THE BATTLE OF SUGAR POINT

A Re-Examination

William E. Matsen

READERS of the New York Times on Thursday, October 6, 1898, were without doubt shocked by the headlines on the front page that day—shocked and, for those old enough, no doubt reminded of similar headlines 22 years earlier that had announced the Battle of the Little Big Horn. Temporarily crowding out the by-then-familiar news from Cuba (where the loss of the Maine was being avenged with proper jingoistic fervor) was the news of another Indian battle, seemingly a disaster of a magnitude only slightly smaller in scale than that suffered by General George A. Custer and the unlucky Seventh Cavalry. “Troops Battle with Indians,” “Rumored Massacre of One Hundred Soldiers,” “Fierce Fight with Bear Lake Savages in Minnesota,” “General Bacon Dead?” proclaimed the headlines. The New York editors might have lacked information, but they certainly knew how to attract the attention of their readers.1

The erroneous headlines and the equally inaccurate news stories that accompanied them were about the Battle of Sugar Point, a disaster for the United States Army but not, as the subsequent unraveling of events would reveal, the bloodbath conjured up by the Times editors. Sugar Point, occurring nearly eight years after the Battle of Wounded Knee, was, if not the last battle between army troops and American Indians, certainly one of the very last. And while Brigadier General John Mosby Bacon and 77, not 100, members of the United States Third Infantry had been decisively defeated by a handful of indignant Ojibway in north-central Minnesota the previous day, Bacon and most of his force were still very much alive even as readers gasped over their newspapers. The fate of the troops, however, was still an open question that morning since, as Major Samuel D. Sturgis, General Bacon’s adjutant in St. Paul, cabled Washington, the “Indians seem to have best position.”2

What brought General Bacon and the members of the Third Infantry to the shores of Leech Lake, a 109,415-acre body of water about 175 miles north of Minneapolis, was the pursuit of an Indian man who seemed determined to avoid contact with a system of justice which the good general was obligated to serve. Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig (Hole-in-the-Day) was a small, wiry man and “as fine a looking man and fighter as I ever saw in my life,” according to United States Marshal Robert T. O’Connor who had attempted to secure the Indian’s arrest. Later, the news reporters would

1 The Times referred to the battle site at Leech Lake as being on “Bear Lake” in all of its early accounts of the battle. Reporters may have taken this name from Bear Island in Leech Lake near Sugar Point. Bear Island was the site of the failed counsel that preceded the outbreak.

2 De-Bah-Ji-Mon (monthly newspaper of the Leech Lake Reservation, Cass Lake), July, 1985, p. 1; Louis H. Roddis, “The Last Indian Uprising in the United States,” Minnesota History Bulletin 3 (February, 1920): 273-290; St. Paul Pioneer Press, Oct. 7, 1898. The claim of being the last Indian battle is not uncontested. The site of the battle is currently known as Battle Point, while a different spot is called Sugar Point.

William Matsen, an instructor in mass communications and English at Bemidji State University, is pursuing a Ph.D. in English at the University of North Dakota.
make him a chief, a tribal leader, and a medicine man, but Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig was, in truth, only a 62-year-old man whose neighbors rose to protect him from what they perceived to be a flagrant misapplication of the whites' law.³

IN APRIL, 1898, Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig had had his first direct experience with the white system of justice when he was arrested and carried to Duluth, slightly over 100 miles to the east. There he had been held on a liquor bootlegging charge and freed only when not enough evidence was found to convict him. Released without any money, he had made his way back to Leech Lake on foot. The trip cost him one pair of well-worn moccasins and apparently left him with one well-founded conviction: not to fall into the grasp of the white judicial system again. That conviction would lead to the brief but bloody confrontation on the shores of Leech Lake on a stormy October day in 1898.⁴

After the battle, Commissioner of Indian Affairs William A. Jones condemned "the frequent arrests of Indians on trivial causes, often for no cause at all, taking them down to Duluth and Minneapolis for trial, two hundred miles away from their agency, and then turning them adrift without means to return home." The arrest of Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig on bootlegging charges, while it would definitely have the most far-reaching effects, thus was not an isolated event.⁵

The commissioner also commented on another injustice which loomed in the background: the theft of Leech Lake Reservation pine by logging companies and their agents. On September 25, only ten days before the battle, the "chiefs and headmen of the Pillager band of

