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# *The Prairie Island Community*

## *A Remnant of MINNESOTA SIOUX*

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A FAMILIAR THEME in American Indian history concerns the tribe or fragment of a tribe who either avoid government removal to some far-off reservation or who return to their original homeland after exile. The Cherokee offer the most celebrated example. When they were removed from their native territory in the Southeastern Uplands and relocated west of the Mississippi in 1838-39, a few families remained behind and were later joined by others who fled the new area set aside for them. Their descendants live today on the Qualla Reservation in North Carolina.

A Minnesota band of Mdewakanton Sioux provide another instance of this sort of back-trailing. These Indians survived not one, but two, removals, and their descendants are to be found on Prairie Island in Goodhue County. Sent first to a reservation on the Minnesota River after the treaty of Mendota in 1851, and then to the Santee Reservation in Nebraska after the Sioux Uprising of 1862, a few families drifted back to their old homes. They were eventually given official

recognition by the government and were allowed to remain on Prairie Island, where their children and grandchildren make up one of the few surviving Sioux communities in Minnesota today.

The Mdewakanton were one of the seven bands that composed the Sioux nation, and the first white men to visit the Minnesota country found them living near Mille Lacs Lake. The advance of the Chippewa, who had obtained firearms from the whites, forced them out of this region about the middle of the eighteenth century, and they moved southward to the lower Minnesota River and the Mississippi below the Falls of St. Anthony. One of the Mississippi River villages was situated a few miles above Lake Pepin and was headed by a series of chiefs bearing the titular name of Red Wing.<sup>1</sup> Zebulon M. Pike stopped there in 1805 and 1806. Henry R. Schoolcraft in 1820 reported the village to consist of four large and several small lodges with cornfields nearby. In the middle of the century the Mdewakanton numbered 1,750, of whom about three hundred were living at Red Wing's village in twenty-four bark or log houses. They called this spot "Hem-minne-cha" (also spelled "Khemnichan," "Remnica," and in various other ways), said to mean "hill-wood-wa-

<sup>1</sup> Frederick W. Hodge, ed., *Handbook of American Indians*, 1:678, 826-828, 2:364 (Bureau of American Ethnology, *Bulletins*, no. 30 - Washington, 1910); Newton H. Winchell, *The Aborigines of Minnesota*, 532, 537 (St. Paul, 1911).

ter," and they seem to have been deeply attached to it.<sup>2</sup> The river, its adjacent marshes, the woodlands, and the nearby prairie made an extremely desirable habitation for a people whose economy was still largely one of hunting, fishing, and food-gathering.

The story of the treaties of Traverse des Sioux and Mendota is well known. By the terms of this "monstrous conspiracy," as it has been called, the Lower Sioux — Mdewakanton and Wahpekute — relinquished their claims to a vast area in southeastern Minnesota and were given as partial compensation a tract of land twenty miles wide along the upper Minnesota River.<sup>3</sup> After the treaties were ratified in 1852, the Indians showed an understandable reluctance about moving to this reservation. The departure of those at Red Wing was hastened by the burning of their houses in the spring of 1853. One witness remarks that this was "evidently the work of incendiaries," who went unpunished.<sup>4</sup> By a combination of threats and inducements, nearly all the Sioux were eventually persuaded to move, so that, according to one source, fewer than twenty Mdewakanton and Wahpekute were living outside the reservation by 1862.<sup>5</sup>

After the uprising of 1862 had been quelled, virtually all the Minnesota Sioux were exiled from the state, and their rights under earlier treaties were abolished. About fifteen hundred of the Lower Sioux were held at Fort Snelling over the winter of 1862–63, and then thirteen hundred of them were shipped to Crow Creek on the Missouri. The remaining two hundred, who had been friendly to the whites, were allowed to return to the former reservation, where Congress had authorized their settlement on individual tracts of land. Opposition from white settlers in the area made this plan unworkable, and after wandering for a time, some of the Sioux settled near Mendota and Faribault. Eventually these groups died off or removed to Morton and elsewhere.<sup>6</sup>

After three years at Crow Creek the thousand or so who had survived the river trip and subsequent epidemics were moved

again — more for the convenience of the government, which had a supply problem, than because of the complaints of the Indians, who were thoroughly miserable there. This time they were taken down the Missouri to the mouth of the Niobrara River in Nebraska, where they were joined by another 280 Sioux, chiefly men who had been imprisoned at Mankato and later at Davenport, Iowa. From this time on the eastern Sioux are generally referred to as the Santee, a name apparently derived from their ancient dwelling place near Knife Lake (Isanti or Isanyati) in east-central Minnesota. They were placed on the Santee Reservation in the hope that they would become farmers, as some had before the uprising. Upon their arrival they settled first on the bank of the Missouri in a disconnected village of tents and log and earth huts roofed with sod. Thus they remained for two or three years, apparently making little effort to farm or otherwise establish themselves. The area chosen for their final home was rather rough and not especially suitable for cultivation. In addition, their previous experience with the

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<sup>2</sup> E. D. Neill, "Dakota Land and Dakota Life," and "Pike's Explorations in Minnesota, 1805–6," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 1:214, 309, 339 (St. Paul, 1902); Mentor L. Williams, ed., Henry R. Schoolcraft, *Narrative Journal of Travels through the Northwestern Regions of the United States . . . in the Year 1820*, 212 (East Lansing, Michigan, 1953); Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge, ed., *History of Goodhue County*, 33 (Chicago, 1909).

