

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN C. PARISH

ASSOCIATE EDITOR OF THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

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Moving the Winnebago

On Wednesday morning, June 8, 1848, when the first flush of dawn appeared over the hills to the east of Fort Atkinson, Iowa, the clear tones of the bugle awoke the sleeping garrison to face the hardest task of their term of enlistment. To James M. Morgan, "Little Red", and his company of Iowa Mounted Volunteers had fallen the duty of escorting the Winnebago with all their belongings to their new home in the Indian country north of the State of Iowa.

Almost two years before, on October 13, 1846, the United States government had completed a treaty with the Winnebago whereby the Indians agreed to relinquish their claims to the Neutral Ground in Iowa and remove to a reservation to be selected by them or their agent in the upper Mississippi region. Soon after the treaty was concluded Henry M. Rice, acting as their agent, chose for the new home of the Winnebago the country lying in the present State of Minnesota between the Watab River on the south,

and the Long Prairie River and the Crow Wing River on the north, a tract of some 1,557,000 acres. The delay in starting, however, was due partly to dissatisfaction among the Indians created by persons whose business would be affected by their removal, and partly by their fear of being drawn into difficulties with the Sioux and the Chippewa who would be their new neighbors.

For weeks before the departure, detachments from Captain Morgan's company had been kept busy bringing back stragglers who tried to avoid the migration by stealing back to Wisconsin. At the same time details from Captain Wiram Knowlton's company from Fort Crawford rounded up bands of Winnebago that had left the reservation for their old hunting grounds in Wisconsin and assembled them at Prairie la Crosse to join the main body en route. Teamsters, wagons, mules, and supplies were brought to Fort Atkinson in preparation for the journey. Arrangements were made for Second Lieutenant Benjamin Fox to move over from Fort Crawford with twenty-five men of Captain Knowlton's company to occupy Fort Atkinson during Morgan's absence; and the day for the departure was set.

On that hot June day the cavalcade moved slowly north from the post on Turkey River, headed for Wabasha's Prairie on the Mississippi. The government had provided 110 wagons with civilian teamsters to haul the Indians, their goods, and supplies

for the trip, while the traders and Mission and Agency folks furnished about 56 more. Four of the supply wagons were hauled by six-mule teams. The Indians, variously estimated from 2100 to 2800, either rode on the 1600 ponies or squatted on the bumpy beds of the army wagons. Squalling papooses rode in "kyaks" or sacks of hides hung over the ponies, helping to swell the volume of sound made by the crawling caravan. Oxen driven by soldiers hauled the two lumbering cannon, and the handful of mounted volunteers, Iowa boys from farm and shop, rode alongside and behind the train, keeping both the Indians and some 143 cattle from wandering away from the route.

In the late afternoon a halt was made for the night. Five hundred tents erected for the accommodation of the Indians and a hundred more for the soldiers, teamsters, and the Agency and Mission people, made a city of canvas on the prairie. Soon, before hundreds of tiny gleaming campfires, troopers and squaws baked dough and roasted meat on sticks while the aroma of boiling coffee rose above the other smells of the camp.

The travel next day afforded no unusual excitement. The creaking wagons moved slowly north, dipping into valleys of lush prairie grass, fording streams, and crawling over bare hills. On the morning of the third day, however, the Indians refused to move until they had buried with appropriate ceremonies one of their number who had died the night

before. Even when the ceremonial dancing and wailing was ended the soldiers had difficulty in getting their charges to start, for many of them wanted to take their belongings and return to their old haunts about the fort and the mission.

Captain Morgan had instructed his men to be ready for an attack or trouble at any time, day or night, and when camp was pitched guards were posted at regular intervals to prevent the Indians from breaking through the lines. One night a bullet whizzed past the sentinel at post number three, and he yelled the alarm, "Post Number Three, C-O-M-E," drawing out the last word in a long wail. The word spread that the Indians were trying to break through the lines and soon the soldiers were in full chase, but Morgan halted them fearing that the shot was a ruse to get the troops away from the camp so that the Indians could plunder the wagons. He ordered the men to lie on their arms until morning holding their horses in readiness for an attack. Daybreak came with no further alarm and after breakfast the Indians started on, the soldiers following.

