IN THE LATE 19th century several states and state organizations issued quasi-military medals to veterans (or their heirs) who had volunteered during the Civil War. These honors were usually given for service in a particular unit, such as the "Worth Infantry" medal issued by the state of Pennsylvania, or for participation at a significant place, such as the "Defender of Fort Sumter" medal given by the New York Chamber of Commerce. Some were more general tributes like the "Ohio Veterans" medal or West Virginia's medal presented to the "Heirs of Soldiers Killed in Battle."  

In 1898 Lieutenant Colonel George W. Davis of the War Records Office conducted a study of these Civil War medals for the War Department. He surveyed the states to ascertain which ones had issued medals and requested that specimens be sent to the War Department for display and archival purposes. His correspondence, now in the National Archives in Washington, D.C., reveals an unexpected history behind one — the "Defender of Fort Ridgely" medal "presented by the State of Minnesota" in 1896.  

The round copper medallion, one and a half inches in diameter, is suspended from a bar. The obverse design in low relief shows three sides of Fort Ridgely from within the parade ground. The United States flag flies high above what appears to be the smoke of battle. Four cannon and some human figures appear in the parade area. Raised block letters around the perimeter read "DEFENDER OF FT. RIDGELY/AUG. 18.—27. 1862." Above the flag in raised block letters on a ribbon are the Dakota words, "TI-YO-PA/NA-TA-KA-PI," which will be dealt with later. The reverse design shows a wreath of moccasin flowers (the Minnesota state flower) and foliage enclosing the raised block letters, "PRESENTED/BY THE STATE OF/MINNESOTA/TO," with a blank area to be engraved with the recipient's...
name. The manufacturer’s name, J.K. Davison of Philadelphia, is indicated in small block letters below the wreath.3

There are at least two significant irregularities pertinent to the issuance of this medal. The first and more obvious is that there were no strictly Civil War actions on the then remote frontier of Minnesota. The second, never “proclaimed from the house-tops,” was that, contrary to its own inscription, the medal was not truly presented by the state of Minnesota!

Events associated with what the medal commemorates certainly had indirect connections with the Civil War, however, if not direct ones. The defenders of Fort Ridgely fought for their lives against warring Dakota (Sioux) Indians, not southerners. But the bloody Indian uprising of August and September, 1862, had a great deal to do with the Civil War — troops raised for that conflict were used in Minnesota, for example — as well as root causes which went back much further.4

White land hunger had long been a dominant factor in shaping United States Indian policy, and in 1853, as a result of treaties signed at Traverse des Sioux and Mendota two years earlier, the proud, nomadic Santee Dakota had been placed on a narrow reservation flanking the Minnesota River. A new treaty signed in Washington, D.C., in 1858 legalized the sale of the half of these lands, close to a million acres, lying north of the river. Annuities and provisions were promised in compensation, but very little was ever delivered to the Indians. Political intrigue involving traders and low popular opinion of the Indians kept them far down on the list to receive what was due them when supplies were short.5

Supplies were indeed short after 1861 when much of the available food, equipment, and money were funneled into the national war effort. Some of the Dakota in the summer of 1862, being held to restricted hunting grounds and having had poor harvests the previous year, were decidedly hungry. Their appeals to the Indian agencies were met with admonitions for patience but with few provisions.6

Further, it was not lost on the Indians that the Minnesota frontier was poorly defended, most of its experienced soldiers having been shipped off for service on Union lines far away. If there ever was to be a propitious moment for redress of grievances, this was it, and sadly, violence appeared to be the only available option under existing circumstances. Indian leaders begrudged the loss of tribal traditions and integrity under the different and demeaning life-style imposed by the reservation system. And not insignificantly, the culture of the Dakota glorified battle; they were magnificent warriors.7

THAT CONTEMPORARIES viewed the Dakota, or Sioux, Uprising as part of the greater Civil War is evidenced, for example, by the lengthy and graphic — but garbled — account of the outbreak presented in Samuel M. Schmucker’s massive history of the war, hurried into print in 1865. Schmucker asserted that the “other” of two causes of the uprising (the first was the annuities problem and related financial frauds) was “the influence exerted by a number of emissaries of the Rebel government, who represented that the Federal Union had fallen into chaos, and that the propitious hour of their deliverance and revenge had at length arrived.”8