³ *Minneapolis Tribune*, Oct. 5, 1898. Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig's status as simply an Indian among Indians was one of the few things the *New York Times* managed to get right in its first account of the battle. At least part of the subsequent confusion may stem from the fact that two 19th-century Ojibway chiefs were named Hole-in-the-Day. The first of these, alternately a fighter and peacekeeper, claimed to have consolidated his people's land holdings at the expense of the Dakota. He died in about 1845. The second, his son, continued to fight the Dakota as he saw necessary, but also spent much time trying to convince the United States government to fulfill its treaty obligations to the Ojibway. He was assassinated by dissident Ojibway in 1868; see Mark Diedrich, *The Chiefs Hole-in-the-Day of the Mississippi Chippewa* (Minneapolis: Coyote Books, 1986), 3, 14, 20, 46-48. Sugar Point's Hole-in-the-Day does not appear to be descended from these men.

⁴ A further note on names: spellings of both the Ojibway and some of the soldiers' names vary from source to source, as do the first names of some of the federal officials.

⁵ Many accounts place this incident in the winter, but records indicate that it occurred in April; see Roddis, "Last Indian Uprising," 278n8, wherein the date 1895 is most likely a typographical error for 1898.

Chippewa Indians of Minnesota had petitioned President William McKinley for redress on this problem. The immediate cause of the events at Sugar Point, however, was without doubt Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig’s determination to avoid another senseless journey to, and most probably from, Duluth.

On September 15, 1898, an Ojibway named Sha-Boon-Day-Shkong and Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig went to the agency in Onigum, one of the larger Indian villages on Leech Lake, to receive their annuity payments. There they were seized and held as witnesses for yet another bootlegging trial by U.S. Deputy Marshal Robert Morrison and Colonel Arthur M. Tinker, Inspector of Agencies. As the two captives were being led to a boat that would start them on their way to Duluth, Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig, speaking in Ojibway, called for assistance from nearby onlookers. In the melee that followed, the two captives managed to escape. Although Morrison and Tinker claimed they were set upon by a group of 200 Indians, Ojibway accounts of this incident state the number was much smaller and that the rescuers included a large number of women.

One individual who would pay for the assistance he rendered the fleeing captives that day was Bah-Dway-We-Dung, whose English—or “other”—name was George White. As Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig fled past him, White tackled a pursuer. Subsequently, he was named as one of 20 Ojibway charged with aiding the fugitive. This incident led the authorities to call for assistance from the army, as it now seemed that Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig could not be taken by any means short of military action.

The first response by the military could hardly have been less impressive. Twenty soldiers of the Third Regiment United States Infantry from Fort Snelling were dispatched to Walker, the only white settlement on Leech Lake, where they arrived on September 30. These troops, who were under the command of Second Lieutenant Chauncey B. Humphreys, were sent to Onigum and played no part in the events that followed; ultimately, Lt. Humphreys refused to move his men to

General Bacon’s assistance on October 5 because he had no orders from a superior officer.

On October 3, a council was to have been held at the Onigum agency to persuade the recalcitrant Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig, Sha-Boon-Day-Shkong, and their rescuers to surrender. None of the wanted men attended, but some of the Onigum Ojibway told the two representatives of the Office of Indian Affairs, John H. Sutherland, agent at White Earth, and Inspector Tinker, that the weather was too windy for a crossing from the villages on Bear Island and other points on the east side of Leech Lake where all of those sought either lived or had fled.

According to newspaper reports, U.S. Marshal O’Connor and Inspector Tinker traveled unarmed to Bear Island on Tuesday, October 4, and attempted, in vain, to convince the Indians to surrender. (It was on this trip that O’Connor claimed to have met Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig.) This failed meeting was the final event in the sequence which would break the peace that had existed between the Ojibway and the United States for 89 years and which would bring General Bacon defeat and Captain Wilkinson death.

Humphreys’ force, apparently sent north to oversee a peaceful surrender, was too small for a military engage-
ment. A request for reinforcements was telegraphed to St. Paul, and that same day an additional 80 men from the Third Regiment under the command of Captain and Brevet Major Melville C. Wilkinson were sent to Walker from Fort Snelling. Wilkinson was accompanied by General Bacon, the acting commander of the Department of Dakota. Bacon, as events dictated, would assume active command in the field.

