Dakota Land in 1862, A Genocide Forgotten: How Civilizational Transformation can Get Lost in the Fading Rate of History

Michael Andregg
mmandregg@stthomas.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr

Part of the Comparative Literature Commons, History Commons, International and Area Studies Commons, Political Science Commons, and the Sociology Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol59/iss59/6
Andregg

Dakota Land in 1862, a Genocide Forgotten:
How Civilizational Transformation Can Get Lost in the
Fading Rate of History

Michael Andregg
mmandregg@stthomas.edu

Abstract

The year of 1862 was critical in a process by which a land larger than many nations was transformed from one civilization to another. But the process was not a classic conquest easily recorded in history books. Rather, it was a slow "digestion" of over 20 million hectares of territory by one civilization, accompanied by moments of true genocide or "ethnic cleansing" during long periods of high death rates for one group and high birth rates and immigration rates for the other group. But this was sufficiently gradual that most historians did not record it on their lists of wars and other organized conflicts.

I will discuss some very divergent views on what happened then. One reason they are so divergent is because the conflict of 1862 and its aftermath were extremely complex, with massacres on both sides, and with Indians working on both sides. Some whites fought to exterminate the Indians while others risked their lives to save them, and vice versa. Half-breeds of many kinds were caught in the middle, trying to survive a dramatic civilizational transformation occurring all around them. The result: In 1800, the territory now called Minnesota was 99%+ Indian, and by 1900 it was 99%+ whites of European descent.
Introduction

The Minnesota State Historical Society describes this conflict in the introduction to its large collection of related manuscripts (Ref. 1, page 7):

In 1862, Minnesota was still a young state, part of a frontier inhabited by more than one million Indians. Times were hard and Indian families hungry. When the U.S. government broke its promises, some of the Dakota Indians went to war against the white settlers. Many Dakota did not join in, choosing to aid and protect settlers instead. The fighting lasted six weeks and many people on both sides were killed or fled Minnesota. Former Minnesota Governor Henry Sibley led an expedition of soldiers and Dakota scouts against the Dakota warriors. The war ended on December 26, 1862, when thirty-eight Dakota Indians were hanged in Mankato in the largest mass execution in U.S. history. Afterwards the government forced most of the remaining Dakota to leave Minnesota. For white Minnesotans, their experience of blood and terror negated all promises they had made to the Dakota.

To many Dakota today, this was a case of outright genocide preceded by a trail of broken promises in treaties enacted by whites with no sense of honor. To many whites today, Native Americans of any kind are rare curiosities who run casinos (if they are lucky) or live in squalor on dirt-poor reservations if they are not lucky. These polar views are both enabled by selective forgetting of the real history that led to this day.

William Eckhardt (an ISCSC member) wrote about a “fading rate of history” in his superb “Civilizations, Empires and Wars: A Quantitative History of War” (Ref. 2, 1992). He discussed how this phenomenon of lost data complicates the quantitative study of war. A related problem for all scholars...
is selective memory, because the data lost most quickly are not random.

Genocides are especially likely to be "forgotten" quickly. The case I discuss below vividly illustrates some of the powerful social and psychological processes at work. It is not necessary for evil people to censor records. Shared assumptions, legalistic definitions, preoccupation with other topics and a dash of hubris are sufficient for this result. The fact that victors write histories and that the losers in this case relied on oral tradition is also significant.

Genocide is embarrassing to those with consciences, all the more so to people who claim to be very "Christian" or otherwise grounded in deep moral foundations. Shared assumptions that the people being replaced are not fully human, deserving of human rights (e.g., "savages"), or are not really being killed but are "just moving away," assist the process of genocide. Artful definitions of such key terms as "war," "murder," and "justice" can help some people to ignore genocides, just as others today ignore or rationalize torture as US policy. They do not have to be "bad" people, just "busy" people. "Manifest Destiny" was a vibrant idea in the United States of the mid-1800s, and millions of immigrants from Europe were being told to go west for opportunity (Ref. 3, 2006). Missionaries wanted to "civilize" the "heathen" by baptism into an entirely new way of life, and prevalent agrarian culture saw wilderness as land "wasted" on hunter-gatherers who produced little or nothing of commercial value.

