

CAPTAIN EDWIN V. SUMNER'S DRAGOON EXPE-
DITION IN THE TERRITORY OF IOWA IN
THE SUMMER OF 1845

INTRODUCTION

The opening of the vast trans-Mississippi region to settlement necessitated something more than the mere payment of the purchase money to Napoleon: to occupy this Indian country under the cloak of legality the United States was confronted with the problem of procuring land cessions from the numerous tribes of Indians who claimed the country as the hunting-grounds inherited from their fathers. Accordingly, treaties or contracts of sale were entered into, and to prove its good faith the government generally stationed a fort with a body of horse troops in the neighborhood of the Indians to protect them in their treaty rights against that element of the American population which was always over-anxiously pushing its way into the Indian country to grab the best sites for farms.

The United States government wanted to preserve order upon the frontier, to prevent clashes between red men and whites, and to punish the tribes which made incursions into the lawful settlements of American pioneers. In the Territory of Iowa, for instance, Fort Atkinson was established in 1840 in the Neutral Ground then set apart for the Winnebagoes, who thereby became a sort of buffer nation between the Sioux on the north and the Sacs and Foxes to the south. The troops kept all these Indians within proper bounds and did not a little to thwart the introduction of their worst enemy, liquor in all its forms. Fort Des Moines, also, arose in 1843 to serve much the same purposes.

But not only were these troops intended to act as direct conservators of the peace upon the western frontier: they were despatched on expeditions to distant parts to impress the natives with their "vigor, alertness, and fine appearance", as well as with "the wise and humane admonitions" of their commanders. Thus, in the summer of 1845, among the many precautionary movements of the troops Colonel Kearny marched along the route of the Oregon emigration to the southern pass of the Rocky Mountains, and back by the valley of the Arkansas and the road of the Santa Fé traders. At the same time Captain Sumner¹ commanded a detachment consisting of his own and Captain Allen's company from Fort Des Moines on an expedition to the northern part of the Territory of Iowa (now Minnesota). The report of their saddle journey is now for the first time rescued from oblivion and reprinted from the *United States Senate Documents*, 1st Session, 29th Congress, No. 1, pp. 217-220.

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IOWA CITY

CAPTAIN SUMNER'S REPORT

[The following report is reprinted verbatim from *United States Senate Documents*, 1st Session, 29th Congress, No. 1, pp. 217-220.—EDITOR.]

FORT ATKINSON, I. T., *August 23, 1845.*

SIR: In compliance with instructions from department

¹ Edwin Vose Sumner, born in Boston, 1797; Second Lieutenant of Second Infantry, 1819; served in the Black Hawk War, 1832; Captain of First Dragoons, 1833; Major of Second Dragoons, 1846; brevetted Lieutenant Colonel for gallant conduct in the battle of Cerro Gordo, 1847; brevetted Colonel for gallant conduct at Molino del Rey, 1847; rose to the rank of Major General in the Civil War; died at Syracuse, N. Y., 1863, while on his way to take charge of the Department of the Missouri.—Heitman's *Historical Register*. Captain Sumner was also military commander and acting governor of New Mexico for a few months of the year 1852.

headquarters, dated May 7, 1845, I marched from this post with "B" company 1st dragoons² on the 3d day of June.

The prairies were very wet and the streams all full, which delayed my arrival at "Traverse des Sioux" till June 22. I came up with Capt. Allen,³ on the 13th of June, about half way between this and the St. Peter's, and the companies continued together from that time. On the 16th of June, two men of "I" company 1st dragoons were seriously injured by the accidental discharge of a pistol. I sent those men down to Fort Snelling⁴ by water. One of them, private Berry, died after his leg was amputated by Dr. Turner; the other, private Howard, the man by whose carelessness the accident happened, has recovered.

