

# SULLY'S EXPEDITION OF 1864

*featuring the*

## KILLDEER MOUNTAIN AND BADLANDS BATTLES

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**AUTHOR'S NOTE** — The saying that truth is stranger than fiction was never truer than when applied to the events of Sully's Expedition of 1864. In the last hundred years many legends and exaggerations have grown up around the battles at Killdeer Mountain and in the Badlands so that one wonders just what did happen. It is refreshing to go back to the diaries and letters of the soldiers written on the spot and get a realistic picture. What these men tell is even more fascinating than some of the legendary accounts which have floated around for some time.

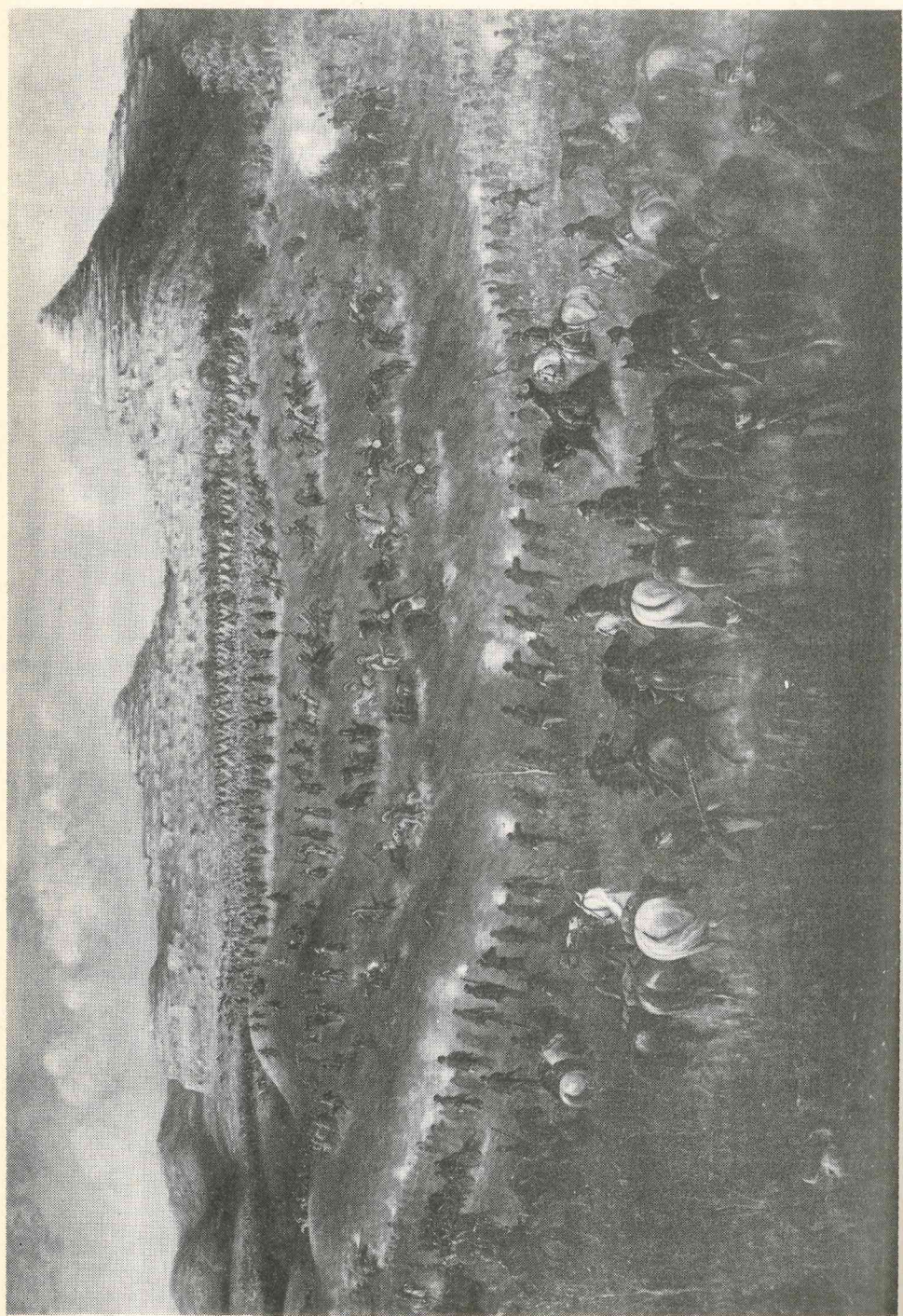
In this account I have relied almost exclusively on the soldiers' diaries, some of them quoted for the first time, and on the official correspondence of the officers in Sully's army. Two authorities that I quote I do so with reservations: I consider Col. M. T. Thomas' reports greatly exaggerated and misleading, and I cannot determine when Stanley Vestal is giving facts and when he is using his imagination. I quote them because they are interesting and I will let you decide if they tell the truth.

