MYRICK'S INSULT

A fresh look at myth and reality

Gary Clayton Anderson

HISTORYANS of the western frontier are generally familiar with the established causes of the tumultuous Dakota War, or Sioux Uprising, of August, 1862. Discontented with the treaties that forfeited lands in Minnesota and tired of the corruption inherent in the Indian bureau's distribution of annuities, in retrospect the eastern Dakota, or Sioux, people seemed ripe for rebellion. In addition, the chances for trouble increased after the Civil War broke out; promised money annuities were delayed, and white males on the frontier departed to fight in the East and South. The long-range problems, however, sometimes are given less attention than the actions of one Andrew J. Myrick, a trader on the Dakota reservations in 1862. It was Myrick who supposedly refused food to the Indians and replied to their entreaties by saying: "So far as I am concerned, if they are hungry, let them eat grass."

This heartless paraphrase of Marie Antoinette is frequently seen as the catalyst that spurred Dakota leader Little Crow and several hundred Mdewakanton warriors into rebellion. Clearly recent historians of Indian-white relations see Myrick's role as crucial. In The Long Death: The Last Days of the Plains Indians, Ralph Andrist subtitled his discussion of the war: "Let Them Eat Grass." After Myrick apparently made his fateful comments, Andrist concludes, his words "were repeated among the Sioux — with sullen satisfaction by the most ardently anti-white factions." Dee Brown, on the other hand, notes that Little Crow was the most affected by Myrick's comments, the trader's words hitting the chief as "hot blasts upon his already seared emotions." Just two days after the supposed council with Myrick, Little Crow received word of the killings of five white settlers near Acton, Minnesota, by hunters from his tribe. After an all-night debate he finally decided to join in a war against the whites. The first assault took place on the morning of August 18 at the Lower, or Redwood, Agency near present-day Redwood Falls.


The author thanks Alan R. Woolworth and the staff in the archives and manuscripts division at the MHS for invaluable assistance in the preparation of this article.

2 Andrist, The Long Death, 31 (New York, 1964); Brown, Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the
The above sequence of events has been repeated so often by so many authorities that challenging its accuracy seems tantamount to debating the very outcome of the destruction that followed. Yet several chronological difficulties not known to earlier historians strongly suggest that Myrick's insult did not occur at the Lower Agency, nor is it likely that the council could have taken place immediately before the war. This is not to say that Myrick's insult did not take place; rather, that discrepancies in the traditional interpretation of the event make it necessary to take a closer look at the impact of the comment. In addition, such an assessment leads to a better understanding of the origins of the war by offering a different vantage point from which to re-examine those crucial days in early August when the lives of so many people on Minnesota's frontier were affected by a brutal confrontation between Indians and whites.

Scholars know very little about Andrew J. Myrick. Along with his brother, Nathan, he kept stores at the Lower and Upper agencies, which were opened for the eastern Dakota along the upper Minnesota River in 1853 after they had sold their claims to Minnesota lands in treaties negotiated two years before. Like other traders, the Myricks spent most of their time at the Lower Agency, closer to St. Paul, rather than at the Upper Agency, 30 miles northwest of Redwood Falls near Yellow Medicine. Traders had become essential to the existence of the Dakota people by the 18th century. Their role as suppliers of manufactured goods, especially arms, increased during the first half of the 19th century. By the 1850s, men like the Myricks made a substantial profit on the two Dakota reservations by selling goods to Indians on credit and then claiming the cash received by individuals at the time the government distributed money annuities.\(^3\)

By spring, 1862, this commerce had taken on added importance because of the growing difficulty that the government experienced in meeting its obligations to the Indians. The Civil War directed attention away from Indian matters, and Congress and the Bureau of Indian Affairs delayed in providing the necessary funds. Conversely, the Dakota had gradually reached a point where they felt that traders were taking advantage of them, demanding all of their annuity funds in exchange for relatively few goods. A clash seemed inevitable. It began at the Upper, or Yellow Medicine, Agency, when a native soldiers' lodge, or military society, resolved to stop the payment normally given to traders. The Sisseton and Wahpeton at Yellow Medicine made known their complaints in a council held with Lieutenant Timothy J. Sheehan, commander of a part of the Fifth Minnesota Volunteer Regiment sent to Yellow Medicine to keep order during the annuity distribution.\(^4\)

