SHORTLY AFTER MIDNIGHT on August 19, 1862, Henry Behnke of New Ulm mounted his horse and rode toward Traverse des Sioux, some thirty miles to the east, to sound the alarm of the Sioux Uprising and solicit the aid of Charles E. Flandrau. Behnke was already weary, having survived an Indian attack earlier in the day and having spent most of the rest of it riding through the countryside warning his neighbors that the Sioux Indians were attacking white settlers. Flandrau responded to the envoy’s appeal, organized a relief force, commanded the volunteers defending the beleaguered city, and justly earned the name, “defender of New Ulm.”

Why did the threatened citizens of New Ulm turn for assistance to Flandrau? The thirty-four-year-old frontier judge had no military position or training and no ethnic ties with the ethnic-conscious Germans. Moreover, New Ulm’s founders were suspicious of lawyers and even included in their organization’s statement of objectives an admonition to avoid lawyers. As will be seen, Flandrau had obtained sufficient stature, aside from all other considerations, to be asked to lead in the developing crisis.

And who was the young messenger? How and why was he chosen for this particular journey? Although he was only one of a number of couriers dispatched during the war (and he must have come close to encountering William Sturgis, who reportedly arrived at St. Peter about 4:00 A.M. on his way from Fort Ridgely with dispatches for Governor Alexander Ramsey and the commandant at Fort Snelling), Behnke’s midnight ride was nevertheless heroic, dangerous, and important. By alerting Flandrau, Behnke made a significant contribution to the defense of New Ulm and to the ultimate repulse of the Sioux.

Henry Behnke was born in the grand duchy of Mecklenburg-Schwerin (later part of Germany) in 1833 and immigrated to the United States, along with his family, in 1853. Thirteen people, including some aunts, uncles, cousins, and relatives by marriage, made the journey together: father, Frederick, then forty-eight; mother, Sophia, then forty-six; brother, Albert, twenty-two; and sisters, Amelia, eighteen, and Caroline, thirteen. The oldest of the group was Henry’s grandmother, Caroline Dietz, a widow of seventy; the youngest were two infant cousins. The family was probably like thousands of others who fled from Mecklenburg’s pov-
property, chronic unemployment, and crushing oppression by the aristocracy, which dictated even whether their subjects could marry.  

The Behnkes went first to Illinois and farmed in Hanover Township, Cook County, for about a year and a half. About this time, members of the Chicago Land Verein selected land for a townsite along the Minnesota River in what is now Brown County. In 1855, the association was joined by the Colonization Society of North America, a German organization from Cincinnati. The two were merged into the German Land Association of Minnesota in 1857. The site became the town of New Ulm, and it has from the first been settled predominantly by people of German birth or origin.  

The Behnke-Dietz family contingent was among the first arrivals in the spring of 1855. The family traveled to Minnesota by ox team and covered wagon, and the Behnkes may have brought the first horses to New Ulm. When Brown County was organized in 1856, Henry Behnke was appointed the first probate judge and clerk of district court for the county, although he was only twenty-three years old at the time and not yet a citizen. (Until 1896, white persons of foreign birth who declared their intention of becoming citizens could vote and hold office.) How Behnke got these appointments from the territorial government is uncertain, but Francis Baasen, Brown County attorney and Democratic party politician, received from Governor Willis A. Gorman blank commissions which were later filled out with the names of persons Baasen selected. Perhaps Behnke was one of the few who could speak English fluently; perhaps as a bachelor (a state destined not to last) he had time to spend on governmental tasks offering little or no pay. In October, 1856, Behnke was elected register of deeds, a position he held until 1860. He remained clerk of the district court until 1867. In addition, he was acting clerk of the Brown County board of commissioners.  

IT WAS AS a lawyer that Flandrau had his first contact with some of the citizens of New Ulm, being called upon by the founders of the German Land Association for legal advice in pre-empting land for the New Ulm townsite. He accompanied the first pre-emptors to the Winona land office in the summer of 1856 to enter their lands. Those who wished to declare their intentions to become United States citizens appeared before him, including Henry Behnke, on August 25, 1855. His counsel in non-legal matters was even sought. But his social and business intercourse was most likely limited to county officials and leading citizens except for perfunctory contacts in granting citizenship. He never lived in New Ulm.  

