

# Some Recollections of the Leech Lake Uprising

*Pauline Wold*

IN ONE of the last years of the nineteenth century I found myself in charge of Dr. James L. Camp's private hospital at Brainerd. At that time Brainerd was a busy little town — especially during the winter months when the lumber business was in full swing. About sixty miles farther north was the Leech Lake Indian Reservation, where a good many Chippewa lived. The Brainerd and Northern Railroad ran from Brainerd to the little town of Walker on the shores of Leech Lake. I had always been very much interested in the Indians, and it thrilled me to know that now, being so near them, I might be able to learn something more about them than is found in books, and in this I was not to be disappointed.

In April of the year I arrived in Brainerd a lady from the Leech Lake Reservation entered the hospital as a patient. She was Miss Pauline Colby, who had been sent to the reservation, as far as I can recollect, by the Episcopal church to teach the Indian girls lace-making, in which they became very proficient.<sup>1</sup> She was also to act as a missionary and help them in every way possible. She had been unfortunate enough to burn her hands badly in trying to extinguish an exploding lamp, and she stayed at the hospital for several weeks. During this time she and I became very good friends. As she had been among the Indians for some years, she knew them well and could tell me a great many interesting things about them. She told me that they were very quiet and peaceful at the time, but, like children, they were easily aroused if something happened that did not suit them. The worst difficulties, she said, occurred when they obtained firewater, as the young bucks would then get into trouble.

<sup>1</sup> Miss Colby went to Leech Lake in 1893. For an account of her first journey to the mission station, see Frances Densmore, "A Minnesota Missionary Journey of 1893," *ante*, 20:310-313. *Ed.*

Of course, the sale of whisky to the Indians was strictly forbidden, and if anyone was found selling it, a heavy fine or imprisonment followed. Because of this, federal agents were always on the lookout for people who sold liquor illegally. Just lately, Miss Colby told me, there had been quite a stir about the matter, as it was rumored that some people in Walker were selling whisky to the Indians, but the agents had been unable to find witnesses in the cases reported to them.

When Miss Colby left the hospital she invited me to go up to the reservation for a few days' visit with her during my summer vacation, an invitation I was delighted to accept. So, on a glorious July morning I went to visit Miss Colby and the Indians. The trip up through the fine spruce and pine forests was lovely. About noon I landed in Walker, where I was met by Miss Colby, and by boat we crossed the lake to the reservation. Leech Lake is a very large body of water, twenty miles across, and in the middle lies Bear Island, where several Indians lived.

Miss Colby had a very comfortable log cabin, and I spent several days with her. Something happened the first evening I was there which rather puzzled her. Toward dusk a couple of braves entered the cabin, said "How," and sat down. Then one of them pointed at me, saying "Who she?" Miss Colby said I was a doctor from Brainerd who had helped to make her hands well. After a few grunts they arose and went out. Nothing like that had ever happened before, although she had entertained friends several times. She said she had been detecting unrest and suspicion among the natives and did not like it. She thought she could trace it to some rumors she had heard that federal agents were looking for an Indian named Bugonaygeshig — "Bug" for short — who was to be taken to Duluth as a witness in a whisky trial. When he was a young man, he had been taken to Duluth as such a witness, but after the trial was over he was left to get back to the reservation the best way he knew, and as it was in the middle of winter, he almost froze to death before reaching home. Then he had vowed that never again would he let himself be taken on such a trip. This was the man the agents were hunting for, but so far their search had not been successful.

A couple of months after my return to Brainerd Dr. Camp brought Miss Colby, who had gone to town for some shopping, up to the hospital for lunch one noon. At the table Dr. Camp joked with her about the trouble they were having at Leech Lake in failing to find "old Bug." She grew quite serious and said: "Well, Dr. Camp, in all the years I have been there, I have not seen the Indians in such an ugly mood as they are now, and I am seriously thinking of moving over to Walker till the trouble is settled."

Dr. Camp laughed and said, "They had better get some soldiers from Fort Snelling to come up, and when the Indians see the blue-coats, they will soon give up."

Then I said, "Why not let 'old Bug' alone? Then perhaps peace will reign once more."

"No," Miss Colby said, "they can't very well do that either, as then the government may lose control of the Indians altogether. They have set out to do this and they must finish or admit defeat, which would not be good policy at all."

A week or so later I happened to be down at the railroad station and saw a train go by with a lot of soldiers from Fort Snelling. After that rumors came thick and fast that serious trouble was brewing.

Then one stormy evening in October, 1898, Dr. Camp came home very tired after a hard day's work, which included several calls in the country, and exclaimed, "No matter who calls me tonight, I am not going out again in this weather!" I can still see him as he settled down in his favorite chair with a book, a picture of perfect comfort. A few minutes later a call came from the office, saying that someone wanted to speak to Dr. Camp on the phone. He turned to me and said, "Please go and tell them that I am sick or dead or anything you please, as I am not going out again tonight."

Out to the phone I went, and a very excited voice demanded to speak to Dr. Camp. I began to say that the doctor was out, but the voice cut right in and said, "This is Mayor Nevers, and I want to speak to Dr. Camp at once!" I knew Nevers, and a milder-mannered man would be difficult to find, so I felt that anything that could bring him up to such a pitch must really be important.

Reluctantly I went back to face Dr. Camp and tell him that Mayor Nevers was calling and demanding to speak to him in a very excited voice, so something very serious must have happened in the Nevers family. Dr. Camp tossed his book aside and proceeded to the phone without saying a word, only giving me a look that said plainer than words: "You are a weak sister not to help a fellow out of a dilemma."

