

MR. CONNORS recently became an assistant editor of the Catholic Digest, a monthly periodical published in St. Paul. Previously he was chairman of the department of English in the College of St. Thomas.

The Elusive Hero of **REDWOOD FERRY**

JOSEPH CONNORS

THE AIR is heavily charged with stirring associations at the site of the old Redwood or Lower Sioux Agency Ferry, just below Morton on the Minnesota River. The place is best known as the scene of a tragic ambush, usually called the battle of Redwood Ferry, that occurred on August 18, 1862, the first day of the Sioux Outbreak. According to most accounts of the uprising, the real hero of the day was a courageous ferryman, who was brutally killed after remaining at his post to transport fugitives across the river.

Despite the fact that nearly all historians of the Indian uprising have found the story of the ferryman's heroism a deeply moving one, no one seems to have given it a very thorough examination. It cannot even be said that the hero has been satisfactorily identified, for he has been eulogized under at least four different names—Mauley, Hubert Millier, Peter Martell, and Charlie

Martell.¹ Surely, so arresting a figure merits more careful attention than he has hitherto received.

The Sioux Outbreak began at about seven o'clock on the morning of August 18 with a surprise attack on the Lower Sioux Agency. This center for government employees and traders on the Sioux reservation was located on a high bluff flanking the Minnesota River on the southwest, about six miles below the mouth of the Redwood. The Indians killed about a dozen men during the first few minutes, and then fell to plundering. Many agency employees, some with wives and small children, managed to get away, principally by one of the roads that ran down the bluff to the ferry. Their best hope was to cross the Minnesota and try to get to Fort Ridgely, about fourteen miles down the river. It is probable that thirty or more fugitives crossed the Minnesota River on the ferryboat.²

The person credited with saving their lives made his first appearance in print in I. V. D. Heard's *History of the Sioux War*, published in 1863. This writer reports that "The ferryman, Mauley, who resolutely ferried across the river at the agency all who desired to cross, was killed on the other side just as he had passed the last man over.

¹The two latter names appear variously as Martell, Martelle, and Martel. Since Martell has the strongest documentary support, it has been adopted for use in this article except in direct quotations from sources using other forms.

²William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 2:109 (St. Paul, 1924); Marion P. Satterlee, *Massacre by the Dakota Indians of Minnesota in 1862*, 14-20 (Minneapolis, 1923).



THE site of Redwood Ferry, looking south

He was disemboweled: his head, hands, and feet cut off, and thrust into the cavity. Obscure Frenchman though he was, the blood of no nobler hero dyed the battlefields of Thermopylae or Marathon."³ Every later version of the story is evidently the result of the impact of that passage on somebody's imagination. Although most of the details apparently were wrong, or at least misleading, practically all proved fruitful for later writers.

It is clear, for example, that a ferryman did not transport "all who desired to cross" and that he did not pass "the last man over." The slower fugitives found the ferry abandoned when they reached it. Some—a man named Joseph Schneider, for one—swung themselves across on the ferry ropes. Dr. Philander P. Humphrey, the agency physician, and his family found "the ferryman gone and the then typical western flat-bottomed boat . . . on the opposite bank."⁴ It is also fairly clear that the hero's name was incorrectly recorded by Heard, that he was not killed at the ferry landing, as naturally was inferred by those who retold the story, and that his body was not mutilated. It can be granted that he was a "French-

man"—that is, a French-Canadian. And he was unquestionably "obscure." Heard probably meant that the man was "lowly" or "humble," but he could hardly have selected a more prophetically appropriate word than "obscure." For nothing beyond Heard's anecdote is known about the man called Mauley, except that that was not really his name.

THE story of the ferryman's heroism probably was first related by a group of grateful refugees who knew that they had been spared only because the ferry was still operating when they reached it. Perhaps it was told by members of a party like that headed by J. C. Dickinson, manager of the mess hall at the agency, who took a wagon across the river and escaped to Fort Ridgely with his family, his "hired girls," and others picked up at the landing.⁵ They may not have known that their rescuer had been killed, but only that they owed their lives to "the ferryman."