On my arrival at Traverse des Sioux, I found a boat from Fort Snelling, with my howitzers, provisions, &c. A great mistake was made in the provisions forwarded by Major R. B. Lee, commissary: instead of 31 barrels of flour, which should have been sent, 17 only were forwarded. This mistake subjected my command to great inconvenience, for I was not in a country where it could be corrected by purchase. I marched from Traverse des Sioux on the 25th of June, and reached "Lac-qui Parle"⁵ on the 1st of July. I

² The First Regiment of Dragoons with headquarters at Jefferson Barracks, St. Louis, Missouri, was distributed among the different frontier posts west of the Mississippi and was a species of military force peculiarly dreaded by the Indians.

³ Captain James Allen was the commandant at Fort Des Moines, and a classmate of Robert E. Lee and Joseph E. Johnston, and of Charles Mason, first Chief Justice of the Territory of Iowa. For a brief biographical sketch see THE IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY AND POLITICS, Vol. XI, p. 68.

Traverse des Sioux is the point where the Sioux Indians were accustomed to cross the St. Peter's River, now called the Minnesota. The name has survived in Nicollet County, Minnesota.

⁴ Fort Snelling established in 1819 as Fort St. Anthony at the confluence of the Minnesota and the Mississippi. It was the northernmost military post in the Territory of Iowa.

⁵ This lake is a widening of the Minnesota River.

found there a large band of "Wahpeton Sioux;"⁶ and after holding a council with them, I gave them a part of the presents that had been sent to me for the Indians. I said to these Indians, as I said afterwards to all those I met in council — that our government felt a deep interest in their welfare; and that so long as they conducted themselves properly, and did not wantonly molest the whites, they might be sure of protection. I impressed upon them, at the same time, the fact, that our government had now become so strong that no crime could remain unpunished — that there was no part of the Indian country in which a criminal could not be reached, and that he certainly would be. I was particular in this, as I do not think the disposition of the upper Sioux toward us is very friendly. They receive no annuities, and are not connected with us in any way, and they have always had a strong partiality for the British; I believe, principally, because that government has been more liberal in their presents to them. One thing I observed particularly — they seemed unwilling that we should interfere with the "half-breeds" from the British settlements; and I am convinced that the Indians would prefer that that people should continue to hunt upon their lands, than that our government should send troops through their country to keep them out. I asked them who had made the complaints about the inroads of the half-breeds, and they all professed their ignorance on the subject, disclaiming it entirely for themselves. I reached Big Stone lake⁷ on the 5th of July, and on the 6th I met in council a large band of Sissetons,⁸ and I gave them the residue of the presents. I am much

⁶ The Wahpetons form one of the primary divisions of the Dakota or Siouan family. They had one of their most important villages upon the shores of this lake.— For these and succeeding statements about the Indians see the *Handbook of American Indians* published by the American Bureau of Ethnology.

⁷ Also part of the Minnesota River.

⁸ The Sissetons were another of the original tribes of the Dakota or Sioux.

inclined to think that the small presents we make to the Indians do more harm than good, for they serve as a contrast to the very liberal presents they formerly received from the English agents. I left Big Stone lake on the 7th of July. On the morning of the 8th I was holding an informal council, in the saddle, with a band of Sissitons, when three of the murderers of Watson and party, that escaped last fall from Col. Wilson's detachment of the 1st infantry, had the assurance to walk directly into the council. I recognised them at once, and instantly seized them as fugitives from justice. It produced a good deal of excitement at the moment; but I told the band it was useless to talk about it — the criminals were my prisoners, and would remain so; and that if they had any thing further to say about it, I should be back there in about a month, and they could say it then; and I purposely returned by the same route, in order that they might know where to find me. I took these prisoners with me to the end of my march, having them in confinement about forty days. On my return to Traverse des Sioux, I sent an officer with them, by water, to Du Buque, and there turned them over to the civil authority.