In a few minutes he returned, and an entirely changed man he was. His weariness was all gone, and he was alert and full of life. In a loud voice he ordered his sister, Mrs. Hartley, to pack his bag with warm clothing and told me to get his first-aid kit and instrument bag ready and to be quick about it.

For a few minutes all was in a bustle, but at last I ventured to ask him what in the world had happened. In a few words he told us that the people of Walker had called Mayor Nevers and asked him to get as many men from Brainerd as he could and come up quickly to help them, as the Indians were on the warpath and the people were afraid that the natives had defeated the soldiers. A special train was leaving in a few minutes, so off he went.

Well, such excitement! The doctor's sister and I just sat down and looked at one another. The question now was, "What next?"

Leech Lake was only sixty miles away, and Indians on the warpath might easily reach us! And with all our men and guns gone, we felt very much like "babes in the woods."

Few people in Brainerd slept much that night. The next day we tried to get into communication with Walker, but the wires had evidently been cut, and no trains were running. The second day wild rumors were abroad that Indians on their ponies had rushed through town, but there was no news from Walker. On the morning of the third day Mrs. Nevers called to find out if we had heard anything at the hospital, but we had not. She said she had heard that there had been a battle and that several men from Brainerd had been injured or killed, among them, Dr. Camp. Not very good news for us! We were all feeling pretty "jittery." On the following morning a wire reached the hospital asking us to meet a train coming down

that morning, and to bring soup, hot coffee, and surgical dressings.

I must admit we were rather an excited crowd at the station. With sinking hearts we noticed as the train pulled in that there were several rough pine boxes in the baggage car. A shudder went through me when I thought that perhaps Dr. Camp was in one of them! Imagine our relief when the first to get off the train were Dr. Camp and Mayor Nevers. They told us at once that all the men from Brainerd were safe.

Not many questions were asked, as soon we were busy feeding and dressing wounded soldiers and trying to make them a little more comfortable for a trip down to the Fort Snelling hospital. They told us that half a dozen soldiers had been killed, among them the beloved Major Melville C. Wilkinson, and that ten had been wounded. One of the boys had been shot through the thigh. They were indignant to think that some of them had gone through the Cuban campaign without a scratch, and here they were being killed by a handful of Indians.

That evening we had a little party to welcome Dr. Camp. A few neighbors came in, and we then heard from him what had really happened.

Upon reaching Walker, the Brainerd men found everything in great commotion and everyone scared to death. They heard that the soldiers, eighty of them under the command of General John M. Bacon and Major Wilkinson, had gone to Sugar Point near Bear Island in the morning, as news had reached them that "Old Bug" had been seen there. At Walker a lot of shooting had been heard during the day, but no one had returned to tell what was happening. It was feared that the Indians were getting the best of it.

As Dr. Camp had spent a couple of years as the resident physician at Fort Totten, the men elected him their leader, thinking that perhaps he knew more about handling Indians than they did. So the first thing he did was to gather all the women and children into the Walker Hotel, the only brick building in town. Next he placed guards on all the roads leading into town. "I knew this was a very foolish precaution," said Dr. Camp, "for if the Indians wanted to

come they had their own trails that nobody else knew, and they would not use the beaten highways. But I did this to let people know that something was being done. I thought it might act as a nerve sedative — something they needed very badly just then."

The Brainerd group talked things over during the night, and decided to cross the lake as soon as daybreak came and find out what was happening. Early the next morning they got a large barge and also some cordwood, which they piled in the center as a barricade to hide behind in case of need.

At the "Narrows" before entering the big lake, the party found a band of Indians, headed by Chief Flatmouth. They called and asked, "Where are you going?" The men answered, "Over to Sugar Point to see what is happening over there," and the Indians replied, "We will be here when you come back."

When the barge neared the point, the men went ahead very cautiously, not knowing what might be coming. Everything seemed very quiet, with only a few men running down to the beach. They seemed to be in soldiers' uniforms, but that could be a disguise and they might be Indians. The newcomers beached their boat very carefully and went behind the barricade in case they should be shot at. To their relief, however, they were greeted by soldiers and a couple of newspaper reporters who had gone along to write up the happenings at Leech Lake. A couple of more frightened men were never seen. They climbed aboard like two little monkeys and swiftly hid behind the barricade. When they had had time to catch their breaths they told what had happened. They said that the day they arrived the soldiers made a thorough search of the vicinity for "old Bug," but to no avail. All they found were a few squaws and not a single brave.

About noon the soldiers were ordered to a clearing where an old log cabin was standing. They were told to stack their guns and eat the lunch they had carried with them. While they were stacking arms, one gun fell and went off, and in the same minute shots were fired from the woods, where the Indians had secreted themselves. After the first volley of shots, the men turned to the cabin for shel-

ter. In the battle that followed several were injured and killed, among them Major Wilkinson.<sup>2</sup>

A great deal of credit should be given to the Indians in this affair. All they wanted was to protect "old Bug" and guard him so he would not be taken away from the reservation. And when that was done, they did not molest anybody else, but went home peacefully. How different would it not have been a century ago! When Indians were on a warpath then, nobody was safe. Education and civilization certainly have done a lot for our Indian friends.

After the battle was over, "old Bug" went back to the battleground, gathered the empty shells, and made himself a necklace which he proudly exhibited to all he came in contact with, telling them all about the big battle and how he fooled the soldiers.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed account of the battle, see Louis H. Roddis, "The Last Indian Uprising in the United States," *ante* 3:284-288. Plans for the preservation of the Sugar Point battleground as a historic site were announced in the *Minnesota Chippewa Bulletin* for December 26, 1942. *Ed.*

<sup>3</sup> A photograph of Bugonaygeshig wearing the necklace is reproduced, *ante*, 3:273.



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