Thus many North Americans chose to forget how a vast land was taken from others and thousands of highly literate people quietly, almost unconsciously, sanitized their records and textbooks. Although great historic detail remains available about what really happened (Ref. 4, 2005; Ref. 5,
2008), the dark parts of that reality were virtually forgotten within a century among the general culture.

The case I refer to is the living history of the State of Minnesota, one of 50 states in the United States of America. In 1800 CE this land was almost 100% Native Americans mainly of the Dakota and Ojibwe tribes, with a few French Canadian fur trappers and traders. By 1900, Native Americans constituted only 0.52% (half of one percent) of the official census (Ref. 6, 1999). By 1980, even the memory of Native American origins and history was almost gone, except for a plethora of Indian place names.

Not that the Indians were blameless. When this war began, some Indians ambushed hundreds of settlers, killing as many as 400 in the first few days; mainly farmers and families were scalped, raped or brutalized before they died. The spark was an argument among four young Indian hunters over a hen’s eggs near a tiny town called Acton. Two of these youths were later killed by their own Dakota people for bringing a vast disaster to their entire nation.

Years of encroachment by whites, loss of game, debts to traders, and many promises on paper not kept made even eggs worth fighting for. Dakota villages were already in a pre-war status, and a council decided that this was the moment to strike back against the scattered farms.

At only one point, from 1800 to 2000, did this process come close to a level of recorded violence required for the label “war.” To be war, “At least 1,000 deaths in one year due to organized, armed conflict involving at least one government” (Eckhardt, 1992) would be needed. That year was 1862, the year of the “Dakota Conflict,” the “Mankato Uprising” or the “U.S. Dakota War,” depending on who is labeling the affair. At least 600 whites lost their lives that fall, but estimates range as high as 800. The number of Indians
who died, probably larger, was not accurately counted. That is one example of the selective forgetting I refer to. The native deaths were not counted.

Some scholars would exclude this case for another reason, because the Indian tribes were not “sufficiently organized” to count as nation states. Those scholars’ definitions require participation by two governments instead of Eckhardt’s one. Thus by definition, the elimination of many indigenous peoples passed under the cognitive radar of many conventional war scholars. This definition, by the way, excludes most genocides, which are not considered “war.”

After their defeat in the fall of 1862, about 1600 surviving Indians, mostly women and children with some older men, were “interned” at the foot of Fort Snelling, which had been built from 1819–1827 to control this vast territory. Many modern Indians call this a concentration camp; whites just call it a camp if they know of it at all. But a picture from the day shows a high stockade wall and a very dense concentration of teepees (see below). About 10% died there that winter, many of measles and pneumonia, but a serious case can be made that they all would have been killed by enraged settlers had they not been guarded by soldiers. Certainly this was the opinion of Gen. Henry H. Sibley, who had defeated the fighters, gathered survivors, innocents, and “friendlies” and of Col. William R. Marshall who marched them 120 miles to Fort Snelling.

Some died during their forced march from areas near Fort Ridgely, where they were captured or gathered, and some were released to whites who vouched for them. Although 1,658 set out, 1,601 arrived; troops who guarded them recorded lethal attacks on the four-mile-long group near Henderson. However you interpret that, during that hard winter, 130-300 of the 1601 people interned died on the flat land below Fort Snelling.
Snelling because of trauma, malnourishment, and epidemic diseases in close quarters.

About 1,300 Indians survived and were shipped down the Mississippi River to St. Louis, where they were loaded onto a large ferry and shipped up the Missouri River to a Crow Creek reservation in South Dakota. About 300 more died there before they were moved again to a Santee reservation in Nebraska.