It seems improbable that these refugees were referring to the actual proprietor of the ferry, Oliver Martell, who did not remain behind, but found refuge himself at Fort Ridgely. He first comes upon the scene in an early account of the march to Redwood Ferry by Captain John S. Marsh's doomed detachment of soldiers from Fort Ridgely. After news of the outbreak reached the fort, Marsh set out for the agency with forty-six soldiers and an interpreter. "When within about four miles of the ferry," according to one account, "they met the ferryman, Mr. Martelle, who informed Captain Marsh that the Indians were in considerable force

³ I. V. D. Heard, *History of the Sioux War and Massacres of 1862 and 1863*, 67 (New York, 1863).

⁴ John Ames Humphrey, "Boyhood Remembrances of Life Among the Dakotas and the Massacre in 1862," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 15:343 (1915); Alexander Berghold, *The Indian's Revenge; or, Days of Horror*, 95 (San Francisco, 1891). The latter is a translation of a German narrative published in 1876.

⁵ Charles S. Bryant and Abel B. Murch, *A History of the Great Massacre by Sioux Indians*, 79, 90 (Cincinnati, 1864).

. . . and advised him to return.”⁶ The reference is to Oliver Martell, a forty-three-year-old French-Canadian who was almost at the exact mid-point of a long and extraordinarily active life.

As lumberman, trader, and raftsman, Martell had stored up a fund of exciting memories before going to Minnesota in 1856, when he built a sawmill at Waterville. In 1859 he joined the group of French-Canadians employed in various jobs at the Lower Sioux Agency. The 1860 census lists the following residents of a dwelling that must have been the ferryhouse: Louis Fleury, age fifty-two, ferryman; Henry La Pine, age twenty-two, assistant ferryman; Oliver Martell, age forty-one, assistant ferryman; and John Bersie, age thirty-five, laborer. Two years later the ferry was known as “Martell’s Ferry.”⁷

THE warning to the soldiers was not the first Martell delivered on the day of the outbreak. About two miles east of the ferry, at the foot of Faribault Hill, lived David and Nancy Faribault. “All at once,” Nancy recalled, “a Frenchman named Martelle came galloping down the road from the agency, and, seeing me in the door, he called out: ‘Oh, Mrs. Faribault, the Indians are killing all the white people at the agency! Run away, run away quick!’

⁶ Bryant and Murch, *Great Massacre*, 183.

⁷ See Martell’s obituary in the *St. Paul Dispatch*, December 26, 1904. Among the claims arising out of the massacre was one for wood piled up on the river bank at Martell’s Ferry. It was supported by an affidavit from Oliver Martell. The author has a photostatic copy of this claim, dated October 7, 1862. It is number 272 among the documents relating to the Sioux Claims Commission, in record group 75, National Archives, Washington, D.C. See also the manuscript population schedules for Birch Coulee Township, Renville County, in the federal census of 1860, Minnesota state archives.

⁸ “The Story of Nancy McClure,” in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 6:449 (1894); Satterlee, *Massacre by the Dakota Indians*, 105.

⁹ For Bishop’s account of the “Battle of Redwood,” see *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, 2:167 (St. Paul, 1893).

He did not stop or slacken his speed, but waved his hand and called out as he passed. There was blood on his shirt, and I presume he was wounded.” There is no other evidence that Martell had been wounded; the blood on his shirt was perhaps the result of assistance given one of the refugees. He reached Fort Ridgely safely, as did his young wife, who may have been with the Dickinson party rather than with Martell.⁸

Captain Marsh boldly but unwisely ignored all warnings. In the ensuing ambush twenty-three soldiers and the interpreter were killed, and Marsh later drowned attempting to swim the river. But prior to the attack the soldiers evidently encountered not only a live ferryman but a dead one. One of the survivors of Marsh’s detachment, Sergeant John F. Bishop, recalled that “Between the creek [near Faribault’s house] and ferry we found 2 more citizens dead in the road — one was the ferryman.” Bishop then goes on to relate that the soldiers “found the ferry-boat on the east side, apparently ready to take us over, but Captain Marsh said probably the ferryman, whom we had just passed, was the last man over and had left it on this side.”⁹ That is as close as one can get to locating the spot where the ferryman’s body lay — not at the ferry landing, but evidently not far away, probably within a mile at the most, on the road to Fort Ridgely.

