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THE SIOUX UPRISING
A Problem in International Relations
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WHEN NEWS of the Sioux Massacre reached Fort Garry on the lower Red River in the British Northwest in September, 1862, the officers of the Hudson’s Bay Company, who governed the area then called Rupert’s Land, knew that the effects of the Minnesota uprising would soon be felt north of the border. Their fears were justified, for many of the Indians who were driven out of the state after the outbreak fled across the international boundary and took refuge in the Red River Settlement near Fort Garry. There, they were unwelcome guests who placed their hosts in a most uncomfortable position. During the Civil War years, they caused disharmony between Minnesota and its neighbor to the north, for their presence plagued the British, who did not know what to do with them, and it irritated the Minnesotans, who knew what they would like to do with the red men but were prevented by the forty-ninth parallel from carrying out their plans.

Within six weeks after the outbreak began on August 18, 1862, Governor William Mactavish of Assiniboia, the political division of Rupert’s Land immediately north of the boundary, had come to realize that American military forces would eventually flush the Sioux from their Minnesota nests and force many of them to fly over the border. Their flight could end only in the Red River Settlement, a defenseless outpost that did not have even a police force. It was apparent both to him and to Governor Alexander Dallas of Rupert’s Land that the Hudson’s Bay Company would need troops.

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Indeed, Dallas wrote London that many of the settlers, recalling the Sepoy Mutiny in India, were apprehensive of an Indian conspiracy that would annihilate all the whites in the British Northwest.  

Dallas therefore convened the Council of Assiniboia to consider what could be done about the fearfully awaited Sioux. He strongly urged the councilors that, if they desired troops, they should memorialize the crown and thus strengthen the hand of the company in its own efforts to get military aid. In complete accord with his wishes, the councilors endorsed a petition to the queen describing the perils that confronted them and praying for her protection.

Months passed without word from London. The following spring, the inhabitants of the Red River Settlement grew increasingly uneasy as the Sioux, drifting ever farther northward, began to gather just below the border. In March, the settlers petitioned the Governor and Council of Assiniboia to organize cavalry companies of several hundred men to protect the settlement until the anticipated arrival of British troops. Strangely enough, their prayers went unanswered. The council expressed the belief that danger from the Sioux was not imminent and that to muster a cavalry unit would, therefore, be “somewhat premature.” Moreover, the cost would exceed what the petitioners would be willing or even able to pay; and, if the application to the queen were honored, regular troops might arrive in time to avert any possible danger.  

In reality, despite the Indian peril, the Hudson’s Bay Company hesitated to establish a local military force whose loyalty to its interests might not be as great as its devotion to the free traders of Rupert’s Land.

The company preferred British regulars—disciplined soldiers whose attachment to the crown, and to itself, would be unquestioned. But ironically enough, its own pleas for protection received little sympathy. The British
colonial secretary denied that the crown was in any way responsible for the safety of Rupert’s Land, and declared that he would not recommend troops unless the company agreed to assume all the soldiers’ expenses—pay, subsistence, and transportation. There the matter of imperial protection ended, for the company either could not—or would not—pay the price.

If the Hudson’s Bay Company received little assistance from the colonial office, it found the United States state department even less sympathetic to its plight. In fact, Secretary of State William H. Seward asked the British government for assurance that the company would not issue arms or ammunition to any Sioux Indians who might seek refuge in Rupert’s Land. Whitehall fully complied with Seward’s request and directed the company to use “its authority and influence to prevent the hostile Indians on either side of the [international] frontier from being supplied with Arms, Ammunition, or Military Stores to be used against the peaceable inhabitants of the United States.” Accordingly, Governor H. H. Berens of the Hudson’s Bay Company distributed circulars relaying these directions to all his border posts. From the Red River Settlement, Dallas confidently replied that there was no probability of the Sioux getting arms from either the settlers or the Indians above the forty-ninth parallel, for, like the Americans, they also dreaded the Sioux.