Sheehan had arrived at the Upper Agency on July 2, 1862, with 101 men. Shortly thereafter he realized that the cash annuities had not yet arrived and that the normally peaceful Indians were demanding food. On August 4 a crisis ensued after Dakota warriors raided a government warehouse. Sheehan immediately sought and received reinforcements from Fort Ridgely. Four days of intense discussions followed. Government officials, including army officers and Indian Agent Thomas J. Galbraith, finally convinced the 6,000 Dakota people involved to leave peacefully for a buffalo hunt. By August 8

\(^3\)For an analysis of the 1851 treaties, see Lucile M. Kane, "The Sioux Treaties and the Traders," in Minnesota History, 32:65-80 (June, 1951). See also "The Indian Payments," in North-Western Democrat (Minneapolis), March 22, 1856; Sarah F. Wakefield, Six Weeks in the Sioux Tepees: A Narrative of Indian Captivity, 7 (2nd ed., Shakopee, 1864).

\(^4\)Timothy J. Sheehan, Diary, July 8, 1862, Sheehan Papers, MHS. On the money issue, see Folwell, Minnesota, 2:237. Agent Galbraith felt that the problems in getting the annuities were related to a conspiracy within the Bureau of Indian Affairs to discredit his administration. There is evidence that political friends pressured Indian superintendent Clark W. Thompson to delay the payment in order to increase the indebtedness of Indians to traders. See Galbraith to Thompson, July 19, August 6, 1862, C. B. Hensley, a Mankato journalist, to Thompson, May 20, 1862, and D. L. Hew to Thompson, August 13, 1862 — all in Thompson Papers, MHS. Galbraith to Henry B. Whipple, May 31, 1862, Whipple Papers, MHS.
all seemed quiet again, and both Galbraith and the militia at Yellow Medicine left for the Lower Agency. Galbraith reached Redwood on August 13 and spoke with Little Crow two days later. According to the standard interpretation of events, it was during this brief discussion that the Dakota chief conferred with the traders led by Myrick. The insult supposedly took place as the Dakota pleaded for assistance.

Unfortunately, Galbraith failed to leave a description of the council in his extensive account of events preceding the outbreak. This seems surprising in light of the emphasis that is placed upon the Myrick insult by some historians. Even more unusual is the description offered by the notes that Galbraith took on his meeting with Little Crow on August 15. “I had an interview with Little Crow,” the agent said, “and he seemed to be well pleased and satisfied. Little, indeed, did I suspect at that time that he would be the leader of the terrible outbreak of the 18th.” An “interview” is definitely not a council, and Galbraith failed to mention the traders or Myrick. In addition, the agent indicated that by August 15 corn and vegetable crops had matured and the Indians were harvesting them, providing some explanation for Little Crow’s apparent friendliness. Possibly Galbraith was trying to absolve himself from responsibility for the subsequent violence by mentioning the abundance of food, but most observers agreed that the crops of 1862 were the most substantial ever produced on the agency lands, and they would have fed the Lower Sioux Indians throughout the coming winter. The fact is that Little Crow and the majority of the Mdewakanton were not destitute on August 15.

A close inspection of primary sources reveals no contemporary mention of a council occurring on or near August 15. Not until the 1919 publication of Winifred Barton’s biography of her missionary father, John P. Williamson, was Myrick’s insult put into the context of such a meeting. Barton gave a detailed description of the event, repeating the story as it had been handed down. But she failed to give a date, indicating only that the council occurred just before the outbreak. As for the participants, Barton noted that “hundreds” of Indians were present, along with “storekeepers,” traders, the agent, and her father. After the Indians haggled with the agent over the distribution of food, Galbraith finally turned to Myrick, who was acting as spokesman for the other merchants. When Myrick told the Dakota to “eat grass,” the regular interpreter refused to repeat it. Then Galbraith apparently asked Williamson, who had grown up with the Dakota, to give an accurate translation. After he did so, the Indians stood silent for a moment and then “broke into weird and savage war-whoops.”