Flandrau served as Indian agent in 1856 and 1857. He became a state legislator and was an important figure in the 1857 convention which drew up the constitution for the new state of Minnesota. He served on the supreme court of the territory and later of the state. Justices at this time rode the circuit, acting as both trial and appellate judges, and Flandrau presided over the first term of court in Brown County on September 22, 1857, in the Frederick Behnke residence, which served as the county courthouse for a number of years. Albert Tuttle, soon to become Henry’s father-in-law, was foreman of the grand jury, but it was adjourned for lack of business. Tuttle and Flandrau were no doubt acquainted. Tuttle had also served in the constitutional convention and was Brown County’s first representative in the state legislature. On September 26, just a few days after this initial session, Behnke and Tuttle’s daughter, Esther, were married by Justice of the Peace William Pfänder.  

New Ulm grew rapidly from a small settlement of seven households in 1855 to about 900 people in 1862. There was a discordant note amidst the peace and prosperity of the town by 1862. The Civil War had broken

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5 Jeremiah Clemens and J. Fletcher Williams, United States Biographical Dictionary, Minnesota Volume, 314 (New York, 1897; Fritsche, History of Brown County, 1:124–125, 466, 5:524–526; Folwell, Minnesota, 3:133n).  
6 Flandrau, History of the Minnesota Valley, 705; Alexander Berghold, The Indian’s Revenge: or, Days of Horror, 37 (San Francisco, 1891); Fritsche, History of Brown County, 1:295, 442, 466; New Ulm Review, February 21, 1917, p. 3; New Ulm Journal, October 26, 1928, p. 2; Brown County Atlas, 83 (St. Paul, 1905); United States Census, 1857, Brown County, 59, 97, National Archives Microfilm Publication, T1175, Leota M. Kellett, Early Brown County, 10 (New Ulm, 1966); Brown County commissioners’ records, Book A, January 5, April 7, July 6, 1857, August 3, 1861, Minnesota Constitution, Article 7, Section 1, in Minnesota, Legislative Manual, 1895, p. 45.  
7 Flandrau, Flandrau, 11–18; Flandrau, History of Minnesota, 350–353, citizenship papers, in Clerk of District Court office, Nicollet County Courthouse, St. Peter.  
8 Flandrau, Flandrau, 15, 17, New Ulm Journal, October 26, 1928, p. 2; Brown County marriage records, 1857–1859, 7, in Brown County Courthouse, New Ulm. A notation in Book A, p. 18, of Brown County commissioners’ records states: “Letter from Judge Ch. E. Flandrau notifying Commissioners that the next term of District Court for the County of Brown was ordered on the 22nd day of September next. Resolved that the District Court should be held in the house of Fr. Behnke.” Apparently Behnke’s home was the customary place to conduct county business. Other entries record these payments to Frederick Behnke, $6 on January 5, 1858, for lease of register of deeds office (Book A, p. 26); Fr. Behnke, $42, office rent, November 22, 1858 (Book A, p. 44); Fredrik Behnke, $24, January 24, 1859 (Book A, p. 59); Henry Behnke, $12 for record book, March 1, 1859 (Book A, p. 59); Henry Behnke, $36.50 for services as clerk of district court, September 14, 1859 (Book A, p. 69); Fr. Behnke, $36, January 3, 1860, for rent, register of deeds office (Book A).
out, and men were needed to fight for the North. On Monday, August 18, 1862, a group of New Ulm men, including Henry Behnke, set out in wagons to recruit volunteers for the Union army. The moment was a festive one when the five wagons left to the accompaniment of music. Little did the men realize that they were about to experience the horrors of war on the Minnesota prairie. Traveling westward up the Old Fort Road on the New Ulm side of the Minnesota River, they had gone only about six miles in Milford Township when they came upon a man lying in the road. He had been shot. They stopped to give him aid when they saw several Indians. In the ensuing melee, some of the men jumped into two wagons and turned back toward town and ten or twelve others got into two more wagons and drove at the Indians in an effort to intimidate them (the recruiters, not expecting trouble, carried no weapons). The survivors took up the dead and others who were wounded and put them in the remaining wagon and returned to New Ulm as quickly as possible. Behnke, however, took off on foot to a neighbor's house, where he borrowed a horse to go across country to warn his father-in-law and others. He rode through the countryside, spreading the alarm and stopping at schoolhouses to implore teachers to send the children home to warn their parents.

