

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

THE BIRCH COOLEY MONUMENT

The object of this sketch is to give accounts of a military expedition sent into the region of the Sioux Outbreak to bury the bodies of victims of the massacre and of the battle in which the members of this expedition participated at Birch Cooley, so that the reader will be enabled to form opinions on the following questions: Was Captain Hiram P. Grant in command of the expedition? Are the inscriptions on the Birch Cooley monument true?

On August 31, 1862, the thirteenth day after the beginning of the Sioux Outbreak and the battle of Redwood Ferry, the bodies of twenty-four soldiers who had been killed there were still lying unburied. Colonel Henry H. Sibley was then in command at Fort Ridgely, and he sent an expedition of about a hundred and fifty men to bury the bodies of those killed at Redwood Ferry, at the lower agency, and in the near-by settlements. This force included Captain Grant and his infantry company, a burial party of twenty men detailed from his regiment, Captain Joseph Anderson and a small cavalry force of newly enlisted men, Major Thomas J. Galbraith and his half-breed scouts, and some volunteers, citizens, teamsters, and others. Prominent in the force was Major Joseph R. Brown, a former Indian agent who had spent his life on the frontier and the members of whose family at the time were prisoners in the Indian camp. The writer, then a boy of seventeen, was one of the burial party.

We started in the forenoon of August 31 and marched about twelve miles that day, burying a number of bodies and making our first camp at the place where Birch Cooley reaches the Minnesota Valley, about a mile from the ferry. The next morning, September 1, our force was divided; most of the

mounted men with a few of the burial party under Brown and Anderson crossed the Minnesota River to bury the victims at the agency on the south bank and went thence up the river valley and across to the north side several miles west of Beaver Creek. Grant, after burying the bodies at the battle ground, went with his force of infantry, most of the burial party, and a few scouts up the north side of the river valley. His men buried some victims of the massacre near Beaver Creek and made camp near the upper range of timber on Birch Cooley, where the Brown and Anderson party joined them and all had a good supper.

My purpose in giving an outline of these movements is to show that the activities of Grant with his infantry and train of wagons were entirely distinct and separate from the movements of Brown and Anderson with their mounted men. On the first day, although they were within sight of one another, there was no occasion for Grant to give orders to Brown nor for Brown to give orders to Grant, the work of each being entirely different from that of the other. On the second day the two groups were separated until evening, when they joined in camp. The battle, which commenced at this camp ground at break of day on Tuesday, September 2, was a very serious disaster, twenty-three men being killed or mortally wounded and a large number disabled.

There had been no disputes, arguments, or lack of harmony among the officers or among the men up to the close of the battle, but some time later a disagreement arose as to who was in official command of the expedition. Grant claimed that Sibley sent him into the field as commander, but Sibley held that Brown was in command, and all official reports were made accordingly. Grant, however, refused to accept Sibley's ruling, and throughout his life he claimed that he was in undisputed command at Birch Cooley, but that he was unjustly treated, since Brown gave him no orders and was in no sense the commander. The matter was the subject of argument for

many years and public sentiment was divided on the question. When a monument was erected at Morton to commemorate the battle, it was inscribed with a statement that Captain Grant was in command, while Major Brown's name appeared simply as "J. R. Brown." There are many who would say that the question should be dropped, because the parties to the dispute have all passed away and the case cannot now be settled. But history should be true history, and in one respect this is not a dead issue, for the monument is still there with its inscription for all to view. There is a strong sentiment in favor of moving the monument to the battle-ground site, where it rightfully belongs. The site is now included in a public park, about eighty acres in extent; and within the past five years it has been the scene of many large meetings, owing to its historic interest and to the beauty of the landscape. If the monument is moved, I think that because of the inscription the old dispute will be revived. During the past few years I have made a study of the matter and have examined all the evidence that has come within my reach. Although I was only a boy of seventeen at the time of the expedition, my memory is very clear about many details and especially about opinions expressed by comrades who were recovering from wounds in the hospital.

After considering such facts as are beyond dispute and bringing to my aid a little knowledge of human nature, I do not believe that Grant was willfully in the wrong. Neither do I think that Brown or any of his supporters would knowingly lend themselves to a conspiracy to rob Grant of his rightful position as an officer. When Sibley sent Grant on the expedition it is likely that he failed to define the latter's position clearly, or Grant may have misunderstood Sibley and gone away with a wrong impression — such mistakes occur in every rank of life. In either case, if conditions later were such that there was no clash of authority, it is possible to understand how the disagreement arose.

With others of the burial party I marched along with Grant's company, but while they marched in column we marched at will. We carried our guns, a supply of cartridges, and a spade, and our knapsacks were taken in a wagon. The mounted men went in advance, usually some distance ahead, and when we were fairly far away from the fort they began to explore the ground on each side. Captain Grant, on horseback, gave the commands — "Attention! Column, forward march," "Column, halt," and the like. I only knew of Grant and the officers of his company, and knew nothing of Brown. We all supposed that Grant was in command. At our first camp Grant was busy riding around and giving directions. At the second camp most of the work was done before the Brown and Anderson party joined us; and I only know that Brown was with us after the battle, when I heard that he was wounded.

But as to the standing of the officers, I cannot do better than refer to a letter written by Captain Anderson to Dr. J. W. Daniels in 1894, giving a full account of the two days of the march.¹ Anderson was a close friend of Major Brown, and he strongly opposes Grant's claims in his letter, which is an able, clearly written document. He was on intimate terms with Brown and he notes that all the officers were on friendly terms. He says that Grant made a bad selection of camping places, but neither he nor Brown protested, and in each case they had a good supper and a pleasant time in the evening. One cannot escape the belief that the officers looked upon the expedition as a camping trip rather than a military expedition. The officers were all from civil life, they had been ten days or less in the service, and although they preserved some dignity while giving commands to their men, it is plain from Anderson's story that they were in fact a group of friends having

¹ Captain Anderson's letter, which was dictated to Anne C. Anderson at Oklahoma City on August 9, 1894, was presented to the Minnesota Historical Society by Dr. Daniels. *Ed.*

a good time. This was only natural, for everyone high and low believed that the Indians would not fight, as is evidenced by the fact that in neither camp were any earthworks built or any water supply brought into camp. Anderson relates that Brown spent the night before the battle in Grant's tent on the latter's invitation. The officers were all close friends, and during the battle they worked in harmony and each did his best. From the time when they left Fort Ridgely up to the night before the battle they had worked apart, and the question of who was in official command probably had not entered their minds.

If this view is accepted it is easy to account for all that took place after the battle, and the old dispute vanishes into thin air, for it was nothing more than a misunderstanding about military precedence between two men just out of civil life. Then the only thing to be considered is the monument, and my views on this subject can be given in a very few words. The name of Grant as commander should be erased, and the inscription should be changed to read that the expedition was under the joint leadership of Brown and Grant. Such a statement will not reflect on the reputation of any man living or dead. Anderson's letter shows that Brown and Grant were personal friends and that both stood by their men in a time of great danger. Grant made an honorable record as a soldier and left the army with the rank of lieutenant colonel. Brown was a prominent figure in the history of Minnesota; he was a man of great talent and energy, and of high character from first to last.

ROBERT K. BOYD

EAU CLAIRE, WISCONSIN

THE SIOUX WAR STOCKADES

On Sunday, August 17, 1862, the first shot in an Indian war that involved portions of what later comprised seven states was fired at Acton, Meeker County, Minnesota, where



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).