Despite her failure to date the event or to indicate where it occurred, Barton’s story gained the attention of William Watts Folwell, who later wrote a definitive history of Minnesota. Folwell noted the omissions in 1919 when he began collecting materials for his chapters on the Dakota War. Other scholars would borrow and enlarge Folwell’s discussion of the events surrounding the Myrick insult, but it was he who first sought to ferret out the truth surrounding the trader’s role. The detective work could not have been in better hands, for Folwell was a thorough and concise scholar who worked by the strict principles of classical “scientific” history.

From the start, Folwell had strong suspicions regarding the verbal exchange. He had access to Galbraith’s report, where there was no mention of a council — just an “interview” with Little Crow. Hoping to find further evidence of the insult, Folwell began a writing campaign, seeking some verification of Barton’s account.

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5Sheehan, Diary, August 4–13, 1862. Galbraith, a political appointee, was inexperienced, arrogant, and a “hard drinker”; some of his contemporaries, including Little Crow and Folwell, considered him responsible in part for the uprising. Lucius F. Hubbard and Return I. Holcombe, Minnesota in Three Centuries, 3:292 (St. Paul, 1908); Meyer, History of the Santee Sioux, 110.


7Barton, John P. Williamson, 47–51.

8Folwell to Dr. A. W. Daniels, February 20, 1919, Folwell Papers, MHS.

THE STONE WAREHOUSE at the Lower Sioux Agency, built by the government shortly before the uprising; Agent Thomas J. Galbraith’s initials appear on the gable on the other side of the structure.
WILLIAM WATTS FOLWELL, working at his typewriter not long after he concluded his painstaking research into the Myrick incident

Since Williamson had died in 1917, the historian could only write Barton, explaining diplomatically that while he believed her summation of the event, "It is a rule among historians to make no positive assertions of past events unless upon the strength of at least two independent written accounts." Folwell then attached a sheet of questions regarding the Myrick incident. He asked Barton how many times she had heard the story, who else was present, and if she knew exactly when the council occurred. Folwell never thought to question her about the location, however, apparently assuming that the council had been held at the Lower Agency. Barton responded that she had heard her father repeat the account more than once, but that he did so mainly in his later years when "his mind seemed to revert to the past." The answer was less than gratifying to Folwell, and a year later he once again queried Barton. This time Williamson’s daughter seemed annoyed that he would doubt her accuracy. If Folwell thought the evidence insufficient for use in his book, she wrote, "don’t put it in."

Meanwhile, Folwell questioned nearly everyone he could find who had been near the reservations in 1862 and had survived the war. The most likely individual in this category was Thomas A. Robertson, an interpreter who had lived a few miles from Redwood in August, 1862. Surprisingly, Robertson responded that he knew nothing, "not even that a council was held." Robertson admitted that at that time he "had very little to do with agency matters." Nevertheless, he could not understand why Galbraith did not mention it in his thorough report, and since Robertson appeared to recall that he had spent Sunday, August 17, at the agency, it seemed strange to him that he had not heard of such a dramatic event.

Others Folwell wrote to for information included George G. Allanson, grandson of Joseph R. Brown, an early Indian agent, and Asa W. Daniels, an early agency physician. Allanson’s mother, Ellen Brown, had been held captive by the Dakota during the war, but she had no information regarding Myrick’s insult. She could not understand why Philander Prescott, the interpreter at the Lower Agency, would have been unwilling to interpret Myrick’s comment. Even so, she did not exclude the possibility that such a council could have occurred. Daniels, on the other hand, was more forthright. He had spent many years with the Dakota and, when queried by Folwell, said simply: "Barton is mistaken in her statement, the council could not have taken place."