As an evidence of the ill-will of the upper Sioux, I was informed that they had said they were glad we were coming up; that they knew we had fine horses, and that they intended we should come back on foot. As the best method of guarding against this threat, I always took occasion to say to the Indians in council that I was not at all afraid of their stealing our horses, intimating by manner that they could try it as soon as they pleased; but I would just tell them, by way of caution, that if an Indian came near them at night he would be instantly shot; and it gives me great satisfaction to report that not an animal was stolen from the squadron this summer. I reached "Devil's lake," on the 48th degree of north latitude, on the 18th of July. On

that day I came upon the trail of the "half-breeds,"⁹ and sent my interpreter and guide after them. They brought ten of the principal men to me, and the next morning I moved to their camp. There were about 180 men, including Indians that were with them. These half-breeds are descendants from the English, Scotch, Irish, and French. I had several talks with them, and I found them to be a shrewd and sensible people; but they are by no means as formidable as they have been represented to be. They have no discipline, no capable leaders, and they are hampered by their families. A few regular troops have nothing to fear from them. They said at once they had no idea of resisting the authority of the American government, and had never thought of such a thing for an instant. They had hoped that, although they were British subjects, their hunting excursions, within our limits, would be overlooked, as they were only hunting on the lands of their Indian parents; but above all, as the subsistence of their families actually depended upon them, that there was not game enough on their side of the line; that they had followed this life from childhood, and knew no other, and they did not know what they could do if our government inhibited them at once from their old hunting grounds. I told them they must perceive that their incursions into our country were violations of our territory, and that all governments were rightfully

⁹ Near Devil's Lake, North Dakota. Nicollet, who was here with his exploring party in 1839, wrote as follows:

"The Metis of the Red River had, we perceived, formed a camp not far from the spot selected by us, which they had vacated but a few days before, on their return home, as we judged from the deep cuts of their loaded wagons. This was rather a disappointment to me, as I particularly wished to become acquainted with this people, among whom, it is said, are to be found the best hunters, the most expert horsemen, and the bravest warriors of the prairies. The information I have of them is this: They are called Metis, or half-breeds, being descendants of Canadians, English, and Scotch, crossed with Chippeways, Kristinaux, Assiniboins, Sioux, &c., &c. They represent the remains of Lord Selkirk's colony and of the Hudson Bay Company. As for many years they were only in small numbers, their incursions within the limits of the United

very jealous on these matters. They then asked me how they would be received if they should move across the line. I told them at once that I could give them no answer to that question, for I thought it would be an improper interference with the rights of their government for me to hold out any inducement for them to secede in a body from their allegiance. They then asked if no time could be granted in which they could change their habits. After due reflection, I advised them to address a letter to our government, asking *as a favor* that a year or two might be granted to them in order to give them a little time to commence some other course of life. I told them expressly that I could give them no encouragement to believe that their request would be granted; and if it was not, they must discontinue their incursions at once. It will be an extremely difficult thing to keep these people out of the country, if they should determine to disregard the order; not from any resistance on their part, but, on the contrary, from the confidence they will place in us. They know very well that their families and themselves will always be safe with United States troops, so long as they do not resist them; and they might continue to come into the country expecting even to meet us, but prepared to retire at once on being ordered to do so;

States were attended with danger to themselves, in consequence of outrages committed upon them by the full breeds, the Sioux, the Rikaras, the Mandans, the Minitarees, &c. But they have since greatly increased; they number from 600 to 800 people, and have become so formidable as to compel those tribes to seek an alliance with them, and thus to maintain peace. The Metis call themselves 'free people,' (*gens libres*;) but by their neighbors they are designated as 'Metis of the Red river,' 'the Red river People,' 'the People of the North.'