It could be objected that a body mutilated in the way Heard reported would hardly have been identifiable. Here a sore point of controversy is touched. Those who wrote early reports of the outbreak were understandably receptive to atrocity stories, but most such reports were never confirmed. Although Heard’s description of the dreadful treatment of the ferryman has been repeated by almost everyone who has alluded to the story, there is no evidence to support the original statement. Both Thomas A. Robertson, a mixed blood who was a messenger for Chief Little Crow, leader of the Sioux, and Dr. J. W. Daniels, who was with the burial party sent out from Fort Ridgely,

emphatically denied reports of mutilation with specific reference to the area between the fort and the lower agency.¹⁰

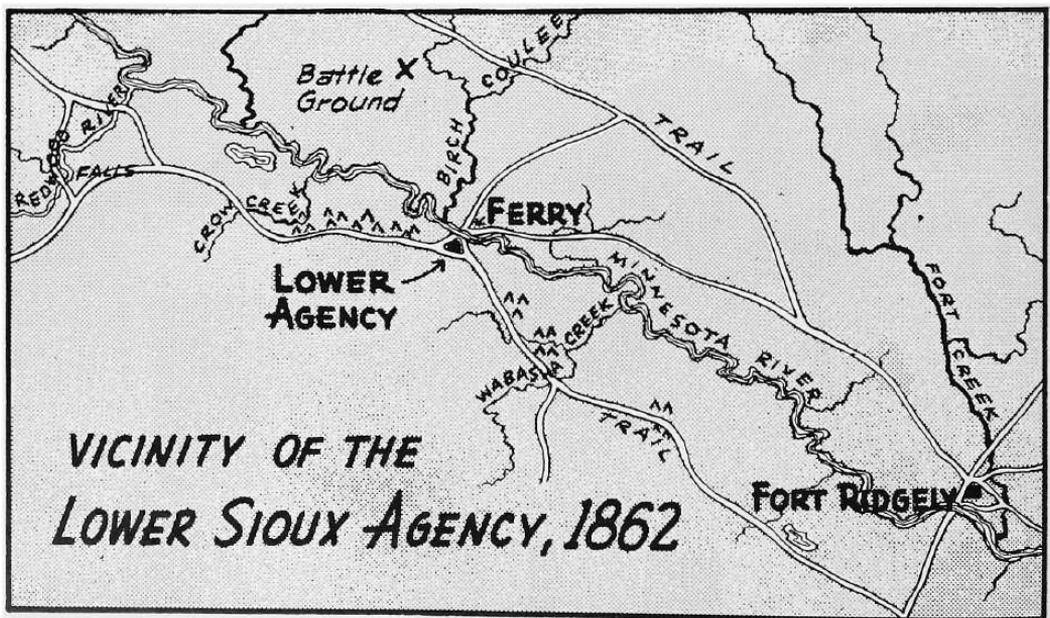
But who was the dead man? One would expect that individuals who had been living in the immediate vicinity of the agency and who later manifested an interest in the story of his noble conduct might have recalled something concrete about him. Mrs. Jannette Sweet, for example, must have been well acquainted with the ferry and its operators. She and her first husband, Joseph De Camp, lived only a quarter of a mile below the ferry, and since a number of French-Canadians who worked at the sawmill boarded with the De Camps, they doubtless knew any French-Canadians in the vicinity. Yet Mrs. Sweet's version of the story gives no indication that, when she set down her recollections in 1893, she knew anything about the matter except what she had read in Heard. The ferryman's conduct is simply put more dramatically: he "refused time after time to escape, saying 'that as long as he knew there was one white person to be ferried over the river, so long would he be there to cross them over.'" The same kind of transmuting of traditional detail can be seen in Oscar G. Wall's recol-

lections. As a youthful member of Company B, Fifth Minnesota Infantry, Wall was stationed at Fort Ridgely. Yet his rhapsodic essay on "The Grand Old Ferryman" provides only another imaginative interpretation of the original story.¹¹