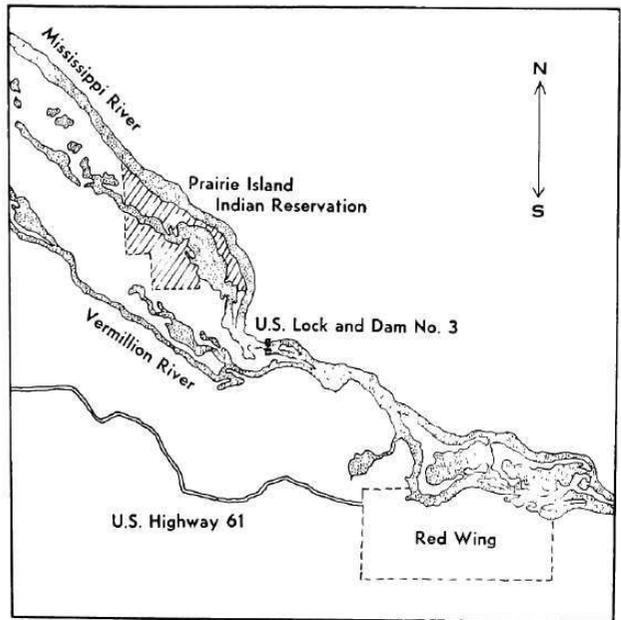
<sup>3</sup> Winchell, *Aborigines*, 554.

<sup>4</sup> [Joseph W. Hancock], *Goodhue County: Past and Present*, 185 (Red Wing, 1893). Hancock went to Red Wing's village in 1849 as a missionary and remained there for the rest of his life.

<sup>5</sup> Return I. Holcombe, *Minnesota in Three Centuries*, 2:322, 326 (Mankato, 1908). An early white settler on Prairie Island told his grandson years later that there were Indians on the island after 1853 and that two or three days before the Sioux Uprising in August, 1862, they held a night meeting around a campfire and suddenly disappeared. See Jay Edgerton, "Sioux Once Driven from Prairie Island," in *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, October 30, 1949, Upper Midwest sec., p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen R. Riggs, *Mary and I: Forty Years with the Sioux*, 208, 223 (Boston, 1880); Commissioner of Indian Affairs, *Reports*, 1866, p. 225–227, 235–239; William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 2:263 (St. Paul, 1924).

UPPER Goodhue County, showing  
the Prairie Island Indian  
Reservation as it was in 1958.



White Father's capriciousness had led them to be hesitant in settling anywhere.<sup>7</sup>

In a few years, however, many of the Indians were induced by their agent and by missionaries to build houses on farms which had been assigned to them. The government furnished teams and paid the Indians to break an acre of land. Soon they were dispersed about the reservation, making an effort to farm. By 1871 about a hundred families were living in houses on individual tracts and some six hundred acres were under cultivation.<sup>8</sup>

Under the Grant administration, Indian affairs were largely taken from the hands of the military and the corrupt Indian agents, and given to the Society of Friends. All four of the agents at Santee during this period were Quakers. They seem on the whole to have been devoted and sincere, although

<sup>7</sup> Commissioner of Indian Affairs, *Reports*, 1866, p. 213, 240; 1877, p. 147; Riggs, *Mary and I*, 230; Doane Robinson, *A History of the Dakota or Sioux Indians*, 23 (n.p., 1904).

<sup>8</sup> Commissioner of Indian Affairs, *Reports*, 1871, p. 163, 266.

<sup>9</sup> John Collier, *The Indians of the Americas*, 224 (New York, 1947). See also Oliver LaFarge, *As Long as the Grass Shall Grow*, 26 (New York, 1940).

they subscribed to the all-but-universal view that the best course to follow regarding the Indian was to transform him as quickly as possible into an approximation of the white man, eliminating his peculiarly Indian heritage—his customs, language, dress, and above all, his religion. A later Indian commissioner was to remark concerning this effort: "it may be that the world has never witnessed a religious persecution so implacable and so variously implemented."<sup>9</sup>

To judge from the agents' reports, they were reasonably successful in their efforts. The number of Indians wearing white man's clothes, the number of acres broken, and the number of houses with shingles and floors increased from year to year. So much progress had been made by the late 1870s that Santee had become a model reservation for other Sioux groups to visit and emulate. The government conducted a manual labor school, and religious groups operated two boarding schools. Yet the Indians were not happy. They longed for their old homes, they had no permanent title to their land, and nearly every spring they were disturbed by rumors of removal. Some neglected to plant crops, expecting to be hustled off else-

where before they could harvest them. A smallpox epidemic in 1873, together with departures discussed below, reduced the original population to 764 by 1880.<sup>10</sup>