At this point, Folwell turned to other members of the Williamson family, receiving responses from the old missionary’s sons, John B., Jesse P., and Thomas C. Williamson. They strongly supported their sister’s account, and even noted that their mother, still alive and living with them, had also heard her husband relate the event. Faced with many contradictions but convinced that the Williamsons were reliable sources, Folwell decided to use the material in his book. His decision seems to have been made by December 12, 1922, when he wrote Allanson that it was a "fact" that Williamson told the story as Barton reported it, but that certain minor details were faulty. In substance, Folwell had concluded that the council occurred at the Lower Agency on August 14 or 15, the day on which Galbraith had an “interview” with Little Crow, but that only small numbers of Indians, rather than hundreds, were present. Nonetheless, when he finally wrote up the description for his book, he noted that Little Crow spoke for “hundreds of Indians present” and emphasized the impact that Myrick’s insult had upon the emotions of the Dakota. Barton’s account and the letters of confirmation that Folwell had received

9Folwell to Barton, September 25, 1920, May 9, 1922, and Barton to Folwell, May 21, 1922, Folwell Papers. For more on Folwell’s early analysis of the event, see “Memorandum,” March 28, 1919, Folwell Papers. Barton’s response is attached to Folwell’s September 25, 1920, letter.

10Folwell to Robertson, August 4, 1922, Robertson to Folwell, August 8, 1922, and Robertson to George Allanson, November 28, 1922 — all in Folwell Papers.

11Folwell to Daniels, February 20, 1919, Daniels to Folwell, undated, Folwell to Allanson, November 13, 1922, Allanson to Folwell, November 15, 1922, Robertson to Allanson, November 28, 1922 — all in Folwell Papers.

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JOHN P. WILLIAMSON, missionary son of Dr. Thomas S. Williamson, as he looked in 1866

from the other Williamson children served as the evidence for his footnote. As other scholars searching for the causes of the Dakota War would soon realize, the story of Myrick's insult was too sensational to be ignored. It made good reading and represented what some historians perceived as the "match" necessary to ignite the conflagration that followed. Indeed, Folwell set a trend when he elected to end his discussion of the major causes for the war with a two-page, emotional description of the inhumanity of Andrew Myrick, concluding that his "heartless and insolent statement must have deeply incensed the Indians." Folwell's search for the truth undoubtedly would have been aided had he had access to John P. Williamson's personal papers. Among them is a letter written from Cincinnati in which Williamson stated, "suspecting no danger I left the Lower Sioux Agency on Monday [August 11] two weeks ago today." On the 12th he met his father, Thomas S. Williamson, near St. Peter, well east of the Lower Agency. In other words, John P. Williamson, Barton's father, was not at the Lower Agency on either August 14 or 15 to interpret Myrick's "heartless" response. When one considers further that Galbraith does not mention such a dramatic event in his report, it seems clear that it simply could not have occurred as Folwell and others who follow him have reported.

The very existence of this letter leads to one of two conclusions: either the council never occurred, a suspicion that Folwell originally held, or it took place before August 11. If the latter is true, then the council could not have been held at the Lower Agency, since Galbraith did not arrive there until August 13. Yet the circumstances surrounding the affair are further confused by a vague and brief note that Williamson scribbled a short time before his death to Minneapolis journalist Marion P. Satterlee, claiming to have been at the "last council" with Little Crow.

Although Williamson indicated that this discussion took place "two or three days" before the outbreak — an impossibility — it does suggest that a "council" did actually occur. It seems possible that in later years the missionary forgot the chronology of the outbreak. But if any credence can be given to this note, it more than likely meant that the council occurred "two or three days" before Williamson departed for Ohio, perhaps dating the meeting on or about August 8. In order to consider this theory more carefully, it is necessary to digress to the events at the Upper Agency during the early days of August. A close examination of the circumstances reveals that most of the actors in Barton's scenario were present at Yellow Medicine during the first week in August. Moreover, Indians at the Upper Agency were starving, providing the necessary conditions for the insult to have occurred.