On the morning of Wednesday, October 5, several Indian office men, U.S. marshals and deputy marshals, an army surgeon, four reporters, and 77 troops under the command of Captain Wilkinson, Second Lieutenant Tenny Ross, and General Bacon boarded two lake steamers, the *Flora* and the *Chief of Duluth*, and a barge which was in tow. The departure, originally scheduled for about 4:00 A.M., did not actually take place until two hours later in rainy and sleety weather. When the force approached Sugar Point three hours later, high waves and a shallow reef bottom made the landing difficult.

As a result, troops were ferried to shore on the barge. There they found a small cabin, belonging to Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig, set in a clearing of about two acres, which opened on Leech Lake and had a sloping beach that dropped sharply about eight feet to the lake. Several Indians were seen leaving the cabin, and those for whom law enforcement agents did not have warrants were allowed to depart unchallenged. Makwa (The Bear), however, was recognized as one of the rescuers of Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig at Onigum and captured after a spirited struggle with several soldiers and government agents.

Having secured this first prisoner, a force of 25 troops, several officers, marshals and deputies, and newspaper correspondents set off on a hike around the point to seek other fugitives in three small Indian villages. Indian sources state that while on this mission the soldiers attempted to interrupt a Grand Medicine Dance by pointing their guns at the dancers, who ignored them. After meeting with no success and becoming thoroughly soaked in wading through sloughs, the reconnaissance force returned to the cabin. There they discovered that a second prisoner had been captured. Bah-Dway-We-Dung (George White) was now under arrest for aiding Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig.

GEORGE WHITE provided one of the two conflicting versions of how the battle started; the other rested upon the reports of members of Bacon's expedition. According to the accounts circulated after the battle by Bacon

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GEORGE WHITE, Makwa, and an official, probably U.S. Marshal Robert T. O'Connor

THE FLORA at the middle landing, Leech Lake, 1896, photographed by Edward A. Bromley, Minneapolis
and his men, an inexperienced recruit—and there is no doubt that at least three-fourths of the soldiers were novices—had forgotten to engage the safety on his rifle. That weapon accidentally fired when the troops were ordered to stack their guns before the midday meal at 11:30 A.M. The Ojibway, who had hidden themselves in the undergrowth on the three wooded sides of the clearing, thought they were being attacked and opened fire. The soldiers scattered, returned fire, and suffered almost immediate casualties.\(^\text{13}\)

According to a version reported by the son of George White and descendants of other Ojibway who fought in the battle, however, the hidden Indian defenders opened fire when several of Bacon’s recruits began to

\[\text{THE BATTLEGROUND and environs, from a sketch in the Daily Pioneer Press, October 8, 1898}\]

shoot at a canoe carrying Indian women as it rounded the point. Nevertheless, there is agreement that the first half hour of the battle was the most fierce and that most of the casualties suffered by the Third Infantry and its supporters occurred during this time. In short order, the dead included three privates, Sergeant William S. Butler, and Captain Wilkinson. Butler was shot through the head, reportedly as he ran carrying a message. Wilkinson was wounded in the leg, had his wound dressed, returned to the battle, and was shot through the abdomen. He lingered for an hour and a half before dying.\(^\text{14}\)

The wounded among the troopers included ten men; most seriously injured was Private John Daly, whose bone shattered when he was shot through the thigh. According to a New York Times account on October 8, an Indian at the right of the soldiers’ line was particularly effective, hitting someone with virtually every shot. Ojibway accounts single out two warriors, Maze-Na-E-Gans and Gay-She-Gwanna-Yash, as having respectively wounded and then fatally shot Wilkinson.\(^\text{15}\)

After the initial attack on the troops near the cabin, the Ojibway turned their attention to the boats. Lightly constructed of native timber, these craft offered little protection for those on board. At least four civilians, including Ed Harris, city marshal of Walker, were wounded. Harris would lose an arm. George White, who was being held prisoner on the Flora, watched the battle as best he could through a hole in the side of the boat, until he was struck in the face by splinters from wood that shattered when a bullet passed by his head.

The boats, crews, and passengers, including a reluctant George White, quickly departed from the point and returned to Walker; the Chief left in such a hurry that she reportedly “snaked” her anchor off the reef without bothering to raise it. Although Inspector Tink-
er later argued that the boats had left the scene to get reinforcements, this action was greeted derisively by townfolks and others at Walker. In Walker and throughout the region, hysteria mounted, based on unfounded fears of an Indian uprising. George White and Makwa were removed from the Flora in Walker, where an onlooker threatened to shoot them. Placed on a train and taken to Brainerd, they had to be hidden since a waiting crowd wanted to lynch them. Eventually they reached the safety of the jail in Duluth, where the guards told them daily they were about to be hanged.