Every move went from more fertile to more barren land with harsher prospects for survival. About 400 captured Dakota men were separated from the women and children, and 392 were quickly tried. Of these, 303 were given death sentences, and 38 Dakota men ultimately were hanged simultaneously from an elaborate gallows in Mankato, Minnesota, USA, on the day after Christmas of 1862 in the largest single execution in U.S. history.
The distinction between “friendly” and hostile Indians deserves some discussion. The Dakota were divided about what to do, given that the white people were flooding into their land. First, they were organized into many different bands and tribes, which were not all of one mind. Second, some were already quite assimilated, called “cut hairs” by their “traditional” brethren, and were working farms growing potatoes, corn, and raising livestock. Others worked as scouts for the Army or local militias. Large numbers of “half-breeds” resulted from the previous century of almost exclusively male fur traders marrying Indian women.

In fact, when the original war parties of Dakota were formed, about half had to be impressed into service by their more aggressive cousins, by claims of their duty to a people who were near starvation as their land was depopulated of
game. Supplies promised by the Great White Father of the east (in return for land cessions) failed to arrive.

These distinctions were mostly lost in the chaos and fear of the first day. When the fighters were defeated just five or six weeks later, all visible Indians (about 2,050) were rounded up. Then 1,658 women, children and very elderly males were separated from 392 other male prisoners, who were quickly tried without access to counsel.

When President Lincoln saw this huge list of men condemned in one day by dubious processes, he decided to commute the sentences of those accused only of fighting, and sent the list back to determine who had allegedly raped or murdered outside of battles with the organized militia or units of the Army. Two were convicted of rape, and 36 others of varieties of murder. The rest were sentenced to hard time in a military prison camp in Iowa for fighting, and most served about four years, where another one-third died. But the rest were eventually returned to their families, who lived by then on the Santee Reservation in Nebraska.

Having lived among the Indians for over 20 years, Gen. Henry Sibley was well aware of the very mixed involvement of only some of the Indians now in his care, most of whom were innocent women and children. But he was also aware of the rage of the settler community and of the harshness of the coming winter, which would challenge feeding his own men and animals, not to mention such a large group of prisoners. Fearful they would all die, he resolved to protect them at the camp to be built at the base of Fort Snelling near St. Paul, Minnesota.

On Sept. 9, 1862 Governor Alexander Ramsey had declared that “The Sioux Indians of Minnesota must be exterminated or driven forever beyond the borders of the state.” In 1863 he put a $25 bounty on the scalp of any
Indian killed by settlers. That was a lot of money in those days. At one point the bounty was raised to $75, and when a farmer shot an Indian man with his son, eating raspberries, he received a record $500; later it was discovered that the man was “Little Crow,” a Dakota chief. How many bounties were collected during this period is unclear, but a senior historian from the Minnesota History Center suggests quite a low number (7, 2005). It remains probable to me that many other Indians were killed by individual settlers for years thereafter, just as they were killed further west. Certainly the decision was made to remove all Dakota Indians from the state of Minnesota, and military expeditions were organized for that purpose.

Organized campaigns kept some records, but this is where the issue of recorded killings versus quiet deaths becomes quite important. Some Indians were undoubtedly killed as one might kill a coyote, to preserve one’s chickens, or as a wolf or bear, to protect one’s children. They had been banished from the new state of Minnesota due to the savage war and the authorities had declared them fair game for extermination.

Now pay attention, dear reader, because this is important and the phenomenological heart of the paper. Indians were killed like vermin, pests, or dangerous animals in the wild west of America for years—for generations actually, if you look further west. Not in large, organized campaigns of armies recorded as wars, but in single episodes repeated thousands of times in remote areas all over our American west. My own grandfather participated in this, as did many others. I have known it to happen even in the gentle Minnesota of the late 1900s. But this aspect was not talked about much, nor often recorded in official histories. You won’t find these stories on modern tourist brochures or in any museum display. Yes,
many Indians died of starvation and disease when driven to barren lands or confined in prisons. But many others were quietly murdered, one "savage" at a time by individual settlers or angry soldiers.

Such murders would soon be forgotten, except by the families ravaged. Politicians in Washington D.C. were much more concerned with the Civil War, which killed more American citizens than any conflict, before or since.