"It is their usage to come twice a year upon the territory of the United States where the buffalo abounds: each family has its cart or wagon drawn by oxen; each hunter has his horse, which is remarkably fleet. They are accompanied by missionaries, who regulate both their temporal and spiritual concerns. Their first campaign is made at the setting in of summer; their second in the fall of the year; and they remain about two months. Sometimes they divide themselves into two bands; directing themselves in this respect according to the distribution which they have previously ascertained of the buffalo herds over

and they would continue to retire so long as the troops remained in the country; but the moment we left it, they would return again to their old hunting grounds. There is a branch of the American Fur Company now established on the line near the British settlements, under the charge of Mr. Kitson, a very respectable and capable man. A number of these half-breeds are becoming connected in trade with this establishment, and I understood, indirectly, that many of them intended to move across the line this fall. There seemed to be a strong disposition among them to become citizens of the United States; and I am much inclined to believe that many of them will become so, within a few years, without receiving any encouragement from our government. There are in all, in this band of half-breeds, about 600 men, and they are increasing fast. I arrived at Traverse des Sioux, on my return, on the 7th of August. I saw many of the Sioux on my way down; and although they manifested but little friendship, they took care to show no hostility. In the summer of 1844, Captain Allen, while on a march in the Sioux country, lost a government horse

these immense plains. One-half of the hunters alternately watch over the camp, and the other half are in active pursuit of the game; and the slaughter of the buffaloes is kept up, according to settled usage, until each wagon is loaded with the spoils of ten of these animals."—*House Executive Documents*, 2nd session, 28th Congress, No. 52, p. 49.

Governor John Chambers, Superintendent of Indian Affairs in the Territory of Iowa, made the following report in the year 1842: "The more remote and wild bands of them [the Sioux] obtain it [liquor] from the British half-breeds from Lord Selkirk's colony, as it is called, on the Red river of the north, who meet them on their hunting grounds and conciliate them by presents of ardent spirits and other articles, while they destroy their game in vast quantities. These half-breeds are a numerous and formidable body of men, whose intercourse with the Sioux is not only injurious to them, but may eventually become dangerous to our Northwestern frontier, in the event of hostilities between the British Government and ours at any future period. They would exercise a dangerous influence over all the Indians on our Northwestern border, and, from their numbers and hardy and daring character would greatly endanger our border settlements."—*House Executive Documents*, 3d session, 27th Congress, No. 2, pp. 415, 423.

and mule, and two horses belonging to officers of his command.¹⁰ These animals were stolen by an Indian. I heard of this man frequently. He had been running about the country boasting of this feat, and I determined to arrest him if possible, as it appeared to me highly important that all Indians should be made to know that the horses of the government, on service in the Indian country, are inviolable, and that they cannot be touched by them without the certainty of punishment at the time, or afterwards. I arrested this Indian at Traverse des Sioux; but as there was no testimony against him, that would convict him before a court, I thought it unadvisable to turn him over to the civil authority. I sent him down to Fort Snelling, requesting Captain Backus to keep him in close confinement until he heard from division headquarters on the subject. I would respectfully refer this case to the commanding general of division. The Indian will not be released till orders to that effect are received at Fort Snelling.

I broke up the squadron at Traverse des Sioux on the 11th inst., ordering Captain Allen, with his company, to proceed to Fort Des Moines, and I reached this post with my own company on the 19th inst.

I am, sir, very respectfully, your obedient servant,
 E. V. SUMNER,
Captain 1st dragoons.

The Acting Assistant ADJUTANT GENERAL,
Third Military Department, St. Louis, Mo.

Remarks

The Secretary of War, to whom this interesting report is

¹⁰ In his journal of an expedition to the headwaters of the Des Moines River and westward to the Big Sioux and back to Fort Des Moines, Captain Allen wrote at length of the theft which occurred near the present site of Sioux Falls, South Dakota.—*House Executive Documents*, 1st Session, 29th Congress, No. 168, p. 14. For a reprint of this document see THE IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY AND POLITICS, Vol. XI, pp. 73, 99, 100.

submitted, will, no doubt, be pleased with the firm and judicious conduct of Captain Sumner towards the Indians and half-breeds, mentioned within. The expedition has been made in conformity with a report submitted by me to the Secretary of War some ten or twelve months ago.

WINFIELD SCOTT.

NOVEMBER 10, 1845.