Meanwhile, at the scene of the engagement, the action had quickly settled down to a series of volleys fired by the Indians at random throughout the afternoon. Two other fatalities occurred later in the battle. That night, as some of the soldiers huddled in the small cabin and others manned rifle pits dug in the surrounding clearing, an Indian was shot by the soldiers as he attempted to leave the battlefield. Gay-Gway-Day-Bet-Tung, a policeman whose English name is variously given as Al or George Russell, had accompanied the expedition. Later it was claimed that the soldiers mis­took him for one of the Ojibway attackers. Early the next morning, one hungry soldier, Daniel Schwallenstocker, was shot and killed as he reportedly attempted to dig potatoes from a patch in the clearing. He was the last casualty.

GENERAL BACON'S losses for the battle totaled six killed and ten wounded. In addition, one civilian was killed (Russell) and at least four were wounded. Bacon’s military position was hardly enviable. He was surrounded on three sides by angry Ojibway and had only Leech Lake at his back; his nearest practical source of reinforcements was Fort Snelling, and he had lost nearly one-fourth of his command. Later, safely in Walker, Bacon would speak in bellicose terms of having “scattered” the Indians on Sugar Point. Many years later, George White’s son Harry would say, “If they [the Indians] had wanted to, they could have killed them all.”

The Ojibway force, it later developed, included only 19 men, and Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig was not among them. And although press representatives and General Bacon would claim otherwise, no evidence has ever emerged that any Indian other than Russell was shot or wounded at Sugar Point. One fact that does emerge, however, is just how poorly the troops of the Third Infantry—all but a handful of whom were new recruits—shot. Steamboatman Nate Dally recounted the story of an Ojibway who, “wearing a white shirt at the time, said to his comrades, ‘They can’t hit anything,’ and then he jumped up on the fence and stood there on top of it while one of the soldiers fired three shots at him and then he jumped down again unhurt.”

It was Dally and his lake steamer the Leila D. who brought General Bacon and the surviving members of the U.S. Third Infantry off Sugar Point on October 7. After this unceremonious leave-taking, the Battle of Sugar Point was over, except for the wave of panic that swept through the area. Headlines in state newspapers announced imminent attack at places as widely scattered as Deer River, Bemidji, Grand Rapids, and Aitkin. In Bemidji, city residents barricaded themselves in the courthouse until a force of militia from Duluth arrived to protect them from the threat of nonexistent warriors. Walker found itself swarming with infantry when 214 men under Lieutenant Colonel Abram A. Harbach and a Gatling gun arrived on October 6 to reinforce Bacon.

That military commander, now safely ensconced in the comparative safety of Walker—with the Gatling—began to provide the naively credulous press with inflammatory comments on his willingness to carry the command against the Ojibway. At times these statements by the general approach the irrational: “Not that I am revengeful but that I would see this question settled now in such a manner that the Pillagers will learn what it means to take up arms against representatives of the government under which they live. . . . I don't want to kill any Indians, but as I told them at the council the other day, they must be killed if they cannot be taught a lesson in any other way.”

Fortunately, a cooler temperament in the person of Commissioner of Indian Affairs Jones appeared at Leech Lake about October 10. Jones spent a week in council with Ojibway leaders and managed to achieve...
what General Bacon and the military had been unable to: he induced the Indians to give up those men on whom warrants had been issued for aiding Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig's escape at Onigum in September.21

As for Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig himself, he remained true to his conviction regarding the white judicial system and once again avoided arrest. None of the Ojibway who fought at Sugar Point ever surrendered, and it is not clear what they could have been charged with if they had. The Indians who turned themselves in over the September 15 incident served brief terms of two-to-six months in Duluth, where they joined Makwa and George White, both of whom were released after 100 days.

Upon his return to Washington on October 26, Commissioner Jones made what well might have been the best analysis of the significance of the Battle of Sugar Point in a report to Secretary of the Interior Cornelius N. Bliss: "The Indians were prompted to their outbreak by the wrongs committed against them and chafed under unfair treatment. They now will go back to their homes and live peaceably if the whites will treat them fairly, which is very likely, as the whites were thoroughly impressed with the stand taken by the Indians. In this respect the outbreak has taught them a lesson."22

THE MAPS on p. 269 and p. 273 are from the St. Paul Pioneer Press, Oct. 6, 8, 1898 and were made available by the MHS newspaper microfilming project. All illustrations are in the MHS collections.