During these years repeated attempts were made to have individuals given title to their assigned lands, both by the agents, who thought this solution best for the Indians, and by land-hungry whites, who wanted to acquire portions of the reservation. These efforts culminated in an executive order issued on February 8, 1885, which granted slightly more than half the reservation lands to individual Indians. Most of the remainder were returned to the public domain to be immediately taken up by white settlers, whose holdings soon checkerboarded the area. At once local whites pressured the Indians to dispose of their lands; they were even told that with the proceeds from the sales they could buy land near their old homes in Minnesota. Although the agent in 1886 pilloried this talk as utterly false, the government in that year made its first concerted effort to provide land for members of the Santee community who had made their way back to Minnesota.<sup>11</sup>

PRECISELY WHEN the departures from the Santee Reservation began is difficult to determine, since the movement was entirely extralegal, and — at least in the case of the people who went to Prairie Island — surreptitious. One group left Santee in 1869 and bought farms near Flandreau, Dakota Territory, where a colony of three hundred Sioux existed ten years later. In his report for 1878 the Santee agent mentioned that others had gone to Minnesota, presumably about the same time as the exodus to Flandreau. Later it was noted that some of the Flandreau people had gone to Minnesota. Since the agents at Santee were not concerned with the exact destination of the Indians who returned to Minnesota, there is nothing in their reports to indicate whether the emigrants went to their old reservations in the upper Minnesota Valley or to their earlier homes farther east.<sup>12</sup>

It is impossible to determine exactly when the Prairie Island colony was established, for information on this point is contradictory. The *Red Wing Argus* of December 22, 1887, stated that these Indians had been a public charge since 1868, which seems rather early. Another account, provided in part by a white resident on Prairie Island during this period, claims that the Sioux did not return until 1886 and that the only red men on the island before that were a few secret visitors who rode by night, or "good Indians" who carried a passport from Henry H. Sibley. The Indians' own records state that Mrs. Eliza Wells, who still lives on Prairie Island, went there in 1884. The state census of 1885 lists no Indians in Goodhue County, although small groups are indicated for Dakota, Scott, and Wabasha counties.<sup>13</sup> The fact that the federal government moved in 1886 to provide land for these people suggests that they had been in the locality for some time. The truth probably is that occasional visits by individuals to their old haunts led in time to longer visits by families, some of whom neglected to return to the Santee Reservation, and that by 1886 sufficient permanent settlement existed

<sup>10</sup> Commissioner of Indian Affairs, *Reports*, 1871, p. 441; 1876, p. 100; 1877, p. 147; 1878, p. 99; 1879, p. 106; 1880, p. 121.

<sup>11</sup> Commissioner of Indian Affairs, *Reports*, 1885, p. 136–141; 1886, p. 189. The bulk of the Santee Sioux remained in Nebraska. Although 1,248 were listed on the tribal rolls in 1950, only 299 were actually living on the reservation a decade later. See *Indians on Federal Reservations in the United States*, part 3, p. 1 (United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Public Health Service, *Publications* No. 615 — Washington, 1959); Llewellyn Kingsley, Superintendent, Winnebago Agency, Winnebago, Nebraska, to the author, August 3, 1960.

<sup>12</sup> Commissioner of Indian Affairs, *Reports*, 1871, p. 269; 1878, p. 99; 1879, p. 106; 1886, p. 193; Riggs, *Mary and I*, 265–267.

<sup>13</sup> Edgerton in *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, October 30, 1949; Minnesota, *Executive Documents*, 1886, vol. 1, p. 330, 337, 377, 391. A brief record of events in the Prairie Island community, begun by Thomas H. Rouillard and continued by his daughter, Mrs. Wells, has been translated from the Dakota language by Norman R. Campbell. A copy is owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

to oblige the government to take some action.

Probably one reason the Sioux found their way to Prairie Island was the fact that it had not been wholly taken up by the whites. Because of its limited agricultural resources and relative inaccessibility, the island was the last portion of Goodhue County to be settled. Although often described as an island in the Mississippi, the area is actually a part of the right bank of that river, cut off from the upland by an arm of the Vermillion River, which parallels the Mississippi from Hastings to the lower end of the island. Since the construction in 1938 of Lock and Dam Number 3 in the Mississippi and the diversion of the Vermillion, the "island" has become a peninsula. Slightly more than ten miles long and averaging two miles in width, Prairie Island is almost completely flat and only about sixteen feet above the average water level of the river; hence it is partially covered with lakes and sloughs and is subject to flooding. The soil is rich in humus but sandy, and in drought years crops which mature late are likely to dry up.