One afternoon several days later the advance guard noticed that part of the Indian braves who often pushed on ahead of the main caravan had apparently gone over a hill into a ravine off the trail. Supposing that they had turned aside for water, the guard followed their trail and soon came to a spring. After refreshing themselves and watering their

mounts they followed the ravine to the Root River, planning to go down the river bank to regain the main trail. Before they had gone far they saw through the brush across the river a number of Winnebago warriors in hiding, and one of them behind a clump of bushes in the act of shooting something. A shot rang out, and back across the river came splashing a trader urging his horse at full speed, and yelling for help at the top of his voice. Supposing that he had been shot the advance guard jumped their horses into the river, crossed over and caught the fleeing Winnebago. He declared that he did not shoot at the trader, that, in fact, he did not see him until after he had fired. The soldiers turned him loose and soothed the ruffled feelings of the trader with a liberal gift of venison. Afterwards it was learned that the braves had stationed themselves in the brush planning to shoot the first white man to cross the river, and this was to be the signal for a general onslaught. The unexpected appearance of the advance guard from the ravine had frustrated their plans.

At this point a halt was made for five days for the Indians were restless and at first refused to go farther. This stop permitted the soldiers to wash their clothes, to sew on buttons, and to rest their jaded horses, while it allowed the teamsters to mend broken traces and to repair the wagons. On Sunday the Reverend David Lowry preached to the soldiers, teamsters, traders, and Agency folks, dwelling upon

their dangerous position among merciless Indians and their dependence upon Divine Providence.

That night a band of Indians sneaked away and a detachment of soldiers despatched in pursuit took two days to find the runaways and drive them back to camp. After this outbreak the Winnebago travelled along peaceably for several days causing no trouble, although the braves at times would dash madly ahead, then rejoin the train when camping time arrived.

Toward eleven o'clock one night the alarm call rang out from Post Number Four arousing the sleeping soldiers who rushed to the post to assist the guard. He had stopped an Indian who said he was chief Little Hill, and he asked to be conveyed to headquarters for a secret council. At the council he stated that a band of renegade Sioux living on Wabasha's Prairie had entered into a conspiracy with the Winnebago to forbid the passing of the caravan through their land on the ground that the Winnebago were killing all the game of the Sioux. The Winnebago were to pretend to be afraid and to insist on going to the lower end of Wabasha's Prairie, thence up the Mississippi by steamboat. When the caravan had reached the lower end of the Prairie, the Sioux and the Winnebago were to join forces to kill all the whites and appropriate the teams, cattle, government stores, arms, and ammunition. Then they would go back from the river where the Great Father's boys could not find them, form a new tribe and enjoy the spoils of victory.

Captain Morgan decided to send Corporal Thomas Cox with eight men to make their way with all possible haste to the Mississippi and to get word to the commanding officers at Fort Snelling and at Fort Crawford to come at once to the lower end of Wabasha's Prairie with soldiers, cannon, and equipment. The detail was passed through the lines early in the morning and succeeded in eluding the Indians. Ten anxious days passed.

True to Little Hill's warning the Winnebago hunters began to return pretending fear and reporting that the Sioux had ordered them off their hunting grounds and had chased them with murderous intent. Finally a body of Sioux appeared and forbade further advance through their country, ordering the caravan off their land. During the second night after this occurrence, Corporal Cox and his squad returned with the word that Captain Seth Eastman with a company of regulars from Fort Snelling and Captain Wiram Knowlton with his volunteers from Fort Crawford would reinforce Morgan at the Prairie.

When the cavalcade reached the head of the Prairie a high steep bluff blocked the way to the plain below. To lower the wagons required a detail of sixteen men who, under the command of First Lieutenant John H. McKenny, let down each wagon by tying a rope around the rear axle and then taking a turn around a tree near the edge of the bluff. It took all day long to lower the government wagons and at

sunset several wagons belonging to the Agency and Mission people remained at the top. The company had ridden on and gone into camp about five miles away at the foot of Wabasha's Prairie, and when the last government wagon was on its way, Lieutenant McKenny ordered his men to mount and follow. Soon after they started they met Jonathan Fletcher, the Indian Agent, and a trader by the name of Pratt with an order from Captain Morgan for the detail to help them down with their wagons. McKenny replied that his men had worked hard all day without any dinner, that they were now going to have something to eat, and that Fletcher and Pratt might go to h—l with their order. This disobedience of orders might have caused trouble had not difficulties of a more serious nature intervened.

Captain Eastman had already arrived with one nine-pound cannon, sixty northern Sioux, and forty regulars. The soldiers went into camp on the lower end of the prairie, while most of the Indians turned off into a ravine out of sight of the troops. Two of the Winnebago chiefs, Broad-face and Little Hill, did not enter into the conspiracy although some of their men did, and the two chieftains with the remnants of their bands came down the Prairie and camped near the soldiers. Wabasha, the chief of the renegade Sioux, permitted his band to join with the Winnebago, but he himself stayed in his wigwam some four or five miles up the river.