They were interested, for example, in repopulating the abandoned farms of western Minnesota to grow food for a hungry Union Army. The wars with the Dakota (more commonly called the Sioux by Europeans) would continue for many years thereafter, driving them ever further west. Later many of these same politicians would conclude that the long term "solution to the Indian problem" would be a formal program of forced assimilation for those who did not flee west to the Dakota and Montana territories, or north to Canada.

The Pre-War Period, 1492-1862.

Everyone in America knows that Christopher Columbus sailed the Atlantic and found "the New World" in 1492. Not everyone remembers that he actually discovered the island of Hispaniola (current home of Haiti and the Dominican Republic) where within about 50 years the native Arawak Indians were rendered extinct by excessive service as slaves. That aspect is vividly recorded in the annals of Bartolomé de las Casas (1484-1566) (Ref. 8, 1552). Once again, the joy of discovery by Europeans got much more press than deadly consequences for the previous residents.

One of the few constants was large-scale immigration from Europe, driven by European population pressure, religious and social repression, and war. This process was
barely slowed by the American Revolution, and as the young nation grew, it also sent its surplus population westward. This demographic pressure was as important as any legal factor or recorded battle of hundreds of "Indian Wars," most too small to list on the scales noted earlier.

About 2.3 million people immigrated to the United States in the decade of the 1860s alone, along with 3% annual growth rates among the resident population. This 3% growth doubles in 23 years, even without new immigration. All those new people did not migrate to Minnesota, but it was on the frontier. A tidal wave of people seeking opportunity was encouraged to "go west" in 1862, where the land was free and opportunity abundant.

Demographic pressure in Minnesota was tiny in 1800, but it became major by the mid-1800s. One key moment was the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, when President Jefferson bought 828,000 square miles of Indian-occupied lands between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains. He purchased this from France, of course, not the Indians.

In late fall of 1805, Army Lt. Zebulon Pike encamped with two groups of Indians on a mile-long island where the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers converge, now called Pike's Island. He had been sent to find the source of the Mississippi River and to get a treaty signed. He traded small goods valued at $200 and "perpetual hunting rights" for signatures from these two small groups on a paper that ceded control of 100,000 acres along these rivers to the U.S. government (Ref. 9, 1806). The fact that the Indians did not read English, understand contracts or the concept of ownership of land, and that the two groups encamped on a river in no way represented the entire Dakota people much less the Ojibwe to the north, was ignored. Lt. Pike did not have to be a 'bad man' to do this; he was just an officer with
a mission to fulfill, which he did. He got his “X’s” on his paper and went home the next spring.

Fourteen to twenty years later, Fort Snelling was constructed about 75 feet up on a bluff to control this vital junction, with a commanding view of both rivers. It was so well built with such impressive crossfires of cannon in all directions that no battle was ever fought there. But it became headquarters for development of the Minnesota Territory. Ultimately, in 1862-3, it overlooked the miserable deaths of hundreds of Indians just a few feet away on the flat banks of the river bottom, while food, blankets, and other stores were stockpiled above.

To the white soldiers and settlers, 1862 was just a footnote in a much longer history of western expansion, and the big notes of that year for historians were certainly Civil War notes.

Another major development in 1862 was passage of the “Homestead Act,” which opened much of the west to claims by pioneer settlers, making available 160 acres of free land if developed, and more if desired, at $1.25 per acre. In Minnesota, that same land had been purchased at 7.5 cents per acre from the Dakota in two 1851 Treaties on the promise of annual annuities. To the Dakota, 1862 was the end of living and the beginning of survival, survival of only a wretched fragment of the whole peoples who had lived there before with cultures and traditions of their own.

The War, Uprising, Conflict, or Rebellion (Depending on Who Labels These Lethal Events)

I will begin with a fairly standard summary of this six-week war. First, it was preceded by a crop failure in 1861 and a very harsh winter of 1861-62. The Treaties signed in 1851 (Traverse des Sioux, and Mankato) had ceded vast areas from
Indian to U.S. government ownership in return for annual annuities and food. But now, rather than occupying half of modern Minnesota, the Dakota were left with a reservation 10 miles on either side of 150 miles of the Minnesota River (reduced by half in 1858).