### Avenging Foes Assemble

June 28, 1864, had begun as just another uneventful marching day for General Alfred Sully's army in Dakota Territory. But it did not end that way. The north-bound column was paralleling the east bank of the Missouri in what is now Potter County, South Dakota. Captain John Fielner, topographical engineer for the expedition, was enjoying himself collecting specimens at some distance from the main column. Though General Sully had often warned him to take along a larger escort on his scientific wanderings, the Captain laughingly replied that he did not believe there were any Indians in the country.

This day he took two soldiers and rode to a curious "Medicine Rock" in which were embedded three human footprints. Near the mouth of the Little Cheyenne the trio picketed their horses and walked toward the creek for a drink of water. As they neared a clump of bushes, a shot rang out on the hot summer air. Captain Fielner slumped forward, mortally wounded by a shot through the lungs.

Three Sioux Indians sprang from the bushes and made a dash for the horses, but the snorting steeds reared, pulled out their picket-pins and ran away. The Indians quickly took to the hills on foot. When news of the tragedy reached the column, General Sully ordered Captain Nelson Miner to take his Dakota Cavalry (called the "Coyotes") and pursue the fleeing redskins. For at least eight miles a dozen cavalymen galloped in hot pursuit, shouting their battle cry: "Death to the murderers!"



The Battle of Killdeer Mountain, Wisconsin, July 21, 1876.



General Alfred Sully's painting of himself with his favorite horse, a dappled grey.

They finally surrounded the refugees in a buffalo wallow, then blazed more than 200 shots at the Indians until the last one fell, riddled with bullets. The Dakota boys returned in triumph with the Indians' guns, bows and arrows. General Sully beamed with satisfaction, but he wanted more — he wanted the *heads* of the Indians! Back to the scene went a detail of soldiers. Sgt. Benjamin Estes cut off the heads with a butcher knife and thrust them into a gunny sack. The next morning Sully gave orders that the ghastly trophies be impaled on poles on the highest hill near the camp as a warning to all Indians that he meant business.<sup>1</sup>

The bloody events had far-reaching and sobering effects on both red men and white. On every soldier's face appeared a sort of grim determination and earnestness, and every man in the brigade seemed to tighten his belt.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Abner M. English, "Dakota's First Soldiers," *South Dakota Historical Collections*, Vol. IX (1918), 278. Hereafter cited as English, "Dakota Cavalry." John Pattee, "Dakota Campaigns," *South Dakota Historical Collections*, Vol. V (1910), 304. Hereafter cited as Pattee, "Dakota Campaigns." Pvt. Frank Myers, Co. B, 6th Iowa Cavalry, *Soldiering in Dakota Among the Indians in 1863-64-65*, (1888), 12-13. Hereafter cited as Myers, *Soldiering in Dakota*.

<sup>2</sup>Pattee, "Dakota Campaigns," 304.

It was something exciting for the boys in blue to write home about. One soldier even included a gory souvenir in his letter. It was a bloody lock of hair from one of the severed heads, but he told his folks that they could wash it clean! Another soldier wrote to his people and told how they had caught the "red devils." This letter never reached its destination. An Indian took it from his arrow-riddled body near Killdeer Mountain just a month later.<sup>3</sup>

Among the Indians the effect was electrifying. The story of the beheading of the warriors at the Little Cheyenne flew as upon the wings of the wind to every Sioux camp from the Oglalas on the Platte to the bands in farthest Canada. The Sioux read in it the determination of the whites to exterminate their nation, and they concluded that their only safety lay in flight to those places which were considered inaccessible to the soldiers.

Members from almost all of the Sioux bands flocked to the huge encampment between the Heart and Cannonball Rivers. The Santee ruffian, Inkpaduta, was away on the Minnesota River on a horse-stealing expedition so a swift messenger, The Hawk, was sent to summon him. Should the fleeing Sioux be forced to fight, they would need Inkpaduta's generalship as they had in the Summer of 1863.<sup>4</sup> The stage was being set for a great showdown between red men and white.

