

1908.

[Report on the battle of Wood Lake]

To the Governor:-

The commissioners appointed by the legislature, Ch. 336, L. 1907, to perform certain specified services in connection with the battle field of Wood Lake, have, in view of the fact that the battle there fought resulted, not only in the defeat of the Indians under Chief Little Crow thus ending the war in Minnesota, but in the rescue of 107 white women and children from captivity, and the further fact that many errors have appeared early and late, in reference to that encounter, deemed it advisable to annex to a report heretofore made the following account of that engagement, which they believe to be accurate.

At the treaty of Traverse des Sioux in 1851, the Sioux tribe of Indians ceded to the government their lands in Iowa, and Minnesota, reserving a strip ten miles wide on each side of the Minnesota river, extending from Fort Ridgely to its head waters. This reservation was divided at the Yellow Medicine river, and agencies were established thereon, one at the Yellow Medicine river, near its junction with the Minnesota river, and the other at the west side of the river thirteen miles above Fort Ridgely. They were known as the upper and lower agencies.

The Sioux were a powerful, fierce, and warlike tribe, consisting of numerous bands which in 1862 occupied and roamed over not only the lands ceded to the government, but a vast territory to the westward. Many of them were dissatisfied with the treaty and nearly all hated the whites.

Early in July 1862 the Indians commenced congregating at the upper agency to receive their annual installment of pay, or annuity, and by the fourteenth of that month as many as 779 lodges or tepees

were counted.

Owing to the fact that our government was at that time engaged in the great Civil War, and all its energies were turned toward the suppression of the Rebellion, the expected funds for the Indians did not arrive on time and the trouble commenced.

Little Crow, a fierce warrior, and bitter foe of the whites was a leading chief of the Sioux. He understood the situation of the government and the fact that large numbers of the young men were out of the state at the front engaged in the war led him to believe that the opportunity had come to drive the whites from the state. The supplies brought by the Indians to the agency were soon exhausted, they were hungry and made and fired by the eloquence of their chiefs, the butchery of the settlers began. First at Acton on the 17th of August, and at the Upper Agency on the 18th, and on the same day nearly all the whites at the Lower Agency were massacred, and Capt. Marsh of the Fifth Minn. Regiment with 45 soldiers from Fort Ridgely ~~were~~ ~~was~~ ambushed at the ferry near the Lower Agency and 23 of his men killed. Marsh was drowned a few miles below when attempting to cross the Minnesota River. Events followed rapidly. New Ulm was attacked on the 19th and again on the 23d; Fort Ridgely on the 20th, and again on the 22nd. Ft. Abercrombie was besieged from the 3d to the 6th of Sept. and the whole frontier west and north of Glencoe was at the mercy of the wildest of the savages.

On September 2nd and 3d Co. A of the 6th Regiment, Capt. Grant in command and about 75 mounted volunteers under Capt. Anderson, all being commanded by Maj. Joseph R. Brown, were attacked while in camp at Birch Coolie. They succeeded in repulsing the Indians under Little Crow until relieved by troops from Ft. Ridgely, but with a heavy

loss in killed and wounded. The Indians had been repulsed at other points of attack, but not defeated. Self confident they continued for more than a month to raid the western portion of the state, carrying out the design of their chief with the merciless slaughter of men, women and children; not less than a thousand of the settlers being massacred. The survivors had either left the state, or had fled to the cities, or were huddled together in stockades temporarily constructed at various points. Many of the women and children were held in captivity.

Gov. Ramsey was vigilant and active, and as soon as possible after the outbreak, men of the Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, Ninth and Tenth Minnesota Regiments, just then being recruited, were hastened to Fort Ridgely and other points.

Henry H. Sibley having been commissioned Colonel of the State Militia, assumed command and organized a force at Fort Ridgely to advance upon the Indians. The expedition was composed of 250 men of the Third Minnesota Vol. Infantry under the command of Major Abram E. Welch of the Fourth Minnesota. The Sixth Regiment commanded by Lieutenant Colonel J. T. Averill, Companies A, B, F, G and H of the Seventh commanded by Lieutenant Colonel W. R. Marshall, Company A of the Ninth commanded by Capt. Geo. A. Camp, acting as pioneers, about 45 men known as the Renville Rangers, mostly mixed bloods, under command of Lieutenant James H. Gorman, twenty-seven mounted volunteers commanded by Capt. J. R. Sterrett, ten or twenty Indians and half-breeds as scouts, two guns, one a six pounder, the other a mountain howitzer, Capt. Mark Hendricks in command. In all there were about 1,450 men in Sibley's command that left Fort Ridgely on the 19th of September, crossing to the south side of the Minnesota River, and thence followed the government

trail leading to the Upper Sioux Agency.