No specific mention was made of the Prairie Island group when Congress in 1884 appropriated ten thousand dollars to buy stock, tools, and other supplies for the Indians who had returned to Minnesota from Santee. In 1886 an appropriation of twenty thousand dollars was made, to be devoted to the purchase of lands, seed, provisions, and lumber for the houses of those members of the Mdewakanton band of Sioux in Min-

nesota who had severed relations with their tribe at Santee. Five thousand dollars of it went to the Prairie Island colony. Walter S. McLeod of Bloomington was appointed agent to buy land, and in the summer of 1887 he purchased three tracts comprising about 85 acres in Goodhue County, 98 acres in Scott County, and 10 acres in Dakota County, as well as a larger area in Redwood County. Robert B. Henton of Morton, who succeeded McLeod, made further purchases in 1889, 1890, and 1891. These included 120 acres in Goodhue County, 258 in Scott, 40 in Dakota, and 110 in Wabasha. No permanent Indian communities, except Prairie Island, grew up on these lands, although those in Scott County are still farmed by four Indian families. The other land has long since passed out of Indian ownership.<sup>14</sup>

Until the appropriation of 1886 could be put into effect, Goodhue County continued, somewhat unwillingly, to look after the welfare of the Indians on Prairie Island, as it had for some years. In November, 1887, several county officials visited Hastings H. Hart, secretary of the state board of corrections and charities, to learn whether it was incumbent upon the county to support these Indians. Hart wrote them the next month that the attorney general had informed him that under the constitution these Indians were a legitimate charge upon the county. Frank M. Wilson, the county attorney, disputed this interpretation, and in response to a telegram from him, Hart appeared before the board of county commissioners early in January, 1888. There followed some correspondence between the county attorney and the Indian bureau, which apparently resulted in the land purchase of 1889.<sup>15</sup>

The number of Indians on Prairie Island at this time was quite small. Although the census of 1890 gives Goodhue County an Indian population of sixty, a list of names filed with the county auditor that same year shows only forty-six on Prairie Island. In the next couple of years, Indians from around Wabasha and other points moved

<sup>14</sup> Commissioner of Indian Affairs, *Reports*, 1888, p. lxxvi, 333; 1891, part 1, p. 110, 178; *Argus*, December 22, 1887; *United States Census*, 1950, *Population*, part 23, p. 122; *United States, Statutes at Large*, 58:274; Dakota County Register of Deeds, Miscellaneous Record, book Q, 609; Abstract Books, no. 27, p. 73, among the county archives at Hastings; *United States Indian Population and Land*, 14 (Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, *Reports*—September, 1960); interview with Casimir L. Le Beau, Field Representative, Minnesota Agency, Bemidji, July 14, 1960.

<sup>15</sup> *Argus*, December 22, 1887; Goodhue County Board of Commissioners, "Proceedings," 1888, p. 128, 131, on file in the office of the county auditor, Red Wing.



A Sioux summer dwelling, Prairie Island, 1898

in, with the result that there were said to be nearly a hundred people in the community by February, 1892.<sup>16</sup>

IF ONE is to judge from the infrequent notice given the Prairie Island colony in the local newspapers, the attitude of the surrounding white community was not altogether sympathetic. When these Indians are mentioned at all, it is in tones of condescension and tolerant amusement, and attention tends to be focused on the occasional cases of drunkenness, petty thievery, and quarreling within the band. When a Sioux drowned in 1893 while returning from Red Wing in a canoe laden with a fifty-pound plow and some provisions, the tragic effect was vitiated in the eyes of the writer reporting the incident by the discovery of a half-empty bottle of whisky in the dead man's pocket. Some indication of the popular attitude may be gained from the fact that when an Indian paid off his debts it was news. An 1891 newspaper carried the story of a certain unidentified Indian (the names were always given in the case of misdemeanors) who several times had borrowed the money from the Episcopal rector to buy schoolbooks for his children and then later paid back the entire sum out of wages. The writer comments patronizingly: "This speaks volumes for the honesty of the man, as well as for his desire for his children to receive advantages of which he had been deprived, and also shows that he, at least, is adopting some of the better features of the white man's civilization."<sup>17</sup>

Despite unfavorable soil conditions, the Prairie Island Indians made attempts to earn a living from farming. Throughout the 1890s they raised potatoes and corn, as well as some wheat, oats, and beans. They also supplemented their income in a variety of ways. For example, they often presented dances as part of the Fourth of July program in Red Wing. In this way they once took in more than a hundred dollars. They also picked and sold wild grapes and sometimes collected bounties on wolves.<sup>18</sup>

On the whole, however, the history of the Prairie Island community has been one of poverty. Despite the infrequency of references to them in local papers—at a time when every runaway horse in the county was reported—there is evidence to show that their poverty was chronic. Two men died in the spring of 1888, and on both occasions the Episcopal rector requested that old shoes, boots, and other clothing be donated to the relatives who attended the funerals. The church missionary society served lunch to the mourners and sent enough provisions home with them to last for several days.<sup>19</sup> On February 13, 1895, the *Red Wing Daily Republican* reprinted an article from the *Hastings Democrat*,

<sup>16</sup> *United States Census*, 1890, *Indians*, 336; list of Indians on Prairie Island, October 21, 1890, in the Goodhue County auditor's office; *Red Wing Daily Republican*, February 10, 1892.

<sup>17</sup> *Daily Republican*, April 13, 26, 1893; *Argus*, October 29, 1891.

<sup>18</sup> *Daily Republican*, July 5, 6, October 11, 1892; June 1, 1893.