The only piece of fresh information turned up for the period between 1863 and the present has to do with the hero's name. It was reported by Return I. Holcombe in 1902. "The histories give . . . Jacob Mauley," he wrote, "but parties who knew him, assure the writer . . . that his real name was Hubert Millier. His surname [*sic*] was, however, uniformly pronounced Mauley."¹² The information is meager, but it has the flavor of reality. Hubert Millier is hardly a name that anyone would simply manufacture, and "Mauley" would be a fairly natural

¹⁰ Robertson, "Reminiscence," in *South Dakota Historical Collections*, 20:590 (1940); Daniels to Return I. Holcombe, October 21, 1894, Holcombe Papers, owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

¹¹ Mrs. J. E. De Camp Sweet, "Narrative of Her Captivity in the Sioux Outbreak of 1862," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 6:378 (1894); Oscar G. Wall, *Recollections of the Sioux Massacre*, 173 (Lake City, 1909). See also Sioux Claims Commission documents, numbers 272 and 278, record group 75, National Archives.



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Holcombe's complaint that "the histories" give the name incorrectly as "Jacob Mauley" — a complaint echoed several times by that tireless explorer of outbreak history, Marion P. Satterlee — is bewildering. Heard introduced "Mauley," but where did Holcombe find the "Jacob"? Perhaps the explanation lies in the fact that there really was a Sioux War victim named Jacob *Mauerle*, who lived northwest of New Ulm and whose body was reported to have been savagely mutilated.¹³ Holcombe may well have confused the two names.

Another survivor who mentioned the ferryman is Benedict Juni, Jr. In his reminiscences, published in the *New Ulm Review* of July 30, 1902, he recalls that as a boy of fourteen, on the morning of the outbreak, he had his horse taken from him by Indians near the present site of Morton. After that mishap, he decided to avoid the beaten track: "I kept to the north . . . and circumvented the high rocks," he records. He then notes that "just before reaching the road again I saw the dead body of the ferry man lying in the grass. His little dog was sitting by it and licking the blood that was oozing out of the wounds about his

face." Complications were introduced into the story in 1916, when a slightly altered version of Juni's narrative appeared in a local history. There the supposed ferryman is identified as "a Frenchman, one of two brothers who were operating the ferry." That sentence caused Satterlee to conclude that "two brothers, named Martelle, owned the ferry." Of these, writes Satterlee, "Peter Martelle was killed near the stone mound at Morton, Oliver and wife reached the fort." Evidence that Peter's name was known to survivors of the uprising could have been found many years earlier in a place at once public and inconspicuous — the middle of a list of names on a monument erected in September, 1896, on the site of Fort Ridgely. Among the "Armed Citizens" whose names are inscribed there are Oliver and Pierre Martelle.¹⁴

When the monument was planned, B. H. Randall, who had commanded the armed citizens, apparently had trouble with the question of the two Martells. In letters concerning the monument, he listed Pierre as one of eleven civilians who had their own guns, but put Oliver's name at the end of a list of noncombatant refugees.¹⁵ Yet it seems likely that the Martell whom Randall clearly recalled was really Oliver.

ANOTHER controversy centering about the name and identity of Peter Martell developed in 1919, when the Minnesota legislature passed a law providing for the erection of monuments to victims of the Sioux Outbreak. The law specified that, because he "saved the lives of many citizens" during the massacre, a marker inscribed to Peter Martell should be erected at the ferry site. The plan was opposed by Satterlee and Julius Schmahl, then secretary of state. The latter believed that the marker should bear the name of Hubert Millier.¹⁶ As actually erected, it bears the following confused inscription: "In memory of Charlie Martel, whose bravery as ferryman at this point saved many settlers in the massacre of 1862."

¹³ Minnesota Valley Historical Society, *Sketches Historical and Descriptive of the Monuments and Tablets Erected . . . in Renville and Redwood Counties*, 23 (Morton, 1902). Holcombe, who served as historiographer of the group which published this booklet, prepared the text.

¹⁴ Bryant and Murch, *Great Massacre*, 145, 147; Satterlee, *Massacre by the Dakota Indians*, 45.

