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About 5000 words

THE ORDEAL OF HINHANKAGA

as told to

F. J. Patten

By Clem Felix, Hinhankaga's Grandson

Editor's note:

Many accounts relate the experiences of whites who participated in the terrifying events of the Great Sioux Uprising: the massacre of settlers; the battles of Fort Ridgely, New Ulm, Birch Cooley and Wood Lake (all in southern Minnesota) and the rescue of the prisoners of the Sioux at Camp Release (near Montevideo, Minnesota.)

But we know of none, other than this, from the point of view of the many mixed bloods, part white, part Indian, who participated in that stubborn conflict and fought as comrades with the "blue-coat" soldiers.

Hinhankaga (The Owl,) as he was called by the Sioux, was a son of Pierre Coursolle, who was pure French. His mother was pure Sioux, a member of the Wakanga (Sweetgrass) family. Hinhankaga's English name was Joe and he was employed as a clerk at the Lower Sioux Agency on the Minnesota river, 100 miles southwest of St. Paul, Minnesota, when the Indians hit the warpath.

Hinhankaga enlisted in Captain Joe Anderson's Mounted Men at Fort Ridgely and fought with the whites during the long campaigns that followed. He died on a reservation at Niobrara, Nebraska, where many of the Sioux were moved from <sup>Mi</sup> Minnesota following the uprising.

Denais Felix's name appears on the roster of Company A, 6th Minnesota, as "Dana" Felix. He served until the Regiment was mustered out of service. He received his discharge August 19, 1865, just three years and one day after his enlistment.

Hinhankaga's grandson, Clem Felix, lives at Prior Lake, Minnesota. Incidentally, Clem was cited for bravery for an incident of World War I that occurred on Oct. 14, 1918, in the Meuse-Argonne. It was Clem who related the story of his grandfather.

Jerry Patten, father of the writer, was a member of Company H Sixth Minnesota, and participated in some of the campaigns with Hinhankaga. He was among the troops at Camp Release when the prisoners were rescued. Jerry related many of his own experiences to his son and his narrations agreed, in all essential respects, with the account of Hinhankaga. He knew Denais Felix casually.

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During the whole of the night - I shall never forget the date, August 18, 1862, - a strange foreboding kept sleep away. Marie, my fair-skinned French-Sioux wife, lay still beside me but I knew that she, too, was awake. Cistina Joe (Little Joe) my son, nine days old, kicked in his crib. My slender, black-eyed girls, Elizabeth, six, and Minnie, four, breathed quietly. Duta, my red setter, rumbled low growls outside the open door. Something was out of place, but what could it be?

The night was hot and sticky. From the village of Little Crow, two miles up the valley, I could hear tom-toms throbbing. But that often happened and this familiar sound could not have put that anxious feeling in my stomach.

Suddenly a light hand touched my shoulder. "Sh-h-h, Hinhankaga, be still. I am a friend." I had heard no one enter the room. Why Duta had not challenged her I do not know. "Sh-h-h," she continued, whispering in Sioux, "big trouble coming. Tomorrow warriors kill all whites. Go, now, before too late. Tell no one I warned you or I, too, will die." Then she slipped away as silently as she had come.

In spite of the heat, shivers ran up my back. "Does she speak true?" I thought. "The Indians are angry. The gold annuity payment is late. There is hunger in the lodges. I have heard the men asking for food at Trader Merrick's store, promising to pay when the money comes. But they have been my friends for years. My French father married a Sioux woman. I am as much Indian as white. Surely they will not kill. Still, if there be no danger why have I been warned? No, I must take no risk. We will go at once



to Fort Ridgely where the white soldiers live.

Daylight was growing and Cistina Joe was awake. We shook Elizabeth and Minnie and they quickly dressed. I carried baby Joe, and Marie carried food in a blanket. Duta we shut in the cabin so he could not betray us to the warriors by his barking.