Others, including Horace Greeley of the New York Tribune, subscribed to the Confederate agent conspiracy theory, too, but evidence does not seem to support these contentions. But there were disaffected Democrats in Minnesota who, having lost their political appointments after the Republican victory in 1860, publicized southern military successes and took every opportunity to tell stories which would poison the minds of the Indians against the government.9

The murders of three white men and two women by four hot-blooded Indians during a seemingly trivial encounter at Acton, Meeker County, on August 17 touched off the Dakota war. Knowing white revenge would follow, the Dakota met and debated war. One leader,3 A specimen of this medal is in the MHS museum collection. Another is currently in the possession of the Division of Military History, Smithsonian. See National Archives artifact item no. 94-17-117.
6 Blegen, Minnesota, 266-268.9 Ironically, the long delayed annuity money — $71,000 owed in 1862 (Congress debated a month before deciding to send gold instead of greenbacks) reached Fort Ridgely the very day, August 18, that the outbreak began. Foodstuffs, also late, were already at the agencies, but the white officials short-sightedly refused to distribute them to the hungry, impatient Indians (who knew they were there) until the money arrived so that both payments could be made at the same time. A small amount of food was finally given out: Blegen, Minnesota, 266-268.
7 Blegen, Minnesota, 263-265.
Little Crow and other, cooler heads cautioned against misreading United States strength and foresaw ultimate doom for the Indians' cause if they chose to fight. Angry young braves persuaded the reluctant Little Crow to lead them by accusing him of cowardice. First he made an eloquent speech of warning, saying in part: "Yes, they fight among themselves — away off. Do you hear the thunder of their big guns? Yes; they fight among themselves, but if you strike at them they will all turn on you and devour you and your women and little children just as the locusts in their time fall on the trees and devour all the leaves in one day. You are fools. You will die like the rabbits when the hungry wolves hunt them in the Hard Moon (January). Taoyateduta [Little Crow] is not a coward: he will die with you."

On Monday, August 18, the Dakota carried out a series of ferocious surprise attacks, first on the Lower (Redwood) Agency on the south bank of the Minnesota and then on scattered settlements. Many white settlers fled to hoped-for safety at Fort Ridgely, across the river and some 13 miles downstream from the agency. By nightfall on August 18 some 200 fugitives crammed into the fort, a vulnerably open, unpalisaded, undermanned post in northwestern Nicollet County and near the southeastern edge of the reserved lands. When the post was soon attacked twice, the second time by as many as 800 Dakota, many settlers volunteered to fight. Their services were gratefully welcomed, and eventually they brought the armed force at the post to around 200 "effectives." The latter included two companies (one partly depleted at Redwood Ferry) of the Fifth Minnesota Regiment plus a unit called the Renville Rangers.

WERNER BOESCH was one citizen-soldier at Fort Ridgely. Born in 1829 in Switzerland and trained as a machinist, he immigrated to Chicago in 1855. He moved in 1857 to the New Ulm area, predominantly settled by Germans. When the Indian war erupted, he and his wife of two years, the former Anna Steffen Voehringer, were living on a farming claim a few miles upriver from Fort Ridgely. Like many other settlers near them, they hurriedly sought refuge at the beleaguered garrison.

Fortunately for its defenders, the fort had been an artillery post and still had cannon and ammunition stores under the command of a regular army ordnance expert, Sergeant John Jones. His three gun detachments, more than any other one factor, drove away the Dakota attackers. Boesch had had experience in the Swiss artillery and volunteered his services as a gunner under another citizen-defender, J. C. Whipple, who had gained artillery skill in the Mexican War. Whipple stationed his 12-pound mountain howitzer at the northeast corner of

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10 A version of Little Crow's speech, said to have come directly from the chief's son, Wowinapa, appeared in H. L. Gordon, The Feast of the Virgins and Other Poems, 343 (Chicago, 1891). It was reprinted under the title, "Taoyateduta Is Not a Coward," in Minnesota History, 39:115 (September, 1962). See also Carley, Sioux Uprising, 10-12.