TWO MAJOR and sometimes contradictory descriptions by white participants have survived of the events at the Upper Agency during early August. Lieutenant Sheehan kept a journal, and Galbraith later gave a day-by-day account in his official report. Both agree that the Dakota at Yellow Medicine were suffering because game was scarce or nonexistent. Galbraith had only a small supply of food, most of which was intended to feed the large number of white government workers at the agency, and the traders had generally refused the Indians credit as long as they threatened not to pay for goods out of their annuities. Most of these Indians, in contrast to those at

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12 Jesse Williamson to Folwell, September 2, 1922, Thomas C. Williamson to Folwell, September 23, 1922, John B. Williamson to Folwell, undated but attached to Folwell's letter of September 28, 1922, and Folwell to Allanson, December 12, 1922—all in Folwell Papers; Folwell, Minnesota, 2:232, 233.

13 Folwell, Minnesota, 2:233. Other historians have concluded that the killings at Acton sparked the war.

14 Williamson to S. B. Treat, August 25, 1862, ABCFM Papers.

15 Galbraith, in 38 Congress, 1 session, House Executive Documents, no. 1, p. 390. See also Williamson to Satterlee, July 25, 1917, Satterlee Papers, MHS.
Lower Sioux, did not farm. Within a week or two after Sheehan arrived on July 2, members of the Dakota soldiers’ lodge approached him and asked for food. They also restated their intention to stop traders from seizing their annuity cash once the distribution of goods, food, and money scheduled for July took place. Sheehan sent them to Galbraith, and the agent did hand out a few provisions, mostly soda crackers, at the annuity enrollment on July 25. The sight of Dakota men scurrying for crackers scattered on the ground from barrels attested to their destitution.

By August 4, when no further provisions were forthcoming, these same Indians (almost entirely from the Sisseton and Wahpeton bands) surprised Sheehan’s command and broke into the agency warehouse, carrying off several dozen barrels of flour and sugar. In all, Sheehan counted 1,500 Dakota men involved in the raid, perhaps an exaggeration. The lieutenant halted the pillaging by aiming a cannon at the door of the building and threatening to set it off. While Galbraith cowered inside his residence, Sheehan convinced the discontented Indians to join in a council. They demanded food, pointed out that the provisions in the warehouse were rightfully theirs, and threatened further violence if they were not satisfied. Sheehan carried the ultimatum to Galbraith, who first asked the lieutenant to retrieve the lost food but soon realized the futility of this request and issued a few provisions.

The next day, August 5, the crisis heightened. After Galbraith instructed Sheehan to arrest the men involved in the warehouse raid, he made a cowardly attempt to escape to the Lower Agency with his family. The Dakota drove him back and then struck their tents, obviously making preparations for war. Galbraith next asked Sheehan to arrest Peter Quinn, who acted as army interpreter, and remove him to Fort Ridgely. Galbraith suspected that Quinn had encouraged the Indians to raid the warehouse; others would later dispute this charge. Sheehan wisely concluded that he could no longer control the situation and sent the old interpreter to the fort to ask the commanding officer to send reinforcements.

Meanwhile, Galbraith requested aid from the Protestants whose mission was located a few miles north of the
agency. Thomas S. Williamson, John's father, was then returning from the East, but missionary Stephen Return Riggs did respond to the request. Welcoming him to the agency on August 5, Galbraith asked Riggs whether there was “anything between the lids of the Bible” that would solve the problem. Riggs thereafter had several meetings with Dakota leaders, many of whom he had known for years. In a later newspaper account, Riggs indicated that Galbraith attended these councils, and it seems likely that, if the agent were in on the discussions, the traders or their clerks were also there. Unfortunately, Sheehan was busy guarding the warehouse and never attended, and Riggs only implied that through his mediation, which may have lasted several days, the difficulties were eventually resolved. \(^{19}\)