Dallas soon discovered that it is easier to make promises than to keep them, for Little Crow, leader of the Sioux Uprising, arrived in the Red River Settlement with his band late in June, 1863, and embarrassingly reminded Dallas that the British had promised his people an asylum in the “American War” of 1812. The unwelcome visitor then used pressure on the governor to demand both food and ammunition. Lacking military support, Dallas was forced to give Little Crow food, and it was only with the greatest difficulty that he could refuse ammunition, for the chief was a desperate man who knew he was fighting with a rope around his neck. In fact, Little Crow declared he would never return to the United States until the Americans released their Indian prisoners. But fortunately for the British, the band remained only over a week end. Despite his vow, Little Crow later returned to Minnesota, where he met his death at the hands of two deer hunters.

WHILE military expeditions led by Generals Henry H. Sibley and Alfred Sully were chasing the Sioux over the Dakota plains in the summer of 1863, isolated bands of the savages continued to plague the Minnesota frontier. Thus the conviction of certain Minnesotans was seemingly borne out that only a smaller and more mobile force could lay hands on these will-o’-the-wisps. The same group had already brought pressure to bear upon Washington; and as a result, the war department commissioned an ex-Indian agent, Edwin A. C. Hatch, as a major and directed him to raise an independent battalion of volunteers to suppress the Sioux.

Hatch began to enroll his men at Fort Snelling in the late summer of 1863, and as soon as he had mustered in three companies of cavalry, General Sibley ordered the bat-
talion to Pembina near the international border in Dakota Territory. There a fourth company, made up in part of Red River settlers, was enrolled. Delays in the procurement of horses and arms put off the departure of the first three companies from Fort Snelling until dangerously late in the fall, and the mercurial weather proved unkind. Blizzard conditions confronted Hatch and his men nearly all the way to Pembina. They had to fight their way against rain, drifting snow, and high winds, leaving a trail that was morbidly marked by the carcasses of their livestock. When the troops finally reached Pembina in mid-November, instead of adequate shelter, they found only four or five log buildings, and it was not until the first of the year, when the thermometer stood at sixty below zero, that all the men were quartered.11

When word of the organization of Hatch’s Battalion reached the Red River Settlement, it was well received, and some thirty-five of the settlers quickly enlisted in the unit as mounted rangers. But after the battalion reached the border area, its presence was regarded as a mixed blessing. Although the American troops provided “an abundant market and high prices” for the settlers’ products, the battalion also served as a lever to pry loose from their winter encampments on the Dakota plains many of the Sioux who had remained south of the border. As a result, they fled northward “by the hundreds” and gathered in the Red River Settlement.12

The settlers, who lacked police protection and had only enough food to sustain themselves, were frightened by the unwanted visitors, many of whom were “deeply implicated in the American massacres.”13 The Nor’Wester, a newspaper published in the settlement, reflected the anxious mood of its Red River readers in its issue for December 17, 1863. “Meet anybody, now-a-days, and the topic is at once, The Sioux, the Sioux!” reads the account. It then questions: “Are any more in? Have any gone away? What are they coming for?” The questions are answered thus: “They are coming in multitudes — men, women, and children — ‘bag and baggage’ — without any special object apparently, beyond getting something to eat and escaping the hated long-

11 Nash, in Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 1:595-598.
12 Nor’Wester, July 22, November 11, 25, December 7, 1863.
13 Dallas to the secretary of the company, December 11, 1863, Hudson’s Bay Company Archives, series A-12.
It was only natural that people living in "a small community, in the heart of a vast unpeopled waste, far removed from other civilized communities, and without facilities for getting help if it becomes necessary" should fear these newcomers. When the problem of the Sioux, "bag and baggage," was presented to Governor Dallas, it placed the poor man in a quandary. After exacting from the Indians a solemn pledge that any ammunition they received would be used only for hunting, the governor, in desperation, offered them both food and ammunition if they would leave the Red River Settlement. But because they lacked transportation for their sick and aged, the Indians refused the bribe. What more could Dallas do? He was obliged to enlarge his offer, tendering more food and spicing the bribe with the added inducement of transportation. And this time the strategy apparently worked, for the Indians got underway on Christmas Day with provisions valued at from three hundred and fifty to four hundred pounds.\(^1\)