It mattered little to the settlers of the Upper Midwest that the Sioux Indians had real grievances when they massacred the hundreds of people in the Uprising of 1862. They thought only of their relatives and friends who had been killed, and they were out to punish the murderers. The punitive expeditions of 1863 had been only partially successful. As they were planned, General Henry Sibley was to pursue the Sioux refugees into Northern Dakota while General Alfred Sully was to ascend the Missouri and intercept the Indians before they could cross the Missouri. The well-planned pincer movement failed because low water on the river had delayed Sully. Though Sibley had skirmished several times with the Sioux, and Sully had given them a sound beating at Whitestone Hill, the results were indecisive.

Early in 1864, therefore, General John Pope organized a more vigorous campaign — one that would utterly crush the hostile Sioux and force them to submit. On January 25, 1864, General Sibley wrote to Pope: "I feel quite certain that hostilities will be indefinitely prolonged unless the recent reverses experienced by these prairie warriors are

<sup>3</sup>Fanny Kelly, *Narrative of My Captivity Among the Sioux Indians*, (1891), 105.

<sup>4</sup>Doane Robinson, "A History of the Dakota or Sioux Indians," *South Dakota Historical Collections*, Vol. II (1904), 330, 345. Hereafter cited as Robinson, "Sioux Indians."

followed up vigorously by Government forces, until the Indians are made to feel that there is no safety for themselves or their families except in their unqualified submission.<sup>26</sup>

Small bands of Indians continued to raid settlements in Minnesota, Iowa and Dakota, stealing horses and killing people.<sup>6</sup> Scouts sent out to Dakota brought back news of a huge alliance of Sioux tribes gathering west of the Missouri determined to stop both river travel and the passage of overland caravans of goldseekers headed for Montana. Furthermore, it was common belief that during the winter the traders and half-breeds from the British settlements on the Red River had restocked the Indians with ammunition.<sup>7</sup>

The army, therefore, planned to meet the Indian coalition in a show-down battle, beat the redskins into submission and establish a series of forts to police the frontier and protect the immigrant trains trekking to the gold fields. Four military posts were projected for 1864, though only one was actually built that year — Fort Rice. The others were to be located at Devils Lake (Fort Totten), on the James River (Fort Seward near present Jamestown) and on the Yellowstone (at the mouth of the Powder, but never built).

General Sully hurried to St. Louis early in March to charter a fleet of steamers for transporting thousands of tons of supplies for the huge army he would lead as soon as travel conditions allowed.<sup>8</sup> Some idea of the size of the shipments can be gauged by this partial list of items supplied by the quartermaster: 2500 suits of clothing and corresponding camp equipment for the soldiers and an equal number of saddles for the ponies recently brought over from Canada; 10,000 horseshoes and 2000 muleshoes, rations for an army of 3500 for four months or more, and a whole boatload of corn for the animals. To the mouth of the Yellowstone alone Sully shipped fifty tons of commissary freight, including seventeen barrels of whiskey.<sup>9</sup>

While Sully was chafing at delays in St. Louis, the troops that he would lead were being assembled in Minnesota, Iowa and Dakota. The expedition of some 3400 men was planned to consist of two brigades which would set out from Sioux City, Iowa, and Fort Ridgely, Minne-

<sup>26</sup>*The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, 1885-1901) Series I, Vol. XXXIV, Part II, 152. Hereafter cited as *Official Records*.

<sup>6</sup>English, "Dakota Cavalry," 267-268.

<sup>7</sup>Official Correspondence Pertaining to the War of the Outbreak, 1862-1865," *South Dakota Historical Collections*, Vol. VIII (1916), 350. Hereafter cited as "Official Correspondence." The letters in this collection, pages 100-588, were reprinted from *Official Records*. (See footnote 5)

<sup>8</sup>Nicholas Hilger states that Sully employed fifteen steamers to carry supplies along the course of the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers. "General Alfred Sully's Expedition of 1864," *Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana*, Vol. II (1896), 314. Hereafter cited as Hilger, "Sully's Expedition of 1864." We know the names of nine of the steamers: *Peoria, Isabella, New Gaty, Gen. Grant, Tempest, Island City, Chippewa Falls, Alone, and Yellowstone*.