<sup>19</sup> *Argus*, April 19, May 2, 1888.

which reported that an Indian woman about sixty years of age had died of starvation on Prairie Island, leaving three children. The writer commented that almost all the Indians there "are in want of the necessities of life." He called for charity, adding that these people "cannot make their wants known, and they don't know how to work, and could not obtain employment if they did."

It might be supposed that merely surviving would be as much as these Indians could do. During these trying years, however, they managed to retain their identity, to learn much from the white community around them, and even to give something to that community, as when they presented their dances or when a group of Red Wing baseball players obtained a pitcher from Prairie Island. When, in 1906, the women of the Indian community contributed several homemade garments for a box to be sent to an orphanage in Minneapolis, a Red Wing newspaper headlined the item "Indian Women of Prairie Island Helping Less Fortunate Whites."<sup>20</sup>

That the dances survived is remarkable, since they were a feature of the native culture that the Indian agents and missionaries were at one time most determined to stamp out. In 1888 the agent at Santee reported indignantly that some of his charges had gone to St. Paul to attend dances given by their Minnesota brethren. The result, he said, was a bad influence on some of the "least progressive" of the Santee. One objection to the perpetuation of old customs, such as dances, was that they supposedly conflicted with the Indians' profession of

Christianity. Nominally Christianized before the Sioux Uprising and repeatedly said by their agents to be "all Christians" at Santee, these people remained under suspicion in this respect long after their return to Prairie Island. A white pioneer who lived on the island for many years stated in reminiscences probably written about 1925, that many of the Indians were "still astraddle of the fence in some things relating to their old faith and superstitions."<sup>21</sup>

Yet their loyalty to the Episcopal faith has been constant since their return from exile, and the little congregation on the island has been over the years one of the principal unifying forces in the community. For the first twenty years after the Indians' return to Prairie Island, the congregation was held together by services conducted in homes by native ministers like Thomas H. Rouillard. The Indians also attended the Red Wing Episcopal Church, where they customarily sat in the rear. In 1905 a church building, originally erected at Point Douglas, was ferried down to Prairie Island and re-erected on land acquired the previous year by the diocese of Minnesota. Since then the Chapel of the Messiah, as it is called, has been served by the Episcopal rector in Red Wing. It was long customary to sing one hymn in Dakota, and as late as the observance of the church's fiftieth anniversary in 1955, the Holy Communion service was conducted in the native language. This practice has since been discontinued.<sup>22</sup>

THE FIRST thirty years of the twentieth century on Prairie Island differed little from the last decade of the nineteenth. Unmarked by major events, this period saw a gradual accommodation to the surrounding white society; the dying off of those who had participated in the exile and the return, and their replacement by younger people born on Prairie Island. The children were aware of the history of the group only through what they were told by their elders. Still, the geographical and cultural isolation of the community persisted to some extent, par-

<sup>20</sup> *Daily Republican*, June 16, 1892; April 17, 1906.

<sup>21</sup> Commissioner of Indian Affairs, *Reports*, 1888, p. 173; untitled manuscript by Alfred A. Johnson, owned by the Goodhue County Historical Society, Red Wing.

<sup>22</sup> *Daily Republican*, May 2, 1940; *Red Wing Daily Republican Eagle*, October 6, 1955; "Indian Women of the Diocese Are Active and Interested," in *Minnesota Missionary*, May, 1931, p. 14; interview with the Reverend Monroe Bailie, rector of Christ Church, Red Wing, June 23, 1960.

tially because its members wished to have it so.

When the depression of the 1930s came, the Prairie Island people, who had never enjoyed much economic margin of safety, were faced by the most serious crisis since their return to the island. Between 1884 and 1899 Congress had appropriated \$85,328.83 for the benefit of the various Sioux groups in Minnesota, and by an act of June 21, 1906, the Prairie Islanders had shared in the division of three million dollars appropriated for the Sioux nation in 1889. Wilbur E. Meagley of the Santee Agency made the final payments to the Prairie Island people in June, 1907. After that, they do not appear to have received any substantial aid from the federal government, and their condition gradually deteriorated until by 1935 they were in desperate straits.<sup>23</sup>

The seriousness of the situation is reflected in the language of a resolution adopted by the Goodhue County board of commissioners on June 7, 1935. It says, in part, that the Prairie Island Sioux "are at present on government relief, destitute and unable to support themselves having nothing except certain lands granted to them for their support." These lands, it goes on, "are so small and inadequate that it is impossible for them to make a living from these tracts." The resolution recommends that "the Indian Bureau of the United States government procure additional land for these Indians in order that they may be able to secure their livelihood from agricultural pursuits."<sup>24</sup>

In an effort to meet this crisis, the Prairie Island community took advantage of the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, which authorized Indian communities to adopt constitutions and bylaws for purposes of self-government and to incorporate as legal entities in order to further their economic development. A constitution was drawn up and adopted by a vote of thirty-five to four in an election held on May 23, 1936. The preamble deserves quotation, if only because of its somewhat grandiloquent lan-

guage: "We, the Minnesota Mdewakanton Sioux residing on the Prairie Island Reservation under the Pipestone jurisdiction in the State of Minnesota, in order to form a more perfect union, develop our natural resources, insure our domestic tranquillity, promote the general welfare, to enjoy certain rights of home rule, to provide education in schools of higher learning including vocational, trade, high schools, and colleges for our people, and to secure the opportunities offered us under the Indian Reorganization Act, do hereby establish the following Constitution and Bylaws."<sup>25</sup>

