Abbie Gardner Cabin Revisited

by Sarah A. O'Keefe

For more than a century, the Abbie Gardner Cabin in Arnolds Park has been a popular destination for tourists on vacation and students on field trips. Below, the author revisits the historic site as an adult and recalls her childhood trips to the cabin during an era of lingering stereotypes. —*The Editor*

Six years old, in bell-bottoms and braids, I remember rushing ahead of my cousins to get inside the musty cabin, clenching my fingers around the worn gate protecting its antique contents from people like me — people who would jump in the straw-stuffed bed, touch the leather pouches softly, examining. I would peek my head into the loft by standing on the rickety table, imagining *Little House on the Prairie*. I loved the Gardner Cabin's smell—the way its air felt upon my cheeks, soft and moist—just as much as I loved the scent of burning leaves.

I devoured the museum next to the cabin with the same furious fever, listening intently to the stories told by the female curator who cared for the site in the early 1980s. What stuck in my head about "going to Abbie Gardner" was not anything like *Little House*. What was bred into my heart was fear. I learned words like "barbaric," "savage," and "heathen." The "Spirit Lake Massacre" was passed down to schoolchildren as a fable of pioneer bravery, of taming the wild frontier and making it safe for "civilization." I was first introduced to Native American culture here—as relentless, violent, and predatory. I was told that an evil man, Inkpaduta, had tramped through this region killing innocent families, including the Gardners, to satisfy his inherently vile demeanor and thirst for blood. I walked away at six, seven, and nine, with the sole image in my head of babies being swung by their legs, heads smashed against the trunks of Okoboji's commanding oaks.

What has been forgotten, what has been ignored, subtracted from the textbooks and literature, and minimized, is that white settlers also acted the role of the barbarian—hanging Indian heads on display, stuffing bodies in trees, slaughtering unsuspecting women and children. Whites retold this history as one of "unprovoked savagery" by Indians and of "brave pioneers" who solved "the Indian problem." Yet settlers were exactly what they accused Inkpaduta and the Wahpekute of being.

Inkpaduta wasn't the "savage monster in human shape fitted only for the darkest corner of Hades," as Abbie Gardner Sharp described him in her memoir. Inkpaduta was a man with strengths and flaws. Historical sources tell us that traders such as Martin McLeod and Curtis Lamb spoke of his trustworthiness. Professor F. I. Herriott of Drake University called him "a figure of heroic calibre" and "a military genius" in a 1933 speech to the Okoboji Protective Association. Inkpaduta's younger sister, in the words of another writer, said he was a "very humble man who tried to avoid trouble, but that when he was aroused to a fighting spirit he could do things to an extreme." "Inkpaduta was one of the greatest resistance fighters that the Dakota Nation ever produced," says Mike Koppert, current interpreter at the Gardner Cabin Historic Site.

Inkpaduta was a person who had been pushed too long and too hard. He held back after the massacre of his family, after the mounting of his brother's head on a white man's home, after the murder of one of his men, and after being sent off to die of starvation in the dead of winter—until in March of 1857 he exploded and "went to war."

Nearly 15 years after my first trip to the cabin, I drove myself to "Abbie Gardner" for another visit. I still closed my eyes, loving the warm air and its musty scent. I still imagined myself sleeping in the cabin's loft on a windy night and eating cornbread soaked in bacon grease in the morning. I even loved the new curator, who tells a balanced history, saying the

hardest part of his job is battling racism, bigotry, and ignorance.

Despite this new emphasis on more accurate portrayals of the "Spirit Lake Massacre," the 55-foot granite monument beyond the cabin still stands, timeless. Each of its four sides is engraved. One side tells that the Iowa General Assembly of 1894 sponsored its erection. Another side relates the white man's skeletal story of the incident: "The pioneer settlers named below were massacred by Sioux Indians March 1 to 13, 1857. The barbarous work commenced near this spot and continued to Springfield now Jackson, Minnesota." A third side lists those settlers who died and those who were rescued. The fourth lists the white members of the relief expedition, but omits the names of the three Wahpeton Dakota men who saved Abbie Gardner. The monument stands, perpetuating a superior attitude of white people toward Native American culture, forgetting the names of Abbie's actual rescuers—Beautiful Voice, Iron Hawk, and Little Paul. ❖

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Above, seated: Chetanmaza ("Iron Hawk") was one of the three Wahpeton rescuers of Abbie Gardner. He appears in this 1895 image with his cousin Marpiyahdinape (standing). Below: another rescuer, Hotonhowashta ("Beautiful Voice"), who was also named John Otherday.

SHSI (DES MOINES: HISTORIC SITES)

A delegation of Sisseton-Wahpeton leaders in Washington, D.C., 1858. Standing fourth and fifth from the left are two of Abbie's rescuers: Hotonhowashta ("Beautiful Voice," also known as John Otherday) and Paul Mazakutemani ("Little Paul").

THIS PHOTO AND ABOVE: SHSI (IOWA CITY)