During the day on August 18, panic and confusion increased in New Ulm as refugees from nearby settlements, which had been attacked or had heard reports of the uprising, began streaming into town. Henry Behnke's wife, Esther, along with other residents, sought safety in flight. She and a number of other people piled into a buggy drawn by one horse, but the load was too heavy for the animal. It was exhausted by the time the buggy reached Redstone Ferry, only a short distance south of New Ulm. Mrs. Behnke then set out on foot with her two young children, carrying the infant and alternately leading and carrying her three-year-old boy. They walked several miles eastward to Nicollet, where they met and got on the stagecoach to St. Peter. They were subsequently joined by Henry, and eventually went by steamboat to St. Paul.

MEANWHILE, Henry Behnke also had his hands full. Brown County officials and other citizens probably met that night with Sheriff Charles Roos and Jacob Nix, who had been declared "Platzkommandant." Such a meeting would be consistent for the organization-minded Germans. Very likely the meeting took place in the Freder-
ick Behnke building, which was still used as a courthouse and soon became Flandrau's headquarters.\(^\text{11}\)

The townspeople feared that an attack was imminent. There was need for immediate help. They sent one message to Mankato and also sought aid from Governor Alexander Ramsey, although they doubted that help could arrive fast enough from St. Paul. Where else could aid be sought? Who in the Minnesota Valley would be able to muster a relief force of men and arms in response to the urgent pleas of those under siege? Judge Flandrau, in neighboring Nicollet County, was the logical choice. He was probably the "best-known man in the state after Governor Ramsey."\(^\text{12}\)

Judge Flandrau had the prestige and leadership to organize help, but who among the New Ulm Germans was capable of presenting a compelling plea for immediate action? The task was not one for an ordinary messenger. The judge was used to discounting testimony of emotional witnesses and might be inclined to dismiss the reports as exaggeration. In fact, skepticism had already greeted initial stories to reach the area that the Indians were attacking white settlers.

The choice of twenty-nine-year-old Behnke was logical. As a member of the inner circle of Brown County officials, he was as well known as any person in the county. As register of deeds, everyone in the county who purchased, sold, or mortgaged real estate had to file documents in his office. In 1862, he was operating a mercantile business. As court clerk since 1856, he was well acquainted with Judge Flandrau. In addition, it is probable that he had good horses and was an able and experienced horseman. The family seems to have made good use of horses in the occupations followed by some of its members and it had a reputation for owning "exceptionally fine horses."\(^\text{13}\)

Behnke agreed to ride to Flandrau despite fatigue from earlier riding. He carried an open letter to the judge, arriving at his house about 4:00 A.M. on Tuesday, August 19. It is not clear whether it had taken until almost midnight to reach a decision to send for Flandrau or whether Behnke preferred to ride in the early hours to lessen the possibility of encountering hostile Indians. At any rate, he swam or walked his horse across the Minnesota River (it was probably low at that time of year) to avoid possible ambush at the ferry, rode to St. Peter by way of Nicollet, and continued on to Flandrau's house a mile or so north of St. Peter. It was still dark when he banged on the door, roused the judge, and told him Indians were killing people all over the country.\(^\text{14}\)

Flandrau later wrote: "Having lived among the Indians for several years, and at one time had charge of them as their agent, I thoroughly understood the danger of the situation." His response was instant, since he

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\(^{11}\) Folwell, Minnesota, 2:361; Fridley, Flandrau, 38.