But the U.S. was at war with itself in 1862, the annuities came late, and what food there was remained locked in warehouses waiting for arrival of the gold to pay for it. Game was gone, many Dakota were starving, and they noticed white men heading south for the Civil War.

The Department of Indian Affairs was widely seen as the most corrupt in the entire government (by whites as well as by Indians) and many people took graft before crumbs appeared at Indian tables. The mood was already dark.

Then, in the tiny town of Acton, four young hunters went to steal eggs from a farm; a dispute erupted and one killed the farmer. Within minutes, three white men, the farmer’s wife, and a girl of 15, lay dead. A spark had been set to dry tinder and the war parties among the divided Dakota decided this was the time to strike to save their way of life. They forced others to go along, and soon every farmer for miles around was in danger.

Surviving settlers flooded into the towns of New Ulm, Mankato, and St. Peter. Militias were quickly organized. The Third Minnesota Volunteers, some of whom had already fought with the Union Army at war, were dispatched to defeat the Indians, who were seen as entirely at fault and barbaric in the way they ambushed innocent farmers.

Many immigrant farmers did not have guns, so they were in special jeopardy. But many settlers in Indian country did have guns to hunt, to deal with bears and wolves, and the whole repertoire of dangers that certainly included uncertainty when it came to the Native Americans. Deaths
at the hand of the Army were often recorded; deaths by individual encounters with settlers usually not.

A contemporary Dakota and honors student at one of our universities, Scott DeMuth (Ref. 10, 2007), puts the same story a bit more pungently, but his version is consistent with documentaries produced by our public television station in 1992 and 1996 (Refs. 11; 12). DeMuth writes:

The Dakota Uprising of 1862... began with the Treaty of Traverse de Sioux and the Treaty of Mendota in 1851. These treaties, which were signed by a few Dakota men intoxicated by whisky, ceded vast amounts of Dakota territory to the United States. The treaty guaranteed the Dakota money, food, goods, and a twenty-mile wide reservation along a 150-mile stretch of the Minnesota River. The treaty became null and void after promised compensation was either never given or stolen by officials in the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

When Minnesota was declared a state in 1858, representatives of several bands of Dakota, including Chief Taoyateduta [Little Crow], traveled to Washington D.C. to make further negotiations. The negotiations resulted in the Dakota losing the northern half of the reservation along the Minnesota River along with rights and access to the sacred Pipestone quarry [in far Southwestern Minnesota]. The ceded land was quickly split up into several townships and farmland for settlers. This resulted in the wild prairies, forest, and wild lands used for traditional lifeways, being destroyed. Traditional lifeways were so devastated by colonial settlement that Dakota people in south and western Minnesota had to sell fur pelts to make a living.

Payments guaranteed by treaties were never made. The animal populations that had supported Dakota communities were nearly wiped out. Land was being stolen by the United
States government and occupied by settlers. Additionally, broken treaties, food shortages, and famine all added to growing tensions.

On August 8, 1862, representatives of the Sisseton and Wahpeton bands of Dakota successfully negotiated for food in the Upper Sioux Agency. However, the Wahpekute and Mdewakanton Dakota turned to the Lower Sioux Agency with the same demands and were denied food. Indian Agent and State Senator Thomas Galbraith would not distribute the food without payment, and lead trader Andrew Myrick responded to the Dakota by stating, “So far as I’m concerned, if they are hungry, let them eat grass.”

Three days later, Andrew Myrick was found dead, grass stuffed in his mouth. Chief Taoyateduta had led a band of warriors to attack settlers in the Lower Sioux Agency. Food stores were taken and several buildings were burned to the ground. A militia that was sent to suppress the uprising ended up suffering 44 casualties and losing the Battle of Redwood Ferry. The Dakota band continued to attack the settlement and New Ulm and then mounted an attack against Fort Ridgley on August 22.