On the night of the 22nd the command camped on the east side of what was then known by the whites as Lone Tree Lake, but designated by Col. Sibley as Wood Lake. There were at the time of the outbreak but few settlers in that region of the State and all had fled or were slaughtered. The Government surveys had not been made, but when the work was done Lone Tree Lake was found to be in sections 4, 5, 8 and 9, township 114, range 38, now in Yellow Medicine County and our camp on the Northwest one-fourth of Section 9. The map filed by us shows the exact location.

As our forces approached this point Indians were seen at a distance watching our movements. We were nearing their main encampment which was some twenty miles up the Minnesota River to the northwest, and rifle pits were thrown up in places around our camp in the evening.

The morning of the 23rd was fair, but Col. Sibley did not start on the march as was expected, - all was quiet in camp. At about eight o'clock A. M. a party of some twenty men of the Third with four or five wagons left camp going northerly on the old government trail, their objective point being the abandoned agency about three miles distant. This move was unauthorized and was prompted by curiosity and a desire to forage whatever might be found. The boys little knew the peril of their rash act, for they would doubtless have all been killed had the Indians allowed them to pass farther on toward the Agency before attacking them. As it was, when the party had reached the high ground north of the bridge across the outlet of the lake (a small stream flowing easterly into the Minnesota River through a deep ravine) and 250 yards therefrom, a party of about 30 Indians sprang up from the

grass on the east side of the trail, and some forty yards therefrom, and fired a volley into the leading wagon, that of Company G, wounding all of its occupants but one. The men in the other wagons sprang out and commenced firing. This attack on the part of the Indians was premature and occurred in plain sight of camp and about three-fourths of a mile ^{distant} ~~therefrom~~. The camp of the Third was the nearest the point of attack and some distance from ~~the~~ headquarters. Maj. Welsh, without waiting for orders, or permission, called to his men to "fall in, all who want to fight". A rush was made for the guns and the little command of few more than 200 ^{was} ~~were~~ almost instantly in line deploying the left half as skirmishers, the right following in reserve, Welsh being the only commissioned officer present. He moved rapidly toward the point of attack on the "double quick", crossing the stream some distance below the bridge. On reaching the high land north of the ravine the Indians were met in force and firing became general along the skirmish line, the Indians falling back and the Third steadily moving forward to a point about 300 yards beyond the stream, when an officer rode up from Col. Sibley with orders to Maj. Welsh to fall back to camp. This order the latter reluctantly obeyed and the movement toward camp commenced.

The Indians encouraged by this came on from the right, left and front, and it was down the slope toward the stream that the fight was the hottest and where most of the casualties in the Third occurred. The Indians endeavored to cut the men off from support and whooping and yelling tried to stampede them, but the rapid fire of the Third with shells from Hendricks' guns were too much for them. Gallant Maj. Welsh was severely wounded after crossing the ravine and was carried

into camp by his men.

The Indians in large numbers followed, taking possession of the ravine and kept up the fight with the Third and the Renville Rangers who had been ordered to its support by Col. Sibley. The Indians, however, came no nearer camp than the bluffs on the southerly side of the ravine. In the mean time Capt. Hencricks, with his six pounder, took position a short distance to the north of the camp upon an elevation ^{which} ~~that~~ commanded the entire field, and a brisk cannonading ~~was~~ commenced.

Five companies of the Seventh and Company A of the Sixth moved forward on the right under the command of Col. Marshall to a favorable position when the Indians in front in the ravine were charged upon and routed and sent flying over the hills to the north in great confusion.

At the same time Lieut. R. C. Clin with the Third and the Rangers charged into the ravine on the left of the Seventh, the Indians scurrying over the prairies to the north and the west, our whole line following on the double quick for several hundred yards north of the ravine and until recalled by Col. Sibley.

All of the Sixth Regiment, except Company A, was assigned to the task of protecting the camp, and while the Third was advancing to the relief of the foragers, discovered a force of the enemy on the west side of the lake attempting to reach the rear or south line of the camp. The Sixth moved promptly, Company F occupying as skirmishers an advance line at the south end of the lake and met with stubborn resistance until the main body of the Indians gave way at the ravine north of the camp, when

those in front of the Sixth retreated in confusion.

Capt. Wilson of Company F was wounded in the shoulder near the south end of the lake. The battle lasted about an hour and a half. The fleeing Indians were not pursued for two reasons, according to Col. Sibley. First, he had less than 50 mounted men to pursue a much larger number of mounted Indians, and, second, the enemy had in their possession at their camp before mentioned opposite and near the mouth of the Chippewa River about 250 prisoners, whites and mixed bloods, and he feared that on the approach of the troops these prisoners might be massacred, as had been threatened.

The Indians left fourteen of their dead upon the field and their bodies were buried by the soldiers. Col. Sibley's report of the engagement is found in Vol. 2 of ~~the~~ "Minnesota History in the Civil and Indian Wars," p. 240. A vivid account of the battle by Capt. E. T. Champlin of the Third is published in the same Volume, p. 244.