\(^{12}\) Fritsche, History of Brown County, 1:166; Folwell, Minnesota, 2:235 (quote).

\(^{13}\) Fridley, Flandrau, 34n.

\(^{14}\) The author of this article feels that most of the evidence, except for the account in Folwell, which Carley accepts, indicates that Behnke went directly to Flandrau at Traverse des Sioux rather than stopping first at St. Peter. In three accounts (History of Minnesota, 143, Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 1:731, and Flandrau, 34), Flandrau himself wrote that Behnke rode to his home and did not make it clear whether or not Behnke first rode through St. Peter. Lieutenant Governor Ignatius Donnelly, in Indian Affairs, Report, 1862, p. 62, says, "Mr. Behnke [sic] hurried to St. Peter; called to see Judge Flandrau early on Tuesday morning."

Folwell's account (2:135) says that the messenger (whom he did not identify) went from New Ulm to St. Peter, arriving between 3:00 and 4:00 A.M., and states, "It is not known to

FLANDRAU had his headquarters in the Frederick Behnke building, 101 N. Minnesota Street, New Ulm.
knew that, whether the story was true or not, the frontier was no place at such a time for women and children. He told Behnke to wake the people at St. Peter, and he would be there quickly. He then started his own family down the valley in a wagon to a place of safety, gathered up all the firearms he possessed, and went to St. Peter. On his arrival about 6:00 A.M. he found everyone in a state of excitement. Flandrau’s adjutant at New Ulm, Salmon A. Buell, wrote that the judge informed the people when he arrived that ‘about four o’clock that morning he had received a message from New Ulm, brought to him by Henry Behnke, one of the leading whom the message was addressed, but at four o’clock William B. Dodd, the first citizen of St. Peter in point of time and influence, was dispatching messengers to arouse the settlers of the surrounding neighborhoods. Having delivered his message, the same envoy passed on through the town to the house of Charles E. Flandrau, associate justice of the state supreme court, a mile away at Traverse des Sioux.”

Folwell’s references to Thomas J. Galbraith, in Indian Affairs, Report, 1863, p. 275, and A. W. Daniels, “Reminiscences of the Little Crow Uprising,” in Minnesota Historical Collections, 15:323–336 (St. Paul, 1918), do not support his conclusions. Galbraith says that in the afternoon of August 18, J. C. Dickinson arrived from the Lower Sioux Agency and Fort Ridgely and, in spite of his excitement, “bordering on insanity,” helped convince Galbraith there was trouble. Mrs. Adolph Seiter, a refugee from New Ulm, also helped make clear the uprising was serious. Daniels writes, “At four o’clock in the morning of Tuesday the writer was notified of the outbreak and was asked by Captain Dodd to go to the Rouseville and Briggs neighborhood. . . . This author contends, that Behnke would first seek out Flandrau whom he knew and who had the prestige and standing to organize a formidable force to march to the aid of New Ulm.

15 Flandrau, History of Minnesota, 143 (first quote); Salmon A. Buell, “Judge Flandrau in the Defense of New Ulm During the Sioux Outbreak of 1862,” in Minnesota Historical Collections, vol. 10, part 2:784 (second quote).


17 Folwell, Minnesota, 2:142 (quote), 364. Brown County Journal, June 22, 1918, p. 6; record of claim made pursuant to Act to Pension Citizen-Soldiers of Minnesota who participated in the Indian Massacre of 1862, in division of archives and manuscripts, Minnesota Historical Society.

18 Fridley, Flandrau, 27.

19 New Ulm Review, February 5, 1879 (copy of clipping in Brown County Historical Society). The bankruptcy of the business involved litigation in the Minnesota Supreme Court. See Wells v. Gieseke, 27 Minnesota Supreme Court Reports 478–484 (1881); Auerbach v. Gieseke, 40 Minnesota Supreme Court Reports 258–263 (1889).

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