At 1:30 p.m. on August 6 Captain John Marsh arrived from Fort Ridgely with reinforcements. After huddling with Sheehan, he promptly ordered Galbraith to issue “blankets and stuff” to the Indians. According to Sheehan, Marsh also threatened to “arrest the traders if they appeared to cause dissatisfaction among the Indians.” Galbraith acquiesced to this and on August 7 and 8 held several more councils with the Dakota, after which the storehouses were opened. In exchange for the distribution of provisions, the vast majority of Indians left to hunt buffalo northwest of their agency. By August 11 Galbraith heard that the Indians of the Upper Agency were beyond Big Stone Lake; this dissipated concern about a war. Galbraith busied himself by recruiting for a militia unit called the Renville Rangers designed to fight in the Civil War. He left Yellow Medicine on August 13 for the Lower Agency, meeting Little Crow there two days later. On the eve of the outbreak, both agencies were quiet. \(^{20}\)

In light of the foregoing testimony, the only time when conditions were right for the type of comment attributed to Myrick was during the early days of August, specifically between the 5th and the 8th. Other circumstantial evidence supports this conclusion. For example, it now seems clear that most of the key actors in the event can be placed at the Upper Agency during this period. According to Sheehan, Little Crow arrived on either August 5 or 6. “He was there with two or three of his men at the time of the council,” Sheehan noted, “when it was understood that the provisions were to be issued to the Indians at Yellow Medicine.” Barton’s later description of Little Crow’s role during the council with Myrick, Galbraith, and Williamson is probably a reference to this discussion. She said the chief told the assemblage that when Indians get hungry, “they help themselves.” \(^{21}\) What Barton failed to understand is that this statement must have been a reference to the Sisseton-Wahpeton raid on the warehouse at the Upper Agency.

Placing young Williamson at the Upper Agency is more difficult, since his normal residence was at the Lower Agency, where he had a mission church. But like Little Crow, Williamson had family connections at the Upper Agency and, after hearing news of the troubles, he could have ridden the 30 miles north to see if he could be of some assistance. Later, when he learned of the outbreak on August 25, he quickly returned from Ohio to learn what had become of his parents.

Trying to locate the traders also provides fuel for speculation. Why, for example, would other men involved in the trade and competing for business rely on Myrick to speak for them? An explanation could be that most traders resided at the Lower Agency and left clerks in charge of their houses at Yellow Medicine. Thus, if Myrick were at the Upper Agency, he would probably be consulted by the clerks. Although concrete evidence

\(^{19}\) Riggs, “The Dakota Bread Riot,” in St. Paul Daily Press, August 20, 1862. Riggs, Mary and I: Forty Years with the Sioux, 175 (Minneapolis, 1969). Hubbard and Holcombe are incorrect in dating Riggs’s arrival at the agency as August 7.

\(^{20}\) Sheehan, Diary, August 6–8, 1862. Galbraith, in 38 Congress, 1 session, House Executive Documents, no. 1, p. 397–399.

\(^{21}\) Sheehan deposition, 274, Court of Claims, Docket no. 22,524, Barton, John P., Williamson, 48.
placing Myrick at the Upper Agency in early August does not exist. Galbraith does give the impression that the trader and his brother Nathan were behind the crisis. While the councils were going on, probably on August 6, Galbraith wrote a letter to a friend at Shakopee in which he complained vociferously of the “combination of N. Myrick & old [Indian commissioner Charles] Mix” to oust him. One must wonder why the agent would single out Nathan Myrick, ignoring other traders, and make such a charge unless Nathan and, by proxy, his brother Andrew, were at that moment a thorn in his side. Possibly Galbraith felt that Andrew Myrick had somehow undermined his position, perhaps by adding to the discontent in the Indian camps. This would tend to be supported by Captain Marsh’s threat to imprison “traders” on August 6. At the very least it is interesting that Galbraith’s letter should focus on the actions of one trader at a time when he was facing a native rebellion.

Galbraith’s letter left Yellow Medicine about the same time (perhaps August 6) that a group of women and children were successfully evacuated to the Lower Agency. Perhaps one of them posted it at Redwood. In 1863, one of these evacuees, Sarah Wakefield, wife of the agency physician, penned a description of the troubles at the Upper Agency, written from firsthand observation as well as information collected from friends. Wakefield recalled the rush on the warehouse and took pains to point out that the upper Indians were in a state of extreme need when it occurred. She also remembered the series of councils that took place shortly thereafter, saying that the traders told the Indians that they would get no more money from the government and that “they would have to eat grass like cattle, etc.”