The document provided for the election of a five-member community council, which would in turn appoint four chairmen to deal with land, agriculture, forests, conservation, and public welfare. Commendable as were the motives which led to the adoption of this constitution, its provisions were rather too ambitious for a community of eighty-two people with virtually no natural resources to develop, with no forests to be administered, and a welfare problem far too big to be handled by a local public welfare chairman. Hence it has not proved as useful a tool as it might have been had the group been larger and more favorably located. The council continues to function, however, and holds quarterly meetings at which matters relating to law and order, welfare, education, and land management are discussed.<sup>26</sup>

The corporate charter, which was drawn up and ratified on July 23, 1937, by a vote of thirty-nine to three, provided for the incorporation of the group as "The Prairie Island Indian Community." Among the purposes

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<sup>23</sup> *Santee Claim Case, Evidence for Defendants*, 127 (Court of Claims, no. 33,728); United States, *Statutes at Large*, 34:356, 25:888; *Daily Republican*, June 13, 1907; Mr. Homer B. Jenkins, Chief, Branch of Tribal Programs, Bureau of Indian Affairs, to the author, April 21, 1961.

<sup>24</sup> Goodhue County Board of Commissioners, "Proceedings," 1935, p. 323.

<sup>25</sup> *Constitution and Bylaws of the Prairie Island Indian Community in Minnesota*, 1 (Washington, 1936).

<sup>26</sup> *Constitution*, 2; Mr. Norman R. Campbell to the author, October 4, 1960.

of this act were "to secure for the members of the Community an assured economic independence; and to provide for the proper exercise by the Community of various functions heretofore performed by the Department of the Interior."<sup>27</sup> Here, too, the effectiveness of this plan was largely frustrated by the small size of the group and its inadequate economic base.

Partly in response to the appeal from the county commissioners, the federal government made several land purchases on behalf of the Prairie Island Indians in 1937 and 1938. The original purchase made in 1887 had been divided into small tracts and deeded directly to individuals, while the 120 acres bought two years later had been retained by the government in trust status and assigned in ten-acre tracts. Now a much larger area was purchased, including portions of the original tract which had passed out of Indian hands. It brought the total federal holdings to 534 acres. In addition, five small houses were built, each measuring twelve by fourteen feet, and an inventory of the economic potential of the community was prepared by Clyde G. Sherman, associate credit agent of the Indian bureau.<sup>28</sup>

This inventory is valuable, not only as the most detailed study ever made of the Prairie Island community, but also as an

illustration, in miniature, of the problems facing Indian communities throughout the country. Sherman found that of the 120 acres of tribal land remaining before the 1937-38 purchases, only nineteen were being farmed, all by one man. The rest were idle or leased to whites. The entire community contained one cow, one horse, twenty-five chickens, one buggy, one cultivator, and one plow. During the drought years even the subsistence gardens had been neglected. Of the sixteen houses located there, only three had more than three rooms and six had only one room. The average annual family income during 1935 and 1936 had been \$166.45, of which \$97.12 came from relief and government-sponsored labor. An average of \$43.57 per family was earned annually from the sale of handicrafts, mainly drums marketed through a Minneapolis firm.<sup>29</sup>

Sherman's study recommended several methods of raising the living standards of the Prairie Island Sioux. Based on the assumption that these people would continue to live on the island and not seek employment elsewhere, Sherman's proposals centered about improving the efficiency of their subsistence farming, the only kind of agriculture feasible under the existing conditions. Families were urged to co-operate in the use of the land, to produce all the food they could for home consumption, and to improve their methods of canning and food preservation. Muskrat trapping was suggested as a possible source of cash income when the dam then being built raised the

<sup>27</sup> *Corporate Charter of the Prairie Island Indian Community in Minnesota*, 1 (Washington, 1938).

<sup>28</sup> Clyde G. Sherman, "An Economic Survey of the Prairie Island Indian Community in Minnesota," 7, an unpublished study in the possession of the Minnesota Agency, Bemidji.

<sup>29</sup> Sherman, "Economic Survey," 3, 8, 9, 11, 13.

INDIAN farm  
on Prairie  
Island, 1960



water level and produced ponds and sloughs.<sup>30</sup>

In view of the note of desperation detectable in these proposals, it is not surprising to find the *Minneapolis Tribune* of March 10, 1948, reporting that of the families started in farming in the 1930s, only one was still at it. The situation has remained much the same since then. Until quite recently one man, operating nearly eighty acres, had farmed consistently with the assistance of funds from the council. Except for gardens, this is apparently all the agriculture practiced among the Prairie Island Sioux. In an era when white farmers cannot make an adequate living from eighty acres or even more, one does not have to seek far for the reasons why untrained Indians, with no machinery and no agricultural tradition, are unable to manage on ten-acre plots of submarginal land.