Quickly we ran down the path to my dug-out canoe at the river. The canoe was too small to carry all and I worried about leaving Elizabeth and Minnie for a second crossing but there was nothing else I could do.

All was still and a few strokes carried Cistina and Marie to the north shore. Just as we landed my heart jumped into my throat as I heard the scuffling of moccasins coming down the trail.

"Elizabeth and Minnie," I called softly across the narrow river. "Quick! Hide in the bushes!" Marie carried the baby and we crawled into a plum thicket.

Four Indians came down the path, single file. I did not know them. They were from a village farther up the valley. I was thankful when they passed the hiding girls, turned to the right and trotted down the river trail.

When they were gone I listened but heard no others coming. But soon rifle shots exploded at the Agency and war whoops filled the air.

Believing Minnie and Elizabeth to be safe I waited until all seemed clear, then paddled the canoe again across the river.

Elizabeth and Minnie were gone! My heart turned to stone. How frightened they must be! I must find them!

Up and down the river bank I ran but no trace of them could I find. Perhaps friendly Indians from the Agency had taken them to their lodge. Up the bluff I crawled through the brush and trees. Duta caught my scent and came bounding to me leaping and barking with joy. "Oh," I thought, "the Indians will hear him and find me. Then they will kill me, and Elizabeth and Minnie will have no one to save them."

I was forced to do the cruelest task of my life. I slipped off my belt and pulled it tight around Duta's neck. Tears ran from my eyes as I felt him struggle for breath. Finally he was dead. I knelt down, took his head in my lap and ~~whispered~~ <sup>whispered</sup> "Forgive me Duta, forgive me."

I searched for hours. Our cabin was gone. Smoke still came from its ashes. Other buildings at the Agency were burned. I saw many dead men, scalped and tomahawked with brains oozing out of their skulls. I saw Andrew Merrick dead, his mouth stuffed with grass. The Agency ruins were deserted. There was no one there to give me word of my little girls. How I dreaded to go back and tell Marie.

"Are they dead?" she whispered as she saw me coming alone. "I Don't know. I couldn't find them. But I saw no bodies of women or girls so I think they are alive."

"No one came while you were away," said Marie, "but there were many gun shots and much yelling down the river. I think there was a battle and the Indians won."

"I'll never give up until I find them," I said. "But first I must get you and Cistina Joe to the Fort." There was still yelling but no shooting down the river so I said, "If there was a battle and the Indians won, now is the time to go - while they are scalping the dead and celebrating their victory."

The battle noise Marie heard down the river, I learned later, was the ambush of Captain Marsh's company at the ferry crossing to the Agency.

We started down the government road to Fort Ridgely keeping out of sight in the brush and trees. Soon an army ambulance came up behind us, the horses running at top speed. I stepped into the road and the driver whoaed the team to a halt. In the ambulance was a wounded soldier. Marie climbed in with Cistina Joe and I ran behind as the horses again broke into a gallop. When my wind played out I jumped in too. No Indians appeared and we reached Fort Ridgely without mishap. It was comforting to feel the safety of the Fort but how our hearts ached for Minnie and Elizabeth.



I went with Marie and Cistina Joe to the barracks reserved for women. There Marie met many women with more reason for crying than she -- women who had seen their husbands and their boys tomahawked and scalped. I stayed with her until she was given her place to sleep on a mattress on the floor.

Marie and I were worried about Cistina Joe. His body was hot and his face was flushed.

Leaving Marie I hurried to the office of Captain Joe Anderson who was recruiting for his Mounted Company. Here I signed up and was appointed a corporal on the spot.

The Fort was buzzing with preparations for defense against an attack from Little Crow, expected any moment. I grabbed a shovel and began digging dirt for barricades with the others. Day and night the work never stopped but every time I could get away, even for a minute, I ran to the refugee barracks to see Marie and my tiny boy. Every time I went he seemed weaker than before.