[Many details of battles excerpted here] The fighting lasted over six weeks. Most of the major fighting occurred at the Battle of Wood Lake in September, where Taoyateduta attempted to ambush soldiers of the Third Minnesota Regiment marching along the Minnesota River. The soldiers returned fire and were quickly aided by other soldiers from Sibley’s camp. The fight lasted two hours with the Dakota warriors suffering heavy losses. This would be the last major battle fought in the Dakota War of 1862.

Dakota warriors ended up surrendering at Camp Release on September 26. Six weeks later, 303 Dakota prisoners were convicted of rape and murder and sentenced to death.”
This concludes DeMuth’s description of the war. The attitude of surviving settlers is best captured by some quotes from Corrine Monjeau-Marz’s book about the internment camp (Ref. 7, 2005, pages 28-29). In a letter from Rev. John Williamson to his missionary board:

Perhaps it is not best for me to express it in writing, but I will say, I do not consider that any human court has the right to inflict personal punishment on any one for the sin of some of his race—hence I detest the avowed determination of perhaps a majority of the citizens of this State that they will never rest till the [Indian] race is exterminated by war or sent to a hangman’s or Napoleon’s grave.... On the other hand I am thankful that the Lord has inclined Gen. Sibley to do them as much justice as he had.... It has been in the heart of many to murder the Indians—men, women, and children without discrimination. So far they have been restrained.

Finally, on page 69 Ms. Marz records her opinion about the internment and subsequent exile:

These Dakota, a population of innocent women, children and men would experience horrors associated with government corruption and abandonment but it would be after leaving the Fort Snelling encampment in May of 1863. Destitution, starvation, and debasement were the appalling hallmarks of the 1863-1866 Crow Creek Agency site (at Fort Thompson, Dakota Territory), a true concentration camp and hell on earth.

Exile, More Death, and Forced Assimilation

The Indians were thoroughly defeated at the Battle of Wood Lake on September 23, 1962, the war was over. The 23 counties in southwestern Minnesota had been depopulated of settlers fleeing the raids, but the Indians were driven back
and the aftermath had barely begun. As noted earlier, about 2,050 Dakota were divided into two groups, 392 men held for trial and 1,658 others who were marched to Fort Snelling to be interned, of whom 1,601 arrived. Perhaps 5-6,000 other Dakota fled north to Canada along the Red River or west to the unorganized Dakota Territories. There were continuing skirmishes and raids from the west, but the war in Minnesota was over.

The white population was very vocal about wanting the Indians either exterminated or driven from the entire state of Minnesota. Their will was expressed by the Commander of the Northwest, Major General John Pope (Commanding Officer of Lt. General Henry Sibley), who said: "It is my purpose utterly to exterminate the Sioux if I have the power to do so, and even if it requires a campaign lasting the whole of next year. Destroy everything belonging to them and force them out to the plains, unless as I suggest, you can capture them. They are to be treated as maniacs or wild beasts, and by no means as people with whom treaties or compromise can be made." (Ref. 13, 1862).

A line of forts was established along the western borders of Minnesota to Canada; while there were continued skirmishes and raids, the main episodes of future fighting would occur further west. At one point Indians were "given" the Black Hills of western South Dakota for their next home in perpetuity. The hills could not be farmed and were framed by badlands that were equally unproductive. Their tenure lasted until gold was discovered in the Black Hills in the 1870s.

Most surviving Dakota today live on some of the poorest reservations in America, Devil's Lake in North Dakota and Sisseton-Wahpeton in South Dakota. One tiny band was blessed in later years to own an urban casino (Mystic Lake,
owned by the Shakopee Mdewakanton band) so those fewer than 200 enrolled members now earn about a half-million dollars each per year in proceeds from that successful business.

In 1876 General George Custer achieved lasting fame by losing the only pitched battle between a substantial Army force and the Indians of the west, commonly called Custer’s last stand. It was actually the Dakota and Lakota Sioux’s last stand (the Lakota were the plains tribe, whose life depended on the buffalo, which were by then 98% gone). The last large conflict involving Lakota was the misnamed “Battle at Wounded Knee” 14 years later (Dec. 29, 1890), when more than 300 men, women and children were killed in a chaotic massacre on their way to surrender at the Pine Ridge Reservation.