The soldiers posted double guards while they were

waiting for Knowlton to arrive, the Indians meanwhile appearing in small groups on the tops of nearby hills spying on the camp. With the arrival of the contingent from Fort Crawford all hands set to work to prepare for an attack. The steamboat which had brought the troops was tied up to the bank with a full head of steam ready for use. Then the covered wagons were run end to end in a semi-circle enclosing almost an acre, beginning at a point on the river above the boat and swinging back to the river at about the same distance below. The troops barricaded this enclosure by rolling barrels of flour, pork, and beans, against the wagon wheels on the inside, leaving only a small space for entrance. This enclosure they dubbed the "bull pen". Inside were placed the Indians brought by Eastman, and they displayed their fighting spirit by dancing furiously around some small flags stuck in the ground.

When the barricade was finished Captain Eastman sent a detachment of eight cavalymen to the Indians commanding them to come down the Prairie and to proceed peaceably up the river. The latter agreed to come and did not offer to molest the messengers, however, they waited until the troopers had returned almost to the camp, when with shouts and cries that made the hills and dales reëcho with the sound the braves dashed down the Prairie, armed for battle. They were painted beyond recognition, splattered with red, their hair set up on end and colored red as blood.

When they came within range they were ordered to halt, and seeing three bristling cannon with the aprons off, the gunners standing with lighted fuse, the cavalry with carbines loaded and sabers ready, the infantry in line and prepared to fire, the Indians halted in dismay. The chiefs and officers were disposed to settle the difficulty without a fight if possible but many of the braves and soldiers wished to see who was master of the situation. A council was called halfway between the two forces, and here the Indians consented to go on up the river. Thus was the incipient revolt crushed by a stern display of force. The officers turned over a number of beeves as a present to the Indians who would take after one on their ponies and riddle it with bullets until they were stopped by the soldiers.

With the one steamboat, chartered by the government at one hundred dollars per day, and two small barges the soldiers set to work to transport the stores, animals, and Indians up the river. First Captain Eastman and his command were returned to Fort Snelling, then Captain Knowlton and his men were taken down stream to Prairie du Chien. Morgan's men sent boatload after boatload upstream as fast as possible but the Mississippi became so low that the steamboat or barges would run aground on sand bars and the men at Wabasha's Prairie never knew exactly when to have a load ready. Sometimes when one of the boats that made regular trips between St. Louis and St. Paul reached the Prairie,

the soldiers would compel the captain to stop for a load of Indians much to the disgust of the passengers. During the delay at the Prairie the troopers had little to do except to stand guard and to see that the constantly dwindling bands of Indians did not stray away too far. The soldiers celebrated July 4, 1848, by fighting a sham battle in which they fired several rounds of small arms and let the cannon howl a few times. The Indians ran in all directions and hid in the ravines thinking that "Morgan's Braves" were beginning an attack. For amusement the men swam in the Mississippi, or played ball, while the Indians loafed or hunted. A small detachment accompanied each load up the river so that only a handful of soldiers remained to escort the last group.

The encampment had dwindled until only a few goods and part of three tribes of Indians remained. Dandy's band had crossed the river into Wisconsin, Four-Eyes with part of his band had gone about six miles down the river where they camped and Yellow Thunder, becoming disheartened, declared that he was going back home to the burial ground of his fathers, and with the remnant of his followers started home. The "Braves" started after him in a soaking rain, fifteen soldiers against fifty warriors. At nightfall they came upon the band dancing about a camp fire. Late at night, when the tired Indians sank down to sleep exhausted from their violent exertions, the soldiers crept up, surrounded the band,

seized the guns, and removed the locks. The next morning the crestfallen runaways trailed back to the encampment.

Another small detachment brought back Four-Eyes' band and the soldiers made ready to fire the cannon which was the signal agreed upon for Dandy's followers to return. They loaded the cannon on the barge, pushed over to the east bank of the river and fired one shot. The recoil of the piece surged the barge against the steamboat with such force that the men removed the gun to shore. Here they let it roar a few times and the Indians came yelling, some afoot, some on ponies, and others up the river in canoes. The soldiers put the cannon and the Indians on board the steamboat, loaded the ponies on the barge and then steamed back across the river for the camp equipment and supplies. In the afternoon of that day the last load started toward Fort Snelling.