No Sioux came the next day but the following morning they rode up, circling the Fort out of range of our muskets. Then we saw dismounted warriors, naked except for headbands and breech clouts crawling toward the Fort from the ravines and the woods. At a shouted signal from the chiefs they attacked from every side, rushing at us with screaming yells. Arrows and bullets whizzed above our heads as we returned their fire.

A flaming arrow stuck in the shingles of the officers quarters and a blaze started to spread.

"Corporal Coursolle," shouted Captain Anderson, "climb up on that roof and chop out the fire!"

"Every Indian bow and gun will be shooting just at me," I thought. My legs felt wobbly but up the ladder I went, two rungs at a time. Bullets and arrows whistled past my head. Never did an axe swing faster than mine as I whacked out the fire. The ladder was too slow; I rolled off the roof

and landed with a grunt on the soft top of an earthwork wall. I thought there would be more holes in me than a sieve. But I didn't have a scratch. They were bum shots.

Most of the time we stopped their charges with musket fire but when they bunched up thick we let 'em have it with a cannon and they ran as though the devil was chasing them.

After a few charges that day they gave up and crawled away, dragging their dead warriors back to the horses.

No Indians appeared the next day and we worked feverishly at the defenses piling up stones, logs, bags of feed, hunks of sod - anything we could get our hands on that would stop lead and arrows.

We were mustered in early on the morning of August 22 and right after the ceremony I hurried to the refugee barracks. When I saw Marie fear almost stopped my heart from beating. She led me to her corner of the room and turned back a blanket covering a tiny body. Our baby Joe had closed his eyes forever.

There was no time for mourning. I ran to the carpenter shop where I picked up a small box with a cover. I hurried with the box to the post cemetery, dug a little grave and fitted the tiny coffin in the opening. Then I wrapped my son in a blanket and carried him in my arms to the grave. Marie and the Chaplain walked with me. Gently I lay my baby boy to sleep while the Chaplain said a prayer. Marie and I wept as I held her in my arms.

Then we heard war cries of the Sioux and the rattle of rifle fire. Hastily I kissed my heart-broken wife and raced to the barricades to take my place in the battle.

There were many more warriors in this attack than there were in the first battle. There seemed to be thousands. They were ten to our one ~~and~~ and we knew we must stop them or every person in the Fort would be killed - except the women. And we knew they would rather die than face the fate of prisoners.



*the Sioux*  
Suddenly ~~they~~ rushed toward us, painted and screaming.

One big brave came straight at me. "Maybe you are the one who took my girls," I thought. I took careful aim and muttered, "Take that!" as I pulled the trigger. But I am not sure I hit him.

The first wave of charging Sioux couldn't face our fire. They broke and ran pell-mell back to the forest. Again and again we heard the chiefs urging them back to the battle but each time they rushed they lost their nerve. On one charge they were only twenty feet away and we braced for bayonet fighting. But Lt. Sheehan and his squad pulled a cannon to our position and fired a howitzer right into their faces. Again they panicked and ran howling out of range.

That stopped the attacks for a long spell but in the late afternoon we could see them bunching up in an open area southwest of the Fort. This coming charge, I knew, would be "for keeps." My scalp tightened and the palms of my hands were wet with sweat.

In addition to the twelve pound howitzers we had one twenty-four pounder held in reserve for an emergency. The Indians didn't know we had this secret weapon.

In previous attacks the Sioux had rushed the Fort from all sides. This time they were consolidating for one grand, overwhelming charge.

The gunners placed two twelve-pounders and the twenty-four pounder to meet the assault. The big gun they loaded with a double charge of canister.

The rallying point of the Sioux was in range of the artillery but Little Crow didn't know how far our guns would carry. At the instant the Indians joined forces, all three cannons roared. The shells tore great holes in the ranks of the warriors and the crashing boom of the twenty-four pounder rumbled and echoed up and down the river bluffs. The Indians skedaddled and the fighting was over.