¹⁵ L. A. Fritsche, *History of Brown County*, 1:114 (Indianapolis, 1916); Satterlee, *Massacre by the Dakota Indians*, 16; *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, 2:193b. Satterlee learned about Peter Martell from Thomas Robertson, according to his card file, now among his papers in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

¹⁶ Randall to Timothy J. Sheehan, March 4, 5, 1896, Sheehan Papers in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

¹⁷ Minnesota, *Session Laws*, 1919, p. 579; Ray P. Chase, *Statement to the Nineteen Hundred Twenty-three Legislature*, 69; Satterlee to Schmahl, May 11, 1919; Schmahl to Satterlee, May 12, 1919, Satterlee Papers.

One would be tempted to conclude that there was no Peter Martell—that is, that Oliver himself was also called Pierre or Peter—if it were not for a wonderful yarn preserved by Henry Belland, Jr., and transmitted to Dr. William W. Folwell in an interview on January 19, 1907. According to Belland, Peter Martell, from whom Belland appears to have received the story directly, was a survivor of the first explosion at the the traders' stores west of the agency proper. He hid in a cellar until the Indians set the building afire, when he made a break toward the edge of the bluff. He knocked out his swiftest pursuer, snatched his tomahawk, and escaped into a thicket. After other chilling adventures, he finally got to Fort Ridgely—probably not until August 20.¹⁷

If this story is true, the man found by Juni was not Peter Martell. According to the original narrative the body was simply that of "the ferry man." Before the story was republished—with its detail of the two brothers—did someone point out that a person called "the ferryman," Oliver Martell, had unquestionably escaped? The description in the later version may have resulted from an attempt to reconcile that fact with an unshakable memory of the dead man as a ferry operator. Juni's narrative does not make absolutely clear where he found the body. It is possible that he saw the dead man mentioned by Sergeant Bishop, or he might even have seen a "man lying dead in the road, and his faithful dog watching by his side" reported by Mrs. Mary Hayden, a fugitive from Beaver Creek who passed over the same road followed by Juni on the morning of the Indian outbreak.¹⁸

Even if it can be established that the dead man was Hubert Millier, the question of the basic truth of Heard's story must be dealt with in the court of conjecture. It should be noted that according to his obituary "after hearing of the . . . massacre," Oliver Martell "bravely stayed by his ferry until a number of women and children

. . . were gotten across, and then started for the fort." This statement is supported by the fact that after Martell warned them, the Faribaults had not had time to finish saddling their horses before they saw "a wagon, drawn by two yoke of oxen and loaded with people, coming down the road." Nancy Faribault recalled that the refugees "asked us to put our horses to their wagon," and that just as the harnessing had been completed, she looked up the road toward the agency and saw the Indians coming. It thus seems likely that Oliver Martell remained at the ferry at least until one large group had been taken across the river, and then rode away to spread the alarm.¹⁹

The stubborn fact remains that the body that lay closest to the ferry was almost certainly that of a ferryman. Heard's story may have developed in part from the fact that Oliver Martell had helped some fugitives to safety, but it probably had roots also in the report that a helper of Martell's had been killed in flight after tarrying too long at the ferry landing.

Did one of the fugitives look back toward the landing and see there someone who had not taken advantage of an early chance to escape? It is to be hoped that the mystery may yet be solved. For Heard's story, even if much diluted, still leaves us with a respectable hero—perhaps two heroes. This aspect of the matter can be tested by anyone who will visit the site of the ferry on a mid-August morning, when the late summer dust drifts across the sluggish Minnesota like gunsmoke, and imagine what a decision to linger there for even a few minutes on August 18, 1862, must have involved.

¹⁷ The rough notes of Dr. Folwell's interview with Belland are in the Folwell Papers, Box 84. See also Folwell's notebooks, 3:136, 4:16, in the same collection, at the Minnesota Historical Society.

¹⁸ Bryant and Murch, *Great Massacre*, 110.

¹⁹ *St. Paul Dispatch*, December 26, 1904; Nancy McClure, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 6:449. Martell died at Big Stone City, South Dakota, where he settled in 1871. Doris L. Black, *History of Grant County, South Dakota*, 21, 27 (Milbank, 1935).



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