From the hurricane deck the soldiers viewed the desolate appearance of the lower Wabasha where recently stood a small city of tents, and the highly colored battle array. Wabasha's village slipped past, and the boat approached the rocky cliff known as the Maiden's Rock. Twilight came and the steamer plowed its way into Lake Pepin. All night long the spray from the prow splattered over the sleeping men till their blankets were as wet as though they had been dipped in the river. Above the mouth of the St. Croix River the big barge with all the sol-

diers' horses on board except four which were on the small barge, stuck on a sand bar. With difficulty it was worked off and the soldiers whose horses were on it received orders to get on the barge, cut loose from the steamboat, make for the shore and continue their journey by land. The four soldiers whose horses were on the little barge continued the journey on the steamboat. The rest floated the big barge down stream to Hastings where they landed.

From here they rode through rain and mud to St. Paul arriving several hours after the docking of the steamer. The Indians had gone on out of town and so the cavalymen camped about a mile below the Falls of St. Anthony to await supplies and orders from Captain Morgan. Word came soon that the supplies for the rear guard were on another steamboat stuck on a sand bar twenty miles below St. Paul. The guard received orders to await the coming of the wagons with these supplies, then to overtake the caravan. Two days later two wagons loaded with barrels of flour, pork, and beans from the stranded boat arrived. With plenty to eat, delightful weather, and good health, the men told their longest yarns, sang their best songs, and rested soundly, lulled to sleep by the roar of the Falls of St. Anthony.

The next morning the rear guard set out along the river and followed the Red River trail until they overtook the caravan which had encamped on a beautiful stretch of prairie. Warm were the greetings for a month had elapsed since all had been

together. Here they halted from Friday until Monday, spending Saturday in washing and mending clothes, horse racing, jumping, hunting, fishing, and gambling. Divine service was held on Sunday.

On Monday the march was resumed. Since the caravan was expected to arrive about two months before it finally came, some traders had stationed themselves along the trail supplied with whiskey to sell on the sly to get the loose change of the soldiers as well as the furs from the Indians. One of these traders had a fat pig of about two hundred pounds which he allowed to run at large near his shanty which was hidden in the woods some distance from the road. The pig, hearing the rattling wagons of the caravan, ambled out to see what was happening. The teamsters seeing him chased him under the wagons to the other side of the train. The rear guard saw what was happening and one by one they began to drop out of ranks and to slip into the brush. When the wagon hauling the traps of the rear guard came alongside this spot the boys came out carrying the carcass of a fine fat animal and loaded it into the wagon. As they drew near camp they met a sergeant returning to learn what had happened. To his question as to what was in the wagon, the boys answered "bear meat" as it was not covered. That night officers and men feasted on fresh pork.

At Sauk Rapids a halt was made to hold a council with the Sioux and Chippewa who wanted to hear specifically just how and under what conditions the

Winnebago were to occupy the neutral strip between them. Here assembled the Indian agents and helpers, the Mission officers, the teamsters, the engineers detailed to erect buildings for the Mission and Agency, the cavalry, and thousands of Indians.

An armed guard was thrown around the council grove and the rest of the soldiers mingled with the crowd to maintain order. Fletcher, the Agent, called the meeting to order, a chaplain offered prayer and the Indian chiefs in long speeches presented their views as to what should be the relationship between the tribes. During the second morning of the council a terrific thunder storm broke up the meeting. The wind tore the tents from their fastenings while almost a continuous roar of deafening thunder followed the dazzling flashes of lightning, and the rain came down in torrents. An unusually fierce flash of lightning struck a Winnebago tent and killed seven Indians. This occurrence ended the council temporarily for the Indians took three days to carry out the funeral ceremonies while the soldiers righted the overturned wagons and tents and dried their clothes.

At the close of the pow-wow where the Indians danced, wailed, and chanted while the throbbing drums kept time, the council reconvened. All parties reached an agreement which was announced by the firing of a cannon. The afternoon was spent in a general jollification, Indians and soldiers competing in footraces, wrestling, dancing, and feasting.

From this point Captain Morgan sent out an advance guard to select the best site for the location of the new Mission and Agency buildings while the main train followed. Both the advance guard and the main caravan halted at a favorable place for a camp at the head of the Long Prairie River. The spot was favored by most of the scouts, but some of the traders felt that a better location could be found farther down stream. The scouts, however, saw no place that equalled the head of Long Prairie and so the men staked out the ground for the new buildings. The engineers erected some saw mills to prepare lumber while part of the force built some shacks to house the supplies. Others hunted and fished or gathered huckleberries to add variety to the regular rations of pork, beans, and hardtack. When the buildings were well under way the guard returned to the encampment at Sauk Rapids.