The trip proved much too short for Dallas' peace of mind, since the Sioux went only as far as White Horse Plains, an outlying district of Assiniboia, where they seemed likely to remain for the winter. Clearly, the situation was worse than ever. The settlement could not feed the Sioux indefinitely, and it was feared that when they ran out of provisions, they "would have little scruple in relieving themselves by killing the Settlers' cattle and committing other depredations leading naturally to consequences of a serious character."\(^2\)

Dallas had always hoped that he could settle the problem of the Sioux without American aid, but he now began to doubt whether he alone could remove these sticky savages. And his doubts grew as the settlers themselves began to clamor for American intervention. They were impressed with Hatch's Battalion, which had already demonstrated its eagerness — if not its ability — to kill Indians when a detachment massacred a small band of Sioux encamped below the border. Moreover, after Hatch's arrival, some of the presumably innocent Sioux had drifted back over the forty-ninth parallel and into American custody. As a result, Governor Dallas, acting in concert with the Council of Assiniboia, invited the Americans into Rupert's Land "with a view of inducing" the Sioux "to surrender themselves to their authority."\(^3\)
Hatch would bargain only on his own terms: the Indians’ “surrender must be unconditional.” On that basis, most of the Sioux, including Chiefs Little Six, Little Leaf, and Medicine Bottle, refused to exchange their sanctuary for a hangman’s noose. The pressure upon Dallas increased, as virtually all the Red River settlers importuned him to get Hatch’s troops and deliver them from the Sioux. Indeed some of the settlers had already applied to the major for help. He was more than willing to lend his aid, but he would not enter Rupert’s Land without Dallas’ permission.

It required a unique bit of Canadian-American co-operation to remove two of the chiefs from Rupert’s Land. In collaboration with the Americans—and certainly with the blessing and the financial assistance of Major Hatch—some of the Red River settlers snared Little Six and Medicine Bottle in an effective, if iniquitous, trap. Lured by false pretexts into the home of a settler, the Indians were encouraged to drink a cocktail of raw alcohol blended with laudanum. When they fell to the floor in a stupor, their sleep was deepened by a generous application of chloroform. Unconscious, the two braves were then manacled to a toboggan and delivered into Hatch’s hands. Some of the settlers, including Dallas, deplored the deed; but others, like the editors of the Nor’Wester, expressed the opinion that although the plot might have been “unjustifiable and uncalled for,” both the British and the Americans had gained by it and consequently the means employed should not be investigated too closely.

Knowing that it would take more than a “Micky Finn” to dislodge the rest of the Sioux from their asylum, the Americans tried to arouse the British into taking more forceful action. Objecting to the Hudson’s Bay Company’s policy of feeding the Sioux, the state department bluntly warned the British government that the Indians “should either be restrained from making hostile incursions into United States territory, or the United States troops should be allowed to pursue, subdue and disperse them.”

Major Hatch preferred the latter course of action and intimated to Governor Dallas that, although his orders forbade him to cross the line, he would nonetheless act without orders if Dallas invited his aid. He was even willing to allow the British to command his troops, and he promised that

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MEDICINE Bottle in captivity, 1864

Nash, in Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 1:599; Dallas to the secretary of the company, January 15, 1864, Hudson’s Bay Company Archives, series A-12.

Nor’Wester, January 18, February 5, 1864; Dallas to the secretary of the company, January 28, 1864, Hudson’s Bay Company Archives, series A-12. After the Montreal Telegraph of April 13, 1864, expressed disapproval of the act as a violation of British sovereignty, the Nor’Wester, in its issue of May 20, retorted that in the Northwest people did not pay attention to the “niceties” of international law and “sacred right.”

Seward to Lord Lyons, January 21, 1864, printed in 38 Congress, 1 session, Senate Executive Documents, no. 13, p. 2 (serial 1176).

Dallas to Lord Lyons, February 25, 1864, Hudson’s Bay Company Archives, series A-12; Nor’Wester, January 18, 1864. The paper considered Hatch’s offer “extremely liberal,” and it consistently backed the movement for his intervention.
his men would not fire on Indians save in self-defense. But Dallas turned down the offer.