<sup>9</sup>*Official Records*, Series I, Vol. XXXIV, Part II, 289; Charles Larpenteur, *Forty Years a Fur Trader on the Upper Missouri* (1933), 300.

sota, and would converge on the Missouri River in what is now Campbell County, South Dakota, in June. Later the rendezvous was changed to Swan Creek in Walworth County.<sup>10</sup>

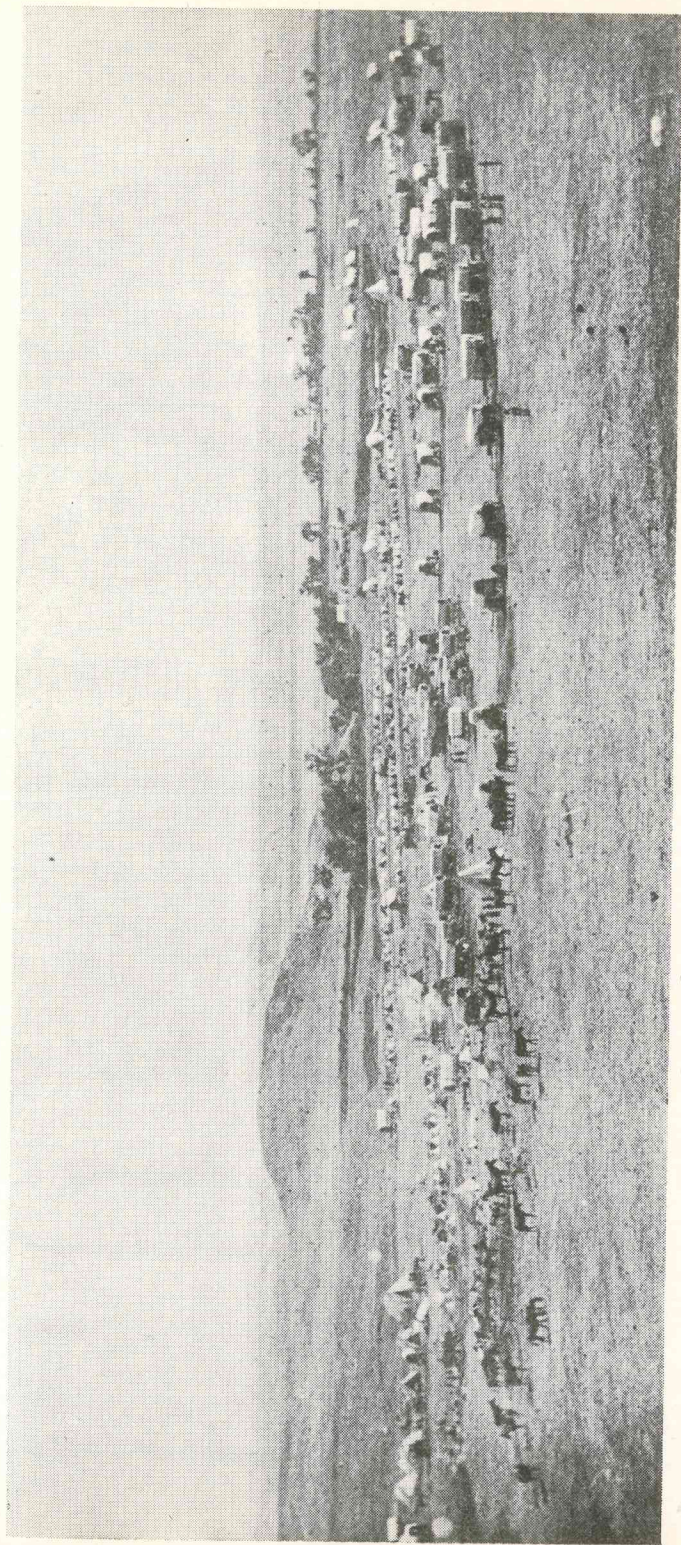
In May, Major Alfred B. Brackett led four companies of the Minnesota Cavalry Battalion to Sioux City, where he joined General Sully's First Brigade. The other divisions of the brigade were eleven companies of the 6th Iowa Cavalry under Lt. Col. Samuel M. Pollock; three companies of the 7th Iowa Cavalry under Lt. Col. John Pattee; two companies of Dakota Cavalry led by Captain Nelson Miner and a small force of Nebraska Scouts (including a number of Sioux and Winnebagos) under Captain Christian Stuft. Among the scouts were the half-breeds Frank La Framboise and Basil Clement, who also acted as interpreters for the Indian scouts. The brigade also possessed a small "Prairie Battery" of four mountain howitzers under the leadership of Captain Nathaniel Pope, a nephew of General Pope. The total force amounted to about 1800 men. Not considered as part of the First Brigade were four or more companies of the 30th Wisconsin Infantry, which came up the Missouri to construct Fort Rice and to protect the commissary supplies to be stored at Fort Union, a fur post at the mouth of the Yellowstone.