Besides Wakefield, one other important person mentioned the “eat grass” insult. Little Crow, in a letter to Henry Sibley dictated during the fighting that followed, specifically charged Myrick with telling the Dakota that they could “eat grass or their own dung.” Myrick was not the only trader mentioned. Little Crow singled out others who had become obnoxious to his people. Yet the chief’s comments again make clear that Myrick had threatened the Dakota with starvation. Years later Chief Big Eagle would claim that after killing the traders at the Lower Agency on August 18, warriors stuffed Myrick’s mouth full of grass. Big Eagle did not indicate, however, that he attended the council where Myrick made his remark and seemed to suggest that all was quiet at the Lower Agency just before the war broke out.

IN SUMMARY, the evidence that has survived indicates that at least two weeks before the war Andrew Myrick did insult a group of eastern Dakota, telling them they might as well “eat grass,” or words to that effect. Folwell and other historians made the mistake of assuming that this discussion took place at the Lower Agency and provided the catalyst for the Mdewakanton to start the war. We know that a handful of Lower Agency Mdewakanton joined Little Crow in his trip to the Upper Agency in early August and were on hand during the councils that followed. But most of the lower Indians were not in attendance at such a council and did not hear Myrick’s comments. Furthermore, there is no reason to believe that on the eve of the rebellion the majority of them were suffering like their western, buffalo-hunting relatives. Indeed, half of the Lower Agency Indians were, at least nominally, farmers by 1862. and they had a bumper crop to gather.

What this new information implies about the causes of the war is difficult to assess. It does question the belief that a charged emotional atmosphere existed in Mdewakanton camps before the attack on the Lower Agency. It follows that the war was less a tragic accident, brought on by unusual circumstances, than has previously been argued. If we de-emphasize the sense of provocation that Myrick’s insult might have offered, it seems clear that historians may want to reassess the causes of the war, beginning with a more thorough consideration of the evidence. At least two Dakota informants later strongly implied that elements among the Mdewakanton had been dissatisfied with the governmental acculturation...
program, the increased occupation of neighboring hunting grounds by white pioneers, and an annuity distribution system that favored farmer Indians in order to discourage traditional occupations. A soldiers' lodge, formed at the Lower Agency well before the outbreak, discussed various options, including war. Furthermore, Little Crow had been promised some provisions for his role in mediating the troubles at Yellow Medicine on August 6–7. Those goods were apparently not delivered. More traditional, nonfarmer Indians living near the Lower Agency seem to have concluded that resistance to white rule was a solution for these inequities.25

In other words, the rationale for the rebellion was more complex than has been previously perceived; Myrick's statement has distorted the nature of the war by placing a much stronger emphasis on the emotionalism of the moment than on the dynamics of Dakota society in 1862. When this latter subject is scrutinized, no doubt the factionalism that was rampant on both Dakota reservations and the impact that government acculturation programs had upon the various factions will gain significance. But until then, as long as we continue to repeat the errors made by past scholars and fail to look carefully at new sources or new interpretations of old sources, the myths of that past will continue to distort our perception of the Dakota War of 1862.

25 See Wa-pa-sha's testimony, in Papers Relating to Talks and Councils Held with the Indians in Dakota and Montana Territories in the Years 1866–1869, 91 (Washington, D. C., 1910); Holcombe, in Minnesota Historical Collections, 6:387; Sheehan's deposition, 274, Court of Claims, Docket no. 22,524.

THE ILLUSTRATION on page 202 is from Winifred W. Barton, John P. Williamson: A Brother to the Sioux, facing p. 108; the one on page 204 is in the Smithsonian Institution. The portraits on pages 199 and 200 are by photographers Joel Whitney and Eugene D. Becker, respectively, and all others are in the MHS audio-visual library.