To the major, the proximity of the Sioux, and yet their inaccessibility, was extremely galling. He knew that when spring came the Sioux would be off to the plains and far beyond his reach. Therefore he again began to plot with certain of the Red River settlers to help him get hold of the rascals. But his scheme, which was of the most nebulous character, was doomed to fail, for the settlers could never have drugged the balance of the Sioux and they certainly did not have the strength to remove them bodily.

As a last resort, Hatch sent Dallas a formal request in March, 1864, asking permission "to pursue and capture these savages, with an armed force, wherever they may be found." And at once the governor complied. The pressures seeking American aid were becoming too great for him to resist; furthermore, he feared that the Sioux intended to make permanent homes in the Red River Settlement. But to Hatch the governor explained only "that a powerful tribe of Indians, inhabiting the borders of an undefined and unprotected frontier of large extent, should be disabused of the belief that they can with impunity commit depredations and murders in one territory and take refuge in the other." Why Hatch asked permission to pursue the Indians beyond the boundary at this time probably will forever remain a mystery. Before he wrote to Dallas, he had been forbidden by General Sibley to cross the line because the entire matter of the Sioux had been taken in hand by the federal state department. But Hatch realized that before diplomacy could operate, the Sioux would have fled from this British sanctuary. After addressing his letter to Governor Dallas, Hatch must have wrestled with his con-

LITTLE SIX

after he was captured

at Red River in 1864
sciences. In the end, he proved to be no Andrew Jackson, and, permission from Dallas notwithstanding, he dared not cross an international line in pursuit of Indians.

A month later, Hatch received orders to withdraw to Fort Abercrombie. But it was not until April 30, when the ice was out of the Red River, that the only steamboat on the stream, the "International," steamed down from Georgetown. Eager to leave Pembina, the troops were ready to depart in a few hours, but the "International," which was en route to Fort Garry, did not return to the border post until May 5. The men then embarked for the slow voyage upstream. Actually, Hatch's Battalion was no longer fit for military service. Most of the horses had perished; the mobility of the battalion had been blunted by a Dakota winter and the negligence of the army. By June, there was nothing to mark the fact that the troopers had been stationed at Pembina except the bleaching skeletons of their horses and "dozens of unfinished houses" outside the walls of the fort.

THE PROBLEM of the Sioux remained to nettle Canadian-American relations long after the troops had withdrawn. For several years after the outbreak, the Minnesota frontier was haunted by red-skinned specters and the movement of pioneers into the Northwest was effectually arrested. Upon occasion, the specters would suddenly materialize and take American scalps.

As a result, Minnesotans continued to resent the existence of a British asylum for the Sioux. Living in a climate of fear and suspicion, many of them apparently believed that "commercial gentlemen living under the protection of the Union Jack, at Fort Garry" were actually "supplying the hostile Sioux of the adjacent American territory with powder and ball wherewith to shoot American citizens." In his annual messages of 1865 and 1866, Governor Stephen H. Miller of Minnesota suggested that if the British government did not see fit to station troops at Fort Garry in order to control the Indians, it should let American troops pursue and capture them.

But what could the citizens of the Red River Settlement do? In August, 1864, nearly thirty-five hundred "doubled-dyed villains" — armed savages who strode truculently about the settlement — arrived at Red River. Again the settlers petitioned for a local constabulary — and again their prayers were not answered. The visitors reappeared in June, 1866. But the Hudson's Bay Company again refused to establish a local police force, for its officers realized that the settlers would expect the company to supply the necessary funds, and that it would not be easy to maintain control of such a force.

Minnesotans eventually began to understand and to sympathize with the plight of the Red River settlers. All the blame for the situation was "laid at the door of the English government." Surfeited by mass executions, Minnesotans were soon more interested in reconstructing commercial relations with the traders of Red River than in hanging the mavericks who remained beyond the forty-ninth parallel. In truth, the refugee Sioux represented a border problem endemic to the upper Northwest — a problem that would not be solved until Canada purchased the Hudson's Bay territories in 1869-70 and law and order were established by the Royal North West Mounted Police.

THE VIEW on page 318 is from Henry Y. Hind's Red River Exploring Expedition, 83 (London, 1880). Other pictures are from the society's collection.