It was June 14 before the First Brigade got under way for its juncture with the Second Brigade. The various contingents of the Second Brigade, had, in the meantime, assembled at Fort Ridgely. Col. M. T. Thomas was in command of the brigade, which was composed of the 8th Minnesota Volunteer Infantry, mounted, under the command of Lt. Col. Henry C. Rogers; six companies of the 2nd Minnesota Volunteer Cavalry, Col. Robert N. McLaren in command; Captain John Jones' 3rd Minnesota Battery, of one section of six-pounder guns, and one section of twelve pounder mountain howitzers; and forty-five scouts. The brigade totaled nearly 1600 men.

Many of the men in both brigades had witnessed scenes of Indian atrocities in the Minnesota Massacre and at other places and were filled with an insatiable desire for revenge. "None but the most heathen and savage minds," wrote one soldier, "could have thought up such heart rending and soul sickening crimes as they perpetrated upon poor defenceless females. When I would get to thinking of these things my blood would boil and I would almost ache to send a bullet through their hearts."<sup>11</sup> So strong was the vindictive spirit that General Sibley found it necessary to write to the leader of the scouts: "Should you kill any more Indians who are trying to do mischief, do not allow your men to

<sup>10</sup>"Official Correspondence," 281, 290.

<sup>11</sup>Letter of J. E. Robinson, October 11, 1864. Hereafter cited as Robinson Letter. The letter is not published. Robinson later became a banker at Steele, North Dakota. For further material on the vindictive spirit, see Lieutenant David L. Kingsbury, "Sully's Expedition Against the Sioux in 1864," *Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society*, Vol. VIII, 450. Hereafter cited as Kingsbury, "Sully's Expedition in 1864."



*Camp of the 6th Iowa Cavalry on Sully's Expedition of 1864.*

Courtesy MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

scalp or cut them up, for this is not like white men or Christians."<sup>12</sup> And there was justification for such a precaution, for already at the beginning of the expedition the officers found it necessary to rebuke their men for ravaging Indian graves and for burning Indian buildings.<sup>13</sup>

General Sibley visited the Second Brigade at Fort Ridgely to see it off. Early on the morning of June 5, the troops answered the bugle call of "boots and saddles" and assembled for marching. While Sibley reviewed the fresh and eager troops, a splendid band, mounted on white horses led the way playing "The Girl I Left Behind Me."<sup>14</sup>

It was the unpleasant task of the Second Brigade to escort a fairly large train of immigrants bound for the gold fields of Montana. It was usually called the "Idaho Train" because until May, 1864, Idaho Territory embraced also the present State of Montana. The "Tom Holmes Expedition", as the immigrant train was otherwise known, consisted of 123 covered wagons drawn by ox-teams, with about 200 men, women and children. The wagons were organized into six divisions, each with a wagon master. A captain general superintended the entire train, aided by a court to try any cases that might arise, a sheriff, a postmaster and a chaplain.<sup>15</sup>

The route of the Second Brigade lay up the Minnesota River and across northern South Dakota.<sup>16</sup> The usual travel procedure was to rise before the sun, eat breakfast, feed the stock, harness the draft animals, saddle the horses, strike tents and set off at an early hour. After traveling in formation for 10 to 25 miles, punctuated by short rest breaks, the column would halt early in the afternoon at some convenient watering place to pitch camp. Then guards would take the herds of cattle and horses out to graze. Just before sunset, at the sound of a big tin horn,

<sup>12</sup>"Official Correspondence," 269.

<sup>13</sup>Diary of George W. Doud, Eighth Minnesota Volunteers, Co. F, June 6 and 7. A typewritten copy is in the archives of the Minnesota Historical Society. Hereafter cited as: Doud Diary. See also *South Dakota Historical Collections*, Vol. IX, 471-474, for facts concerning the diary.