The soldiers killed outright were Ernest Paul of the Rangers, Richard H. McElroy of Company I, 2nd Minnesota., a paroled prisoner of war serving with the Third, Anthony C. Collins of the Third and Chas. E. Frink of the Seventh. Paul, McElroy and Collins were buried in separate graves south of the rifle pits dug by the Sixth Regiment in the order named from south to north. Frink was buried at the north end of the rifle pits dug by the Seventh Regiment, with the expectation that his body would be removed without delay to Northfield, Minnesota, where his parents resided.

An account of these burials was written by Rev. S. R. Riggs and published in the St. Paul Press of October 3, 1862. But none of these bodies have ever been disinterred and when the undersigned visited the

field in 1907, the graves were covered with growing grain. We feel that the remains of these soldiers, if they can be found, should be promptly removed to a suitable burial place.

Edwin E Ross, DeGrove Kimball and Mathew Cantwell of the Third Minnesota were mortally wounded and were removed without delay to the hospital at Fort Ridgely, where they subsequently died. Their names are mentioned in a report made by Dr. Mueller in charge, a few days later, which appeared in the Press bearing date October 3rd, 1862.

Twenty-seven men of the Third Regiment were wounded, three of the Sixth, three of the Seventh, and one of the Rangers, making thirty four in all, many seriously. Their names will be found in the 2nd Volume of Minnesota in Civil and Indian War pp 243 and 244.

As near as can be ascertained from 750 to 800 Indian warriors were engaged in the battle. Their camp consisted of 150 tepees and 1,800 persons, all told.

On the morning of the 25th the troops moved northwesterly and on Sept. 26th at a camp, which Col. Sibley named "Release" on the south side of the Minnesota River in Lac Qui Parle County and nearly opposite the mouth of the Chippewa River, the prisoners, 107 whites and 162 mixed bloods, were delivered into his hands by alleged friendly Indians. All white men who came within reach during hostilities were killed with the exception of George H. Spencer who after being wounded was taken prisoner and delivered up at Camp Release. These prisoners were in a pitiable condition and some of the women had been subjected to atrocious indignities.

Before the troops reached Camp Release large numbers of the Indians

had fled, but Col. Sibley made prisoners of the males remaining in camp, 321 in number. These men were nearly all charged with murder, and were tried with others later on by a military commission. Three hundred and three were found guilty of murder and were sentenced to be hanged. President Lincoln refused to approve this sentence in full, distinguishing in his order between Indians who had participated in skirmishes and battles with the whites, and those proven guilty of actual murder. Of the latter there were 39 and the President directed that Sibley, who had then been made Brigadier General, cause them to be hanged. One was reprieved and the remainder, 38 in all, were hanged at the same time upon a gallows erected for that purpose at Mankato, Minnesota. This order was executed by Col. Miller commanding the Seventh Regiment on the 26th day of December, 1862.

We call attention to a few errors which appear in ~~the History of~~ Minnesota in the Civil and Indian wars. In the roster of the men composing the Renville Rangers, found in Vol. 1 p. 720, Joseph Paro (Perrault) is said to have been killed at Wood Lake. This is an error, Mr. Perrault lived for several years afterward. The man killed belonging to the Rangers was Ernest Paul, his family name being erroneously printed "Pole" in the roster. Several men of this company had already enlisted in the Tenth Minnesota, one of them being Paul, and his name is found in the roster of Company I of that regiment as published in Vol. 1 p. 485, but it is not noted that he was killed in this action. This fact appears, however, in the original muster out roll at Washington.

In the list of the wounded is the name of Alexis Roach of the Rangers, Vol. 2 ~~History~~ p. 244, but this name does not appear in the

roster of Co. I above mentioned. The true name of the wounded man ~~is~~^{was} Alexis Demerce, a half-blood, in the roster, p. 780, erroneously printed "Algis Demar". See Dr. Mueller's report before mentioned. He ~~is~~^{was} a son of Racquet Demerce, an old trader, who had at one time a post at the mouth of the Cottonwood River.

In Dr. Wharton's report of the wounded, p. 244, of the 2nd Volume, private "Seymour Camen" of Company C of the Sixth, is reported as severely wounded in the chest, and it is also stated that his name is not found in the roster of Company C. The man intended and who was badly wounded was William Seymour Curran of Company C of the Sixth Regiment, his name being found in the roster Vol. 1 p. 333, but it is not there stated that he was wounded or that he was discharged for disability, resulting therefrom. Such is the fact and this statement is made upon the authority of Capt. Hutchinson of his Company. See also Surgeon Mueller's report above mentioned.

In the report of Surgeon Greely of the Third, p. 243, 2nd Volume, appears among the wounded the name of John P. Shellander of Company D. It should be John P. Thellander. See Vol. 1 p. 186, roster of his company.

Very Respectfully Submitted.

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Commissioners