

## News updates

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# Commentary

## Olmsted was a fair park in the Dakotas' vast land

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This is the second of an occasional series of articles providing historical background for Olmsted County's celebration of Minnesota's Territorial Sesquicentennial, the 150th anniversary of Minnesota becoming a territory. Author Mark Diedrich is a Rochester resident who has written and published many books on Indians of the Upper Midwest.

By Mark Diedrich

Until Olmsted County, Minn., became a territory in 1849, the Mdewakantons and Wahpekutes continued to hunt in the region. But game became scarce and, aside from the occasional deer, many Dakotas were only successful in bringing in muskrat pelts to pay off the goods they bought from traders of the area.

Alexander Faribault, who worked for Sibley's "Sioux Outfit," traded particularly with the Wahpekutes at a site they called Adekti ("Home of Alex," present-day Faribault. Sibley was painfully aware of the diminishing returns of the Dakota hunters, and this soon caused him to give up the fur trade for politics. He noted about that time: "[The Dakota] ... mode of subsistence has become more and more precarious as the game is destroyed or driven off, so that these Indians must resort to the cultivation of the soil to a much greater extent than they do or perish."

The leading Wahpekute chiefs, Red Legs (Hushasha), and the renegade Inkpaduta, or Scarlet Point, were on opposite ends of the issue concerning whether or not to adopt white man's ways, which was essentially a change of occupation from hunting to farming — which the Dakotas were accustomed to think of as "women's work."

Inkpaduta was an accused murderer, and he and his party tended to remain separate, occupying their hunting territory on the Des Moines River, while Red Legs's group remained in southeastern Minnesota, often camping at the head of the Cannon River.

### Ramsey acquired title

In 1851, the new territorial governor, Alexander Ramsey, moved to acquire title of all of present southern Minnesota from the Dakotas. Treaties were held at Traverse des Sioux and Mendota during the summer. Wakute, Wapahasha III, and Hushasha participated in the Mendota councils, although Inkpaduta was conspicuously absent.

Due to their economic need, they and the Mdewakantons ceded their lands in return for annual money and goods, called annuities, and a reservation along the Minnesota River. Because the treaty

### Speaking Out

was amended the following year, government agents did not attempt to remove the tribes to the reservation until late 1853.

Alexander Faribault aided the agents in gathering up the Wahpekutes for a rendezvous with the Mdewakantons at Traverse des Sioux. They then proceeded along the Minnesota River to the agency near Redwood Falls. The two groups were designated the "Lower Sioux." Sibley commented ominously, "As there are now no more treaties to make, or reasons for conciliating them, it is possible that they will treat them (the Dakotas) with rigor, perhaps severity. The poor devils have not many strong friends left them."

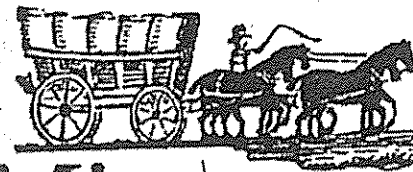
but the reservation was inadequately prepared for the Dakotas, who were expected to give up hunting and gathering and take up farming and husbandry. After receiving various annuity goods and money, the Wahpekutes and the others for the most part returned to their old territories. Sibley reported to Gov. Willis A. Gorman in the spring of 1854 that the Wahpekute band (about 300 people) desired to remain on their old lands, separate from the other Dakotas, remote from the white settlements, but yet be willing to adopt "the dress and manners of the whites." Sibley hopped Gorman would aid the Wahpekutes as he considered them "by far the best and most peaceable band of Sioux in the country. ..." The Wahpekute request was not granted, so they continued to roam their former lands, while keeping up a village on the easternmost end of the Dakota reservation, just west of Milford Township. The Wapahasha and Wakute bands camped close together on the west side of Fort Ridgely.

### On the banks of the Zumbro

It was no doubt the Mdewakantons or Wahpekutes whom the first white settlers of Oronoco found encamped on the banks of the Zumbro River. The Dakotas called the river Waziozu Wakpa, or Pine Grove River. The traders referred to it as Riviere des Embarras. "Embarras," pronounced zumbba-rah, was soon anglicized to "Zumbro."

Another Dakota party also camped at Kings Park. An early settler, William Koenig (or King), visited the latter group and found them willing to share their supper, which was in a large kettle. However, he balked when he heard a Dakota woman say that

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if he dug deep enough he would get some of the "puppy at the bottom." The Dakotas considered dog to be a great delicacy.

In the fall of 1854, it was apparently a Wahpekute band that wintered in Olmsted County. Their stay was virtually the only time of overlapping Indian-white occupation. Mr. Hurd of Salem said that the Indians passed through his area, going from one belt of timber to the next, begging food from the few settlers they visited. Just at this time smallpox broke out among this band and they lost a number of people, including the old chief, Moving Shadow (Skushkahnah).

One early pioneer, James Bucklin, reported that about 200 Dakotas came to encamp on the east side of the Zumbro River across from the site of John M. Cole's later flour mill. Five of their number died, although one death was blamed by a "medicine man" (wichasha wakan) on a bee which had been swallowed by a woman; he thought that it had stung the women's throat or stomach. The Indians were afraid to bury their dead, probably for fear of contamination. White settlers aided them and interred the Indians near Indian Heights (east of present Assissi Heights).

### Bamber leaves his name

The Dakotas then moved their camp south about two miles to a location near the residence of John Bamber, who arrived in present-day Rochester in mid-December 1854 (and who left his name on a

Rochester lake and valley). At that time another Indian died of the disease and to make matters worse, one of the leaders, a young man about 20 years old, identified as "Coskass," was accidentally killed when he was kicked by his pony. The Indians sought the aid of James and Lewis Bucklin to construct coffins out of puncheons for the dead. The dead were then carried to Indian Heights and buried with the others.

Then one of the Indian girls, Winona (first-born daughter) came down with the dreaded disease. She was apparently abandoned in a tepee, while the band moved on to the head of a ravine near the site of Dr. Eaton's residence. Meanwhile, the Bucklin family took her in and cared for her until she recovered.

The band learned of this and gave Bucklin a knife sheath and moccasins as a thank you. In the spring of 1855 the band left and was not seen again.

Part of the reason for this was the Inkpaduta outbreak. During the late winter of 1857 the renegade chief and his band massacred about 40 whites in southwestern Minnesota. For a time, any Indian seen off the reservation was liable to be shot at by skittish settlers. However, a few Wahpekute families were harbored by Alexander Faribault at present Faribault.

At one time, apparent Mdewakantons were seen west of present Stewartville on land settled by Peter Brewer. He described them as having scrawny looking ponies, wearing buckskin leggings with blankets wrapped tightly about their bodies; each man carried a tomahawk, knife, and a bow and quiver of arrows.

The Dakota War of 1862 had little effect on Olmsted County residents, though communities to the west, like New Ulm, were devastated. The Mdewakantons and Wahpekutes had mixed feelings about the war effort. Wakute had died by this time, and his son, also known as Wakute, did not want to fight.

The next time you happen to notice some of the beautiful land features in and around the county, try to imagine several hundred Dakotas slowly traversing the region on their ponies and travois and erecting their buffalo-skin teepees along the Zumbro River. These were Indians who were almost always friendly to the whites, a people who had fought and died in battles with other tribes to retain their hunting territory. Olmsted County was once a fair park in their vast land.