local school. Another resident of McClellan Heights by chance met a Dakota woman once who said she visits the cemetery yearly and conducts a ceremony. But the resident's wife spoke of this real woman as though she, too, were part of a myth, describing how she was "there and then gone."<sup>65</sup>

That the community has constructed such public stories did not surprise Dakota on the Sisseton-Wahpeton Reservation. As Clifford Canku described the situation, "no one wants to deal with an Indian Problem. But the cause was not an Indian cause; it was imperialism." The result is "intentional forgetting."<sup>66</sup> Efforts underway in Davenport to construct a marker are challenging Davenporters' public memories. The story told here challenges the "intentional forgetting" within the academic literature. Publicly telling the internment story begins the complex process of addressing injustices by revealing and celebrating the strength, courage, and survival of the Dakota peoples during this tragic period in their history.<sup>67</sup>

ON MY LAST AFTERNOON in Sisseton, I had lunch with Hildreth Venegas, a Dakota woman and native to Sisseton who had helped translate the letters. Before the letter project, Venegas had never heard of the Conflict of 1862. Her stepfather was from Minnesota and would tell her about hiding in potato fields when the army came. But he never linked it to the Conflict, and the schools were not allowed to teach it. During our lunch, she shared this insight: "One of the best things about being Indian is our sense of humor. We possess a special sense of humor. We

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65. Paula Hart, interview by author, 6/23/2003, Davenport, Iowa; Karen Anderson, interview.

66. Clifford Canku, interview.

67. For the complexities of "public memory," see David Thelen, "Memory and American History," *Journal of American History* 75 (1989), 1117-29. For the tendency of white Americans to tell stories such as that of the Conflict of 1862 as one of "white victimization," see Richard White, "Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill," in *The Frontier in American Culture*, ed. James Grossman (Berkeley, CA, 1994), 27.

can make a serious matter funny." When asked if she had been able to find humor in the internment, she pursed her lips, thought for a minute, and then shook her head.<sup>68</sup>

Venegas' solemnity was of a kind different from the guilt, frustration, anger, and sorrow expressed when responding to narratives of the Conflict constructed by non-Indians. Like many others on the Sisseton-Wahpeton Reservation, she was doing something that Dakota since 1862 had not been able to do: She was reconstructing her own story of this critical moment in her people's past using letters written by her people in her own language. Although the internment story will forever remain tragic, it is no longer a secret. She and others on the reservation can link difficult moments in their own lives—such as being condemned to stand in the hall at boarding school after speaking their native tongue<sup>69</sup>—to this story that exemplifies the courageous sacrifices the Dakota people were willing to make during an unjust internment. In finding this story through their ancestors' words, the Dakota are able to laugh, express sorrow, and especially share with each other and the communities beyond the true honor of having a Dakota heart.

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68. Hildreth Venegas, interview by author, 8/13/2003, Sisseton, SD.

69. Dorris Robertson, interview by author, 8/12/2003, Sisseton, SD.

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