The 1900 census records the population of Minnesota as 1,751,394 white (99.18%), 9,182 Indians of all tribes (.52%, most Ojibwe of the north) and 5,276 ‘other colored’ (.30%). Thus did a vast land go from over 99% Indian to over 99% white in just one century.

Missionaries first arrived in Minnesota in 1834, but they became instruments of government policy in the 1870s when missionary schools were established to “Christianize” the Indians. In 1887 the Federal government passed the Dawes Act (or General Allotment Act), which declared that each cooperative Indian head of household would get 160 acres of land and be taught how to farm it properly. The fact that those acres could not be cultivated, were often badlands was overlooked. But the need to turn hunter-gatherers into farmers was not (Ref. 12).

Much attention was focused on getting the Indian children into boarding schools run by missionaries, to keep them separated from their parents for nine months each year. Here
they were forbidden to use their native languages. Children who returned said they could not speak the Dakota language because it was illegal, Satan’s language, and that they would be punished severely. Even on the reservations, powwows had to be held secretly and rituals such as the Sun Dance, Vision Quests, and sweat lodges were done clandestinely. In fact, the massacre at Wounded Knee was prompted partly by
an effort to stamp out a mystic Ghost Dance, which had been the last gasp of the medicine men to maintain power over their dying culture.

By 1934 in a moment of reform, the now Bureau of Indian Affairs recognized that eradication of Indian languages was not really necessary for the education of Indian peoples and this policy was officially abandoned. But most of the damage had already been done.

Conclusions

Opposing views on this century of history in and around the state of Minnesota are clear. One camp including many (but by no means all) surviving Dakota is that this was a genocide, started by land theft, usurious lending, and broken treaties, crystallized by the war of 1862, and consolidated by banishment to barren lands and policies of cultural destruction that separated families, eradicated language and forced Indians to farm instead of hunt. The other camp including many (but by no means all) whites viewed the uprising of 1862 as entirely treacherous, unjustified, and characterized by barbaric slaughter of hundreds of innocent farmers and their wives and children. The vengeance the Indians harvested was richly deserved, according to this view.

Both views focus on blame, and much of the written record focuses on battles, maneuvers, and personalities of the day (after whom a great many of the counties, towns and streets of Minnesota are named). For a moment, I want to step back from these perspectives and take a quick and simpler view of what happened. Consider these data:

- The last buffalo seen in Minnesota was seen in 1830.
In 1849, a census related to organizing the Minnesota Territory in preparation for a bid for statehood listed 4,535 white resident, about one third of whom were mixed race (French/Canadian Indian residents of the colony of Pembina in the far northwest), far outside the area of the Dakota conflict.

In 1850, the first formal U.S. census was conducted which listed 6,077 white resident, and the U.S. Department of Indian Affairs estimated 31,700 Indians by tribe, of whom 21,500 were varieties of Dakota.

A pre-statehood census in 1857 showed a territorial population of 150,037 (white), an increase of 2,469% from just seven years earlier.

On May 11, 1858, Minnesota became the 32nd state of the USA.

The 1860 federal census showed 172,023 white residents, an increase of 14.7% in three years. The Indian population by then was down to about 18,000, a drop of 43% from just 10 years earlier.

Approximately 1,000 steamboats were landing at St. Paul each year during this tumultuous time, most bringing immigrants seeking opportunity as well as the goods and guns to fuel a vast expansion.

So, a hunter gatherer culture was basically overwhelmed and replaced by an agrarian culture with better weapons and vastly more people.

In the summary of Rhoda Gilman of the Minnesota Historical Society (14, 1999) in “How Minnesota Became the 32nd State” in Making Minnesota Territory: 1849–1858:

By 1854 the Euro-American population of the territory was more than 30,000, and just three years later it topped 150,000.
Later, Ms. Gilman characterizes this period of dramatic change.