During one of the earlier charges a soldier who ~~was running~~ *ran* across an open space between the Fort buildings was struck by an Indian bullet. A young fellow, fighting next to me, ran out from shelter, picked him up and brought him back to the firing line. The rescuer was a member of Company A, Sixth Minnesota, cool-headed and a crack shot. His name was Denais Felix and I took a real shine to him.

All the time, day and night, Marie and I were driven nearly frantic by our concern for Minnie and Elizabeth. Were they hungry? Were they cold? Were they mistreated? Were they alive? Were they DEAD?

"At last the Fort is safe," I thought. "Now I must find them."

"What can you do alone?" asked Captain Joe when I asked permission to go. "Get killed, that's all. And what good would that do? We need every man. Soon Sibley will come with many more soldiers. Then we will catch Little Crow and find your daughters."

It was six days before Sibley came and every hour a torture for *[MARIE]* Minnie and me. Four days more dragged by after he arrived with hundreds of troops. But at last Sibley ordered the Rangers and Company A of the Sixth to scout the country, bury dead settlers, the ambushed members of Company B of the Fifth at the Agency ferry, and search for survivors. I was glad Company A of the Sixth was going along; Denais Felix would be a good man to have by my side.

Marie came to see us off. "Don't worry," I told her as confidently as I could, "I will bring them back."

The things we saw that day were too terrible to describe. Scattered along the road and at burned cabins we found the bodies of settlers, mostly men and boys. Fifty we buried before reaching the ferry. There the most gruesome sight of all awaited us. On the road lay the bodies of thirty-three young men, most of them in two files where they fell when the Sioux fired from almost point-blank range - killed in their tracks without returning a shot. All had been scalped and the uniforms had been stripped from their bodies. We dug at a furious pace in our haste to conceal the fearful sight.



We moved back from the ferry to make our camp. It seemed an endless night, thinking of our dead comrades so near at hand and the way our own bodies would look if the Sioux returned. I was gripped in an agony of fear as I pictured my black-eyed little girls in the hands of these blood-crazed warriors. But I was helped by one ray of hope. We had seen no bodies of little girls. Had Elizabeth and Minnie been spared?

As we moved out in the morning we crossed Birch Cooley creek. Here I saw small piles of knnikinick branches from which the bark had been freshly shaved. I also saw fresh footprints in the sand. I knew the Indians used kinnikinick to wad their guns. I often used it myself. It worked better than paper. I was sure the Indians were not far away.

We followed the valley a few miles west, then climbed the bluff to the prairie road that led to the settlement of Beaver Falls. It was another day of horror; burying putrid bodies exposed for ten days in the August sun.

That night we camped on the west bluff of Birch Cooley creek, on an open prairie not far back from the steep, wooded ravine.

I guess we were all scared of the Indians. I know I was. So I told my sergeant about the knnikinick and the fresh tracks I had noticed that morning on the banks of the creek a mile or so downstream. I asked him to give this information to Captain Grant who was in command. But instead of reporting to Grant he reported to "Major" Brown. Brown wasn't an officer. He had come with us to look for missing relatives and friends. He had been an agent in charge of a government supply post and all such agents were called "Major."

"Don't worry about Indians," said Brown, "there are none within a hundred miles. You're just as safe as if you were home in your own beds!"

I had seen nobody all that day who could give me news of Elizabeth and Minnie and I was tormented with worry when I crawled under a wagon to sleep. We were dog tired, but in spite of "Major" Brown's assurance, many of us, mostly those with Sioux blood, dug shallow holes to lie in. These little holes saved the lives of many!

The history books say the first shot of the battle was fired the next morning by a sentry who thought he saw a wolf slipping through the prairie grass.

That is not the way it started. My friend Desjeuner, who was part Indian like myself, was on duty and he told me what happened. "I saw something move. I looked close and saw an Indian kneeling with an arrow fixed to his bow. I thought 'I never have killed a man. I hate to kill a man now but if I don't kill him he will kill me.' So I shot him in the head."