11 Only the fort's commissary and barracks were built of stone. As plans were revised, the other buildings were constructed of wood. The fort, built between 1853 and 1855, never had a stockade, blockhouse, or well. See Report of the Quartermaster General, November 22, 1853, in 33 Congress, 1 session, Senate Executive Documents, no. 1, p. 131 (serial 691), cited in G. Hubert Smith, "A Frontier Fort in Peacetime," in Minnesota History, 45:115 (Fall, 1976); Carley, Sioux Uprising, 15, 26-28, Blegen, Minnesota, 271; Board of Commissioners on Publication, Minnesotan in the Civil and Indian Wars, 2:193a–193b (St. Paul, 1899). The latter lists names of participants inscribed on the Fort Ridgely monument.

12 Newspaper clippings in Werner Boesch file, Brown County Historical Society, New Ulm; Boesch obituary, New Ulm Register, November 15, 1899.
the parade ground and, especially, early during the first attack on August 20, helped force the Indians back. One of the leading warriors, Big Eagle, later said that "But for the cannon I think we would have taken the fort." By assisting Whipple, Boesch doubtless made a contribution beyond the adding of one more desperate body to the fort's defense.\(^{13}\)

Meanwhile, Anna Boesch earned praise and gratitude for her care of the sick and wounded. A few days later she helped evacuate women, children, and wounded to St. Peter and then by boat to St. Paul. The boat was wrecked and "the dangers of the water" after the ordeal at Fort Ridgely caused her to suffer "illness and nervous prostration from which she never recovered." She was an invalid the rest of her life.\(^{14}\)

The Boesches evidently did not return to their farming claim after the Dakota war but went to New Ulm instead. There Werner Boesch became part owner in 1865 of the Eagle Mill, a sawmill operation, and continued in this business, which prospered and was expanded, until 1886 or 1887. He also did well in real estate and became a prominent figure in the community.\(^{15}\)

THE INDIAN LEADERS, against whom Boesch and the others were to aim their artillery, understood the strategic importance of subduing Fort Ridgely and knew it should be done quickly. They wanted to attack the fort early on August 19 when it was at its weakest, but the young men opted for an assault that day on the town of New Ulm and were driven off. By the time the Indians got around to storming the fort on August 20 and again for a "grand affair" on August 22, Ridgely was significantly reinforced and the hated cannon were ready. The fort did hold, thanks to the grim determination of its frightened defenders. Only three whites were killed and 13 wounded; Indian losses, as usual, were undetermined. When New Ulm citizens repulsed a second, large-scale attack on August 23, the Indians were denied any more movement through the valley of the Minnesota River. After defeat, Big Eagle was quoted as saying: "We thought the fort was the door to the valley as far as to St. Paul, and that if we got through the door nothing could stop us this side of the Mississippi. But the defenders of the Fort were very brave and kept the door shut." The unfamiliar legend, "TI-YO-PA/ NA-TA-KA-PI," on the face of the Fort Ridgely medal is Dakota for "It shut the door against us," using Big Eagle's words.\(^{16}\)

A modern reader can perhaps detect a note of sympathy in those words, for truly more than the door to St. Paul was closed after the abortive uprising. For all but a few, the way of life for the Dakota Indians in Minnesota was finished. By public insistence, they were removed in 1863 to the Missouri River Valley in present-day South Dakota, their treaties in Minnesota abrogated. In less than 30 years — in 1890 — what was called the battle of Wounded Knee in South Dakota marked the end of Indian power throughout the United States.\(^{17}\)

It is not likely that any sympathy in regard to the legend on the medal was intended by 19th-century Minnesotans. Indeed, hysterical fear and loathing of Indians — not a new idea but intensified to white heat by the 1862 events — spread far beyond the confines of the state and the scope of the immediate violence. In six weeks the Dakota war was effectively over, but not in the minds of contemporary citizens who recoiled in horror at the thought of some 500 killings and widespread property damage and the fear of their recurrence.

Minnesotans demanded vengeance. A military court was established by Colonel Henry H. Sibley, who commanded the expedition that defeated the Indians at Wood Lake. The court tried 392 of the approximately 2,000 captured or surrendered Dakota and sentenced more than 300 to death. President Abraham Lincoln, however, in a personally written order, allowed capital

\(^{13}\) [Cynthia A. Matson], Fort Ridgely: A Journal of the Past, 5 (St. Paul, 1972); Blegen, Minnesota, 271.