While part of Morgan's command had escorted the caravan to the head of Long Prairie, another part had scoured the country, raiding the whiskey traders and carrying out the agreement of the Sauk Rapids council. One of these groups had made a trip to the Crow Wing River. Here they found a man living in a shanty, but he denied having any whiskey. However, they started a search and in a little place under the bank like a spring house, they found a keg with four or five gallons of liquor in it. One of the soldiers searching along the river bank, saw something that looked like a rope tied to a rock out in the river.

He called the attention of the others to it, then waded out and pulled it up. Tied to the other end of the rope he found a barrel of whiskey, pure stuff bearing the stamp of W. G. Haun who had a distillery near the Mississippi in the northeast corner of Clinton County, Iowa. The trader denied any knowledge of it, but that night he or some Indians stampeded the horses of the soldiers so that they had to shoulder their saddles and start back to camp on foot. Some of their comrades found and returned the horses to the footsore troopers whom they found lying under trees unable to travel further.

At Sauk Rapids the men heard that the Mexican War was over and the main topic of conversation was when would they get out of the service. Their teamsters came through regularly hauling supplies from St. Paul to the new agency site. One evening as the teams came into camp they had new drivers, the old drivers sitting on the load. Speculation ran rife as to what it meant. When the bugle call sounded the line was filled faster than it ever had been before. The command "Attention!" rang out, then the order was read for the troops to return to Fort Atkinson, Iowa, to be discharged. "Boom!" went the cannon and the celebration continued until late at night. The next morning the men received word to wash and mend their clothes in preparation for the return trip. By this time the troop presented a ragged appearance; some of the men were entirely bare-footed; some had lost the knees out of their

trousers, and others had lost the seats. Jackets were torn and out at the elbows. All day was spent in mending.

Reveille, the next morning, received a prompt response for the men were eager to load the wagons and to set out on the return trip. They made rapid progress in piling tents and equipment in the army transports and mounting their horses. Morgan's "Braves" fired a parting salute and started for home.

Just before reaching Fort Snelling the troop halted for a day to wash their belts and scour their equipment preparatory to delivering them up at the Fort the next day. The following morning, marching through the Fort in single file they delivered up their arms and accouterments, then rode out the south side of the Fort, thence to the Mississippi to await a steamboat at a landing. Here, with the horses loaded on a barge, they went on board for the trip down river. One old cook stove on the forward deck proved totally insufficient for use by nearly a hundred men and so when the dinner bell rang several of the soldiers filed in and took seats at the table much to the disgust of the passengers. The steamboat captain remonstrated but the men sat tight. One of the passengers from St. Louis, straightening up and putting his thumbs in the armholes of his jacket, asserted that he did not propose to eat with soldiers. At this several troopers started for him and he beat a precipitate retreat but the

interposition of Lieutenant McKenny prevented trouble. He said that the soldiers were as good as he was and that he was good enough to eat with anybody and if they did not stop their fuss and let the soldiers eat he would take possession of the boat and put all the passengers ashore. The soldiers ate at the table.

The steamboat slipped down stream between the foliage-clad banks of the upper Mississippi until McGregor's Landing opposite Prairie du Chien was reached. Here the troops rested for two days and the officers visited at Fort Crawford across the river. From this place the men started on the fifty mile trip along the Military Trail to Fort Atkinson, not in regular formation but each man setting his own pace. As the horses were in poor condition from insufficient food and the hard trip on the barge, the soldiers straggled back to the fort one by one.

Shortly thereafter the Mustering Officer, Major A. S. Hooe, arrived at the Fort and the men prepared to make a hasty departure for home as soon as they were discharged. After breakfast on the morning of September 11, 1848, the company was formed in line on horseback, and as each name was called the Mustering Officer read the charges against the man for supplies purchased at the sutler's store and for equipment lost. When the name of a certain trooper who had returned almost in rags was called, the officer glancing up remarked, "There's nothing against him and not much on him."

When Major Hooe completed the roll call he praised the troops for what they had done, saying that they had gone through hardships and dangers without grumbling and that the name of the company had remained untarnished. He hoped that the men would return home without committing depredations, and there return to work and be good citizens. Both Captain Morgan and Lieutenant McKenny addressed the men expressing thanks for their obedience to orders and the respect shown them during the time they had been in command.

Then the men of Morgan's Company of Iowa Volunteers dispersed to their respective homes, to Burlington, to Dubuque, to Iowa City and other points, there to resume the labor of farm or store, or to practice again their professions. Although the men had not served on the battle fields of Mexico against their country's enemy they had performed honorably and bravely every task assigned them and had escorted successfully a restless band of Indians over a trail more than three hundred miles in length.

BRUCE E. MAHAN