Other heads stuck up out of the grass and another sentry fired. Then hundreds of half-naked Sioux leaped to their feet and rushed toward the wagons surrounding the camp, yelling and shooting.

Most of us were asleep when the firing started and for a time we didn't know what was happening. Some men stood up to form a firing line but soon flopped down on their bellies like the rest. All of us had turned in for the night with muskets loaded so we returned the fire before the warriors reached the wagons. We saw Indians fall. Soon all of them dropped to their knees and scampered away on hands and knees through the waving grass. Hurrah! We had turned back their surprise attack! They had planned to kill us all while we slept.

There were nearly a hundred horses on the picket ropes and many of them were hit by the first volley the Indians fired. Some dropped dead and others broke loose and galloped terror-stricken in the wagon enclosure. The warriors had poured in such a <sup>U</sup>nderous fire that all horses but one soon were killed. We used their bodies as barricades. The unscathed horse seemed to have a charmed life and we clung to a faint hope that somebody might mount him and dash through the besieging braves to ~~summon~~ relief from Fort Ridgely. But the Indians ~~had~~ concentrated their fire and finally the poor beast crumpled and fell.



The Indians had no courage for close range fighting and they didn't charge again. They didn't have to risk death in a running attack because of a low-lying hill to the north on which they could lie concealed and shoot down into our camp. Big trees on the rim of Birch Cooley ravine on the east gave them sniping shelter. From one of these trees an Indian rifle cracked and usually some poor fellow in camp stopped a bullet. I watched until I saw the barrel of a rifle stick out through the leaves. Then I fired. A painted body came tumbling down like a dead squirrel. "One less," I murmured to Denais Felix.

The shooting of the sniper started a big commotion and we could hear much jabbering and yelling under the shelter of the bluff. Then I heard a loud voice calling in Sioux, "Hear me, Hinhankaga. We saw you shoot. You killed the son of Chief Traveling Hail. Now we kill your little girls!"

"They are alive!" I almost shouted in relief. Then my heart was chilled with dread. Would they now be killed?

Denais lay beside me behind a dead horse and the wheel of a wagon. A bullet struck a spoke of the wheel directly in front of his eyes and splinters flew in his face. But he wasn't hurt a bit. "Ha, Hinhankaga, I was lucky that time!" A comrade a few feet away turned his head to see what had happened. A bullet crashed into his brain killing him instantly.

Our ammunition was running low but the reserve supply was in one of the wagons and any man who stood up to break it out would be the target for hundreds of bullets and arrows.

I was one of the men ordered to get it. We hunched along on our backs behind the shelter of the dead horses until we were directly under the wagon. Then we quickly raised our feet and tipped the wagon over. One of the men got a bullet through his leg but we got the ammunition! We slid the boxes along the ground, each man helping himself and pushing the boxes on to the man next in line.

Then we discovered a terrible mistake - all the bullets were for larger bore rifles! With our knives we whittled lead from the minie balls. It took forever to pare one down to fit. If the Sioux had charged then our goose would have been cooked. You bet we made every bullet count after that!

While we were whittling bullets one of the Sioux ran toward us waving a white flag. "Sergeant Auge, find out what he's after," ordered Captain Grant. The messenger spoke in a loud voice in his native tongue.

"What did he say?" asked Grant.

"We are as many as the leaves on trees," translated Auge. "Soon we come and kill every soldier. We do not want to kill our brothers. All in camp who have Dakota<sup>h</sup> blood come out. We will not harm you."

"You are free to go," said Grant. "Auge, ask each man to make his choice."

"Hinhankaga, what do you say?" asked Sergeant Auge.

"If I go," I thought, "Traveling Hail's band will chop me up like pemmican meat. I stay!"

Every man with Dakota blood said, "I stay."