\(^{14}\) Clippings in Boesch file, Brown County Historical Society, Marshall News Messenger, September 1, 1893.

\(^{15}\) Clippings in Boesch file, Brown County Historical Society, New Ulm Review, November 13, 1899.

\(^{16}\) Folwell, Minnesota, 2:130-133; Blegen, Minnesota, 271; Carley, Sioux Uprising, 27-30; Charles E. Flandrau to General Hermann Muelhberg, April 6, 1898, NARC 94, special file 36. In his letter Flandrau used the word "gates" instead of "door," possibly because of a faulty memory.

\(^{17}\) Folwell, Minnesota, 2:235-281; Carley, Sioux Uprising, 76-82, 92.
punishment for only 39 Indians who had been found guilty of rape or slaughter of defenseless civilians. In arguing that the others should be dealt with as prisoners of war, not murderers, Lincoln caused his own political stock in Minnesota to plummet. After one more was reprieved, 38 Dakota were hanged simultaneously on December 26, 1862, in Mankato from common gallows amid a great crowd of approving spectators.  

Several of the Dakota leaders, notably Little Crow, escaped to the Dakota prairies. Little Crow, however, returned to Minnesota in the summer of 1863 and was shot and killed by hunters near Hutchinson "as if he were a wild beast." The civilized state of Minnesota gave the killer a $500.00 bounty, and the chief's scalp, skull, and wristbones were exhibited publicly. It was not until 1971 that Little Crow was given a fitting burial at Flandreau, South Dakota.  

Samuel Schmucker's 1865 Civil War account, among others, again showed the contemporary attitude. He acknowledged "outrageous frauds" (having to do with cheating the Indians out of money payments due them for land exchanges) "which the agents of the Government had continually practised upon them," but he could still write, referring to the uprising, that "deeds of blood were perpetrated, compared with which the worst excesses of civilized warfare appear insignificant." The atrocities of their "most ferocious warriors . . . richly deserved the penalty of death." Official commentary written 30 years after the fact still reflected the paranoia and abhorrence felt by white Minnesotans from the "desolation," "depopulation," "horrors," and "waste" caused by the "savages in the west" on the warpath.  

WITHIN THIS ATMOSPHERE, then, it seemed fitting and proper that the Minnesota legislature in 1895 should authorize the expenditure of $3,000 for the erection of a monument at the site of Fort Ridgely, which in time read "in memory of the fallen: in recognition of the living; and for the emulation of future generations."  

Charles E. Flandrau, himself a significant figure in the 1862 events, chaired the monument committee. (Flandrau, who had been an Indian agent and later became a judge on the Minnesota Supreme Court, led the volunteer forces that repulsed the Dakota attackers on August 23 at New Ulm. He afterward was named a colonel in the state militia that guarded the southern and southwestern frontiers from a line of forts reaching to Iowa.) It was in Flandrau's correspondence, with various others and finally with the War Department's Lieutenant Colonel Davis during the latter's research on Civil War medals, that facts quietly surfaced about the origin of the Fort Ridgely Defenders medal. In March, 1896, Flandrau wrote Governor David M. Clough that work was progressing satisfactorily on the monument and that it was expected to be dedicated in August on or near the anniversary of the battles of Fort Ridgely. Flandrau went on:

There is an old gentleman at Mankato by the name of Werner Boesch, who was one of the defenders of the Fort and who takes a lively interest in the erection of this monument. Mr. Boesch has volunteered to defray the expenses of a sufficient number of medals to be presented to the defenders on the day of the dedication, and does not care to be prominently known in the transaction. The committee having the monument in charge, of which I have the honor to be Chairman, thinks it would add much to the value of these medals if they could have inscribed upon them "Presented by the State of Minnesota." The committee would readily assume the responsibility of so saying, but is apprehensive that it lacks power to do so. Will you not accept the medals on behalf of the state when they are completed, theoretically, I mean, and authorize the committee to present them to the proper parties as coming from the state? We all feel satisfied that these medals will be very highly prized by the defenders of the Fort, and much more so if they are bestowed by the state.  