THE PRAIRIE ISLAND community today, if not quite a rural slum, at least qualifies as a depressed area. In 1959 it was estimated that the average annual income was about a thousand dollars per family.<sup>31</sup> Even if they wished to do so, its residents, numbering approximately a hundred and living on less than a square mile of land, could not support themselves by agriculture at a level comparable to that of their white neighbors. The problem is further complicated by the fact that the population, like that of other Minnesota Indian communities, is predominantly young and growing. The increase of the Minnesota Sioux has been phenomenal: from 271 in 1920 to 371 in 1930, 548 in 1940, and 656 in 1950—an over-all increase of 142 per cent in thirty years. Goodhue County's Indian population, located largely on Prairie Island, has grown even more rapidly: from 43 in 1920 to 83 in 1930, 111 in 1940, and 121 in 1950—nearly 177 per cent. More than half of the Prairie Island people today are under twenty-one.<sup>32</sup>

If the Prairie Island community is somewhat better off economically in 1961 than it was in 1937, this improvement is due

mainly to off-reservation employment. Some men from the island work seasonally for white farmers or are employed as construction laborers or at factories in Red Wing, Hastings, and elsewhere. Few, however, are trained for anything but day labor, and in the event of a layoff, they are among the first to be released. Although it would be hard to document the charge, there almost certainly is an element of discrimination involved in the difficulty these Indians have in finding jobs. In 1947 a questionnaire was sent by the Governor's Interracial Commission to 110 employers in small Minnesota cities located near Indian reservations. Although most replies indicated that these employers would hire Indians, many distinguished between "good" and "bad" Indians, and some spoke of high absenteeism, drinking, and irresponsibility.<sup>33</sup>

Off-reservation employment provides income for those who are able and willing to take advantage of it, yet most of the Prairie Island people derive a living from the manufacture of souvenirs, from leasing land to white farmers, and from various forms of public assistance, such as disability payments, old age pensions, aid to dependent children, and direct relief. The director of the Goodhue County welfare service estimates that at least sixty per cent of them

<sup>30</sup> Sherman, "Economic Survey," 22.

<sup>31</sup> United States Public Health Service, "Basic Data: Prairie Island Sioux Community," 2, an unpublished survey compiled by the Indian Health Office, Bemidji. The president and vice-president of the community council on Prairie Island believe the figure given here is low. A study published in 1956 placed the average income at \$150 to \$200 per month. See Cynthia Kelsey, "Changing Social Relationships in an Eastern Dakota Community," in Minnesota Academy of Science, *Proceedings*, 1956, v. 24, p. 12.

<sup>32</sup> Governor's Interracial Commission, *The Indian in Minnesota*, 37 (St. Paul? 1947); *The Indian in Minnesota (Revised)*, 35 (1952); *United States Census, 1930, Population*, part 1, p. 1220; 1940, *Population*, part 4, p. 75; 1950, *Population*, part 23, p. 122; interview with Mr. Norman R. Campbell and Mr. Wallace Wells of the community council, November 26, 1960. The high mobility of the Prairie Island people makes it difficult to say just how many are resident there at any given time.

<sup>33</sup> *Indian in Minnesota* (1947), 64-66.

normally receive some kind of aid; in winter, a slack season for employment, the proportion is greater.<sup>34</sup>

To the average white visitor, who tends to measure civilization in terms of bathtubs and picture windows, the Prairie Island community presents the down-at-the-heels appearance that characterizes so many Indian settlements. Few of the occupied houses are comparable, however, to the tar paper shacks one sees on the northern Minnesota Chippewa reservations, and the best of them are indistinguishable from those of the average white farmer in the vicinity. Half are heated by oil, the rest by wood or coal. Seven or eight are wired for electricity. There are about eleven refrigerators in the community, of both the electric and gas type; most cooking is done with gas. There are sixteen wells on the home premises, though all water is obtained from outdoor pumps. Almost all the families own automobiles, and several have television.<sup>35</sup>

Have the Prairie Island people been assimilated? If assimilation means the general use of the English language, adoption of the clothing and manners of the surrounding white civilization, and some degree of participation in the general life of the larger community, then the Prairie Island Sioux

may be said to have been largely assimilated. The majority of the younger people are fluent only in English, which nearly all members of the community understand, but the older people prefer not to speak.<sup>36</sup>

The Prairie Island people dress like non-Indians, play canasta, watch television, and exercise the same political rights as their white neighbors (twenty-two votes were cast in the November 8, 1960, general election). Nevertheless, they retain a strong group consciousness and a recognition of themselves as Indians. Besides the use of the Dakota language, mainly by the older people, there are various practices — such as occasionally giving Indian names to children, holding special christening and funeral ceremonies, or placing shells and bits of pottery or china on graves — which seem to be survivals of earlier customs. Since 1958 the community has sponsored an annual public powwow at which Indians from other communities perform.<sup>37</sup>