We did not trust the Sioux.

When the roll was complete Auge shouted in Sioux: "Fah! Cowards! You do not dare. Every man in camp has five guns ready to shoot. You fight like Chippewas! Go back and stay with the squaws!" Then he spat derisively at the messenger.

The boastful charge never came. I guess they decided to starve and choke us out. That would have been an easy thing to do. We had no food; we had no water. There was no help we could give to our many wounded comrades who groaned on their blankets. That was the longest night of my life.

Our only hope was help from Fort Ridgely. Had our firing been heard twelve miles away? Was Col. Sibley disturbed over our failure to return?



We had no way of knowing that a relief force was on its way! The firing had been heard and Col. Sibley had sent Col. McPhail and two hundred men to investigate!

McPhail marched to the opposite side of the ravine. He was afraid he wasn't strong enough to attack. He sent a messenger to Sibley for reinforcements and went into camp.

We knew he was there and cursed because he stopped. Perhaps he didn't know what torture that night meant to us; the nauseating stench of death, the desperate thirst for water, the gnawing pangs of hunger, the death rattle in the throats of dying men.

In the morning, after another night of suffering and terror, other companies of the Sixth marched in without firing a shot, as again the Indians skedaddled.

In our camp the rescue party found eighty-seven dead horses, twenty-two dead soldiers and sixty half delirious, wounded comrades.

We marched back to the Fort where I cried when I told Marie I had not found the children. My heart ached because I had to hurt her with such a cruel disappointment.

We drilled and drilled and drilled while more troops came pouring in. Soon there were two thousand soldiers in the Fort and an almost endless train of wagons hauling in supplies. I thought we had enough to lick General Lee but Sibley kept drilling us for two whole weeks!

All that time I was tormented with anxiety, wondering whether Traveling Hail's warriors had killed Elizabeth and Minnie.

At last we left! Our company was in the lead and the column stretched back through the woods farther than I could see. I was glad we had the cannons with us. The big guns scared the daylights out of the Sioux.

We moved like snails. I could have crawled on my stomach and made faster time. Again we cursed Sibley. He was so slow! Every day we started the march in the middle of the forenoon, halted for a noon meal, camped at

four o'clock, dug rifle pits and built barricades. Why waste such precious time! We would never catch the Indians dawdling like this!

Endless rumors ran through the column. "All white captives have been killed." "All whites have been taken to Sisseton." "All whites are prisoners and are in camp near the Yellow Medicine river." How I wanted this last one to be true for that was where we were marching! There, if alive, Minnie and Elizabeth would be found!

We camped at Wood Lake and in the morning a squad of men on a foraging expedition surprised an ambush Little Crow was setting up to cut off the head of our column. The third Minnesota got into the fight first. As we were forming to advance, Company A of the Sixth went by on the double and Denais Felix yelled, "Hurry up, Hinhanhaga! We'll lick 'em this time!"

And lick 'em we did! When the artillery started firing they skedaddled like scared rabbits.

The next day we knew the white prisoners were in camp only a short distance away. Today I would see Minnie and Elizabeth! Or - - ? ? ? the thought they could be missing drove me nearly crazy.

"Hurry! Hurry!" I shouted. Then Sibley ordered a dress parade! For two hours we manouvered and then passed in review. I would have been court-martialed if Sibley had heard what I called him under my breath! And instead of going in to the rescue we camped again that night!

Even Sibley must have caught the urge for the next morning we moved faster. Soon we could see smoke rising from the prison camp. No order was given but every man in the column broke into a run. To run faster I threw away my musket and dashed ahead calling, "Elizabeth! Minnie!" Then I saw a group of ragged women and children running to meet us.

Elizabeth saw me first. "Papa! Papa!" she cried and threw herself into my arms. Just behind came Minnie, her short legs spinning. There was room in my arms for both! For a long time I held them close with their arms hugging my neck. If only Marie had been there too!



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