Flandrau also invited Clough to attend the dedication and personally bestow the medals. The governor responded by signing the statement which Flandrau himself had evidently taken the precaution to compose: "It will afford me pleasure on behalf of the State of Minnesota to receive from you any medals that may be struck off for the defenders of Fort Ridgely, and I authorize your committee to have inscribed upon such medals the words: 'Presented by the State of Minnesota to — — — the recipient, and I will endeavor to be present at the dedication of the monument in August next and present such medals to the brave defenders of the Fort.' "  

Clough was not present, however, at the August 20, 1896, dedication where numerous dignitaries, most of them Fort Ridgely leaders from 1862, recalled the history of the fort and recounted the heroic deeds of those
who withstood the Indian attacks. The *New Ulm Review* listed Werner Boesch as among the people who sat on the platform for the program; he was not one of the speakers. The newspaper report ended: "Then followed one of the most impressive events of the whole day — the distribution of gold [copper] medals to all of the survivors. These medals were appropriately engraved and bear the inscription — 'Presented by the State.'"  

General Hermann Muehlberg, adjutant general of Minnesota, accepted the monument for the state after making the governor's excuses and, as Clough's representative, distributed the medals — "over one hundred to widows and eldest children of the killed, as well as to the survivors."  

Two years later, in 1898, Davis wrote Muehlberg and other state adjutants general about Civil War medals for his War Department study. Muehlberg referred him to Flandrau. Davis wrote Flandrau after the War Department had received a specimen of the Ridgely decoration:  

I have seen it somewhere stated that this medal was ordered struck by the Legislature of Minnesota, but a diligent search in the session laws of your State has failed to discover the Act of the Legislature. If the medal was presented in pursuance of a legislative enactment, you will confer a favor by referring me to the same in the Session Laws. If it was not so ordered, will you kindly add to past...  

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favor by giving me a history of the connection of
the State with the presentation? ²⁶

Flandrau responded to the direct question directly,
giving the story to Davis essentially as he had to the
governor, but he did not mention Werner Boesch by
name. Flandrau referred only to "one of the defenders of
the Fort" proposing the appropriateness of the medal
and his willingness to pay for it, since "the appropriation
was exhausted." He added: "We have never said much
about it, because we thought the recipients of the medal
would value it more highly if they regarded it simply as a
testimonial from the state, without any question about
its regularity, but we believe that the inscription on the
converse of the medal, 'Presented by the State of Minne­
sota to [ ],' is in every sense true." ²⁷

Flandrau then concluded with a hint that he would
prefer the secret be kept: "I give you these particulars
because you ask for them in an official way, and there is
nothing to conceal in regard to this matter, but we do not
proclaim the matter from the house-tops for reasons that
will naturally suggest themselves to you." He did pen at
the bottom of his letter, "I enclose copies of my letter to
the Governor and his reply," which would have revealed
Boesch's identity, but there is no record that Davis pur­
sued the matter further or made known the facts pre­
sented him about the irregularities of the Fort Ridgely
medal.

The secret was buried with Werner Boesch (who
died in 1899, receiving a number of flowery local tributes
to his civic contributions, both socially and in business)
and the few committee members and the governor who
knew. The story came to light during a search for sup­
porting documentation for a number of Civil War medals
recently transferred from the National Archives to the
Division of Military History at the Smithsonian’s
Museum of American History.

Boesch accepted anonymity as the price for assuring
that the medals be as highly regarded as possible. The
price he paid in dollars must have been considerable in
view of the number presented. Documents from engraving
firms of the time suggest prices of one to five dollars
per medal.

For those who would take the time to read it, there is
a small bit of immortality for Werner Boesch on the Fort
Ridgely monument, upon which all the white particip­
ants during those fearful days are listed. Boesch's name
appears in a group of 53 "Armed Citizens." The name of
Anna Boesch is at the top of the alphabetically arranged
list of 19 women who "rendered especially valuable serv­
ices" among those others who "cheerfully and bravely
assisted in the defense of the Fort." ²⁸

²⁶ Davis to Flandrau, April 22, 1898, NARG 94, special file 36.
²⁷ Here and below, see Flandrau to Davis, April 26, 1898,
NARG 94, special file 36.
²⁸ Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 2:193b.