It should be noted emphatically that these people are Indians. The 1937 survey showed that forty-five of the eighty-two people then resident on the island were full bloods, and only one individual was listed as having less than one half Indian blood. The proportion of non-Indian blood has increased since then, but reliable figures are difficult to obtain, as the tribal rolls have not been revised since 1934. It seems certain, however, that the proportion of Indian blood is higher than in the parent Santee community in Nebraska, where only five per cent were considered full bloods in 1950. But the Prairie Island people are not all Sioux; the community also includes Winnebago, Chippewa, and, until recently, one Cherokee. This infusion of non-Sioux stock is the result of exogamous marriages necessitated by the blood relationship of most of the people in the community and the consequent lack of eligible mates at home — a lack which has been cited as a reason some young men leave at their first chance for military service or off-reservation jobs. Twenty-two Indians have left during the past decade.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Kelsey in Academy of Science, *Proceedings*, 13; interview with Mr. Alvin Halvorson, Director, Goodhue County Welfare Service, June 23, 1960.

<sup>35</sup> Public Health Service, "Basic Data," 6; Kelsey in Academy of Science, *Proceedings*, 13; interview with Mr. Campbell and Mr. Wells.

<sup>36</sup> Interviews with Mrs. Raymond H. Nelson, former teacher in the Prairie Island school, July 6 and September 2, 1960; interview with Mr. Campbell and Mr. Wells.

<sup>37</sup> Interviews with Mrs. Nelson, Mr. Campbell, and Mr. Wells.

<sup>38</sup> Sherman, "Economic Survey," 3; *Indians on Federal Reservations*, part 3, p. 1; Kelsey in Academy of Science, *Proceedings*, 16; interview with Mrs. Nelson. In June, 1960, the Minnesota Agency conducted an informal survey of the fifty-four people residing on tribal lands in the Prairie Island community. It was found that eight were full bloods, twenty-three were three-quarters Indian, twenty-one were one half Indian, and two were one quarter or less Indian. See L. W. Chisholm, Acting Superintendent, Minnesota Agency, to the author, November 22, 1960.

Adequate education for these young people has been a problem at Prairie Island, as it is on Indian reservations elsewhere, but the situation seems to be improving. A recent survey showed that the average educational level for all adults was 8.7 grades, but the average for those between twenty and thirty years of age was 10.5 grades. Until 1953 a rural school was operated in the community as a part of the Goodhue County school system but with federal aid because of the tax-free status of Indian land. Since that time the children have attended the Burnside Township consolidated school, now a part of the Red Wing school system. Many who are acquainted with the community believe that the more rigid attendance standards of the Burnside school, as well as the opportunity to compete from the earliest grades with non-Indians, will be of benefit to the Prairie Island children and may give them greater incentive to continue through high school. Although several had started high school in Red Wing, none graduated until 1951. Since then a number have completed their high school work. In 1959 there were twenty-four children enrolled at Burnside and four high school students at Red Wing.<sup>39</sup>

PRAIRIE ISLAND illustrates on a small scale the dilemma facing many Indian groups in the United States — too little land for complete dependence on agriculture and no readily available alternative source of income. It is a truism that there is no single “Indian problem” but a multiplicity of them, with no one answer that will suffice for all. The most conspicuously successful solutions so far have come about through the Indians’ own initiative and planning, while schemes imposed upon them by non-Indians, however well intentioned, have almost invariably failed. Before applying this principle to Prairie Island, however, one should recognize that the Indian communities which have in some measure solved their problems have been fairly large, numbering several thousand people and possessing sub-

stantial tracts of land. Whether a group as small as that at Prairie Island, with so little land available, can initiate and carry out a plan to solve their present dilemma is problematical. A few individuals have found personal solutions by leaving the community and taking their places in the larger world of non-Indians. Perhaps in time those who remain on the reservation will evolve a community solution which will enable them to achieve material prosperity and at the same time preserve their group identity. But the signs of it are not yet apparent.

In June, 1960, archaeological excavations on Prairie Island were begun by Dr. Elden Johnson, state archaeologist, under the auspices of the Minnesota Historical Society and with the assistance of a two-thousand-dollar grant from the Northern States Power Company, which has acquired some 450 acres of land where it plans to build a generating plant. According to early press releases, evidences of a culture dating back at least four thousand years were found along with artifacts from more recent periods.<sup>40</sup> At the time these discoveries were being made, the modern Prairie Island Sioux were meeting to lay plans for the powwow held from July 9 to 11. Although there have been long gaps in the Indian occupancy of the island, and although the present inhabitants in all probability are not descended from those of four thousand years ago, there is in these two events, juxtaposed in the summer of 1960, a suggestion of the tenacity and endurance of the American Indian. If the people of Prairie Island can demonstrate a creative power comparable to the ability to survive that has carried them through two exiles and more than a half-century of poverty, their future may yet be bright.

<sup>39</sup> Public Health Service, “Basic Data,” 3–5; interviews with Mrs. Nelson, Mr. Campbell, and Mr. Wells.

<sup>40</sup> *Minneapolis Star*, June 15, 1960; *Daily Republican Eagle*, July 14, 1960; *St. Paul Dispatch*, July 13, 1960; *Minnesota History News*, June, 1960.

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