The nine territorial years had set the stage for transforming the natural and cultural landscapes of the upper Mississippi country into those of a "civilized" Euro-American community. The undisturbed systems of plant and animal life that Americans called "wilderness" were converted into commodities subject to ownership and exchange. A way of life that regarded them as eternal and necessary for human existence was ruthlessly eliminated. As a result, the scene was also prepared for the tragic drama that drenched Minnesota's western prairies in blood when the Dakota made a last desperate effort to take back their country in 1862. (Ref. 14, page 19)

Civilizationalists should take note that the concept of "civilization" was a driving force during this period. The Europeans and descendents thereof were there to "civilize" a continent seen as wasted on unproductive savages. This was the age of "Manifest Destiny" and beliefs like this were more public in an era of agrarian racism, untempered by the civil rights movements to come. One of the great ironies of the moment was that the largest execution in American history (38 Dakota on December 26, 1862) occurred within one week of the Emancipation Proclamation, which legally freed the slaves in the South (January 1, 1863).

It is certainly possible to become overly romantic about Indians. They were not saints; they warred with each other often then, and fight among each other now. The Dakota were traditional enemies of the Ojibwe, who lived to the north, and as many as a third of the men died violent deaths of one kind or another, according to a pioneer doctor who lived with and observed them for 40 years.
Once alcohol was introduced, alcoholism became rampant among native people. This contributed to the depression and despair of youth, who lacked role-models they had known before the white men came and the game disappeared. Some Indians adopted western ways more willingly than others, especially when they saw the benefits of civilization: stable food sources, warmer homes, and medicines that sometimes worked. Even today, many Native Reservations are very rough places to raise a family, with high rates of violence, alcoholism and poverty and low rates of education and employment.

None of that justified the betrayals of treaties and robbery by agents that characterized the mid-1800s in this area. But in the final analysis, demographics seems the key rather than who was most to blame. In the end the Indians were overwhelmed by a high-birthrate agrarian culture. I am utterly amazed by this case of civilizational encounter as I learn about the history of ground I walk on daily. So I will close with one last thought from the Dakota language. When the ISCS came to the University of St. Thomas for its 35th annual meeting in 2005, I hung a banner to welcome attendees. It said “Mitakuye Oyas ‘in,” which means “We are all relatives” in the language of the Dakota people. That is a thought to ponder on a fragile planet with pressing needs, plenty of ethnic conflict, and nuclear weapons all about.

References


10. “The Struggle is Our Inheritance: A History of Radical Minnesota,” published in July, 2007 by the Jack Pine Community Center on Lake Street in Minneapolis, MN. Pages 4-8 were written by Scott DeMuth, on “The Dakota Uprising of 1862.”


15. Photo references can be found at the archives of the Minnesota Historical Society http://collections.mnh.org/visualresources/search.cfm?bhcp=1 or at other sites maintained by Native American groups, or at the Twin Cities Public Television site which preserved some of the digital photos used during their 1996 documentary at: http://archive.tpt.org/dakota/images/

Endnotes

1 The number of Indians who died during this war will forever remain uncertain. Two meticulous historians claim this was fewer than 100, but also note that Indians customarily removed their dead from battle grounds, and if the body was not found by whites it was not counted. Only 16 Indian deaths are recorded from the battle of Wood Lake, for example where the largest engagement with the best organized regular Army forces occurred. Oral history relayed by Scott DeMuth here later claims their casualties were “very high” but gives no numbers. Written records trump oral histories among scholars.

2 300 is the most widely cited number, but estimates go as low as 130 according to two historians (7, 2005). Both rely on
daily counts at the Fort used to check out rations. That number is contradicted by other estimators, like the physician who dealt with many illnesses and deaths, and other testimonies. The real number will never be known, but since 1601 arrived and “about” 1300 left, 300 is cited most often.

A housekeeper, for example, would be lucky to get $5 per month for hard labor cleaning, cooking and doing an entire wealthier household’s laundry by hand as well as, of course, her own.

Editor’s note: Both money and goods were often sent by Washington D.C., but stolen by middle men including especially the traders authorized to trade with the various Indian groups. Traders were also encouraged to indebted Indians in various ways, and some took liberties with arithmetic.