<sup>14</sup>Board of Commissioners, *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 1861-1865*, Second Edition, (1891), 389.

<sup>15</sup>Thomas E. Cooper, "The Tom Holmes Expedition," 2. This is a manuscript possessed by the Historical Society of Montana. Some accounts place the number of immigrants as high as 500.

<sup>16</sup>The exact route of the Second Brigade has long been disputed. The map published by David Kingsbury is far off the true route. (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, Volume VIII) Recently Alan and Nancy Woolworth have traced the route by using the diary of John Strong. I have checked this route by consulting the diaries of Doud, Rice and Benedict and I find them all to be in substantial agreement. The route I here describe is that as plotted by Mr. and Mrs. Woolworth.

Following the Minnesota River, the brigade went north of Red Wood Falls, then to Wood Lake, to Minnesota Falls and to Camp Release, opposite the mouth of the Chippewa River. Following the north branch of the Lac Qui Parle River, the army went west and crossed the Dakota border about where highway 212 does today. From the border the party followed a northwesterly direction, going along the boundary between Duell and Grant Counties between Round and Crook Lakes, then to Lake Kampeska near present-day Watertown, South Dakota. Passing through the northeastern corner of Clark County and the southwestern part of Day County, the brigade crossed the Muddy River, then crossed the James River about 17 miles southeast of Aberdeen. Turning sharply north, Colonel Thomas led his brigade along the Maple and Elm Rivers which are northwest into Aberdeen in Brown County. Near the North Dakota border, the brigade turned west into McPherson County and camped at Long Lake, some twenty miles northeast of Eureka. After hitting the headwaters of Bordache (Spring) Creek, the army slanted southwest through Campbell County and met Sully's army on Swan Lake Creek in Walworth County.



the animals were brought in and picketed within the corral made by the wagons.<sup>17</sup>

Each man was his own cook so they all looked for fuel as they traveled. Where wood was scarce, the boys speared buffalo chips with their ramrods and brought them to camp. The chips made a quick, hot fire. Since the old army staple, beans, took so long to prepare, the soldiers often cooked them overnight in a "bean hole". The fire was dug out of the pit, the beans deposited, then they were covered with hot coals. By morning they were thoroughly baked, ready for breakfast.<sup>18</sup>

On many an evening the band played, especially in the earlier, more leisurely days of the expedition. Sundays were days of rest, and many congregated to listen to the chaplain's sermon. Occasionally there was excitement in camp, as when a man was once caught stealing from the sutler. The next morning, draped with a placard marked "Thief", the culprit marched at the head of the column, while the band played the "Rogue's March."<sup>19</sup>

As among the soldiers, disciplinary and punitive action was sometimes necessary to keep order among the civilians. One of the immigrants recorded in his diary for June 22, the day they crossed the James River, that two Dutchmen got into a fight over a rope. When one of them was worsted, he went to his wagon, got his pistol and was going after his vanquisher, when others overpowered him. He was forthwith tried and sentenced to travel in the rear and to leave the caravan when it reached the Missouri River.<sup>20</sup>

The weather was generally warm and fair, but occasionally severe rain and thunderstorms hit the brigade. On the evening of June 28, while farther south Sully's men were butchering the murderers of Captain Fielner, a tornado hit the Thomas camp. Major Ebenezer Rice gives this graphic description in his diary:

... about 9 o'clock a Black broken cloud appears in the North West soon a light puff and then a lull a roar is heard in the distance indicating a heavy Wind another puff and now comes a fearful sweep shaking Tents like a blade of grass another and up goes one Tent after another A cracking and down comes my own away goes my Pillow like a kite over the Hill out of sight. the rest of the plunder is covered with the Tent and saved But few Tent[s] stand the fury Head Qr. is flat as also every one of the line Officers of the Reg away goes this ones

<sup>17</sup>Cooper, "The Tom Holmes Expedition," 2.

<sup>18</sup>Cambell (George T. and family) Papers, 1888, 39. This document is a typewritten, undated copy of the reminiscences of George T. Cambell, describing his experiences with the Eighth Minnesota Infantry. A copy is possessed by the Minnesota Historical Society. Hereafter cited as: Cambell Papers.

<sup>19</sup>Diary of Ebenezer O. Rice, June 17. Hereafter cited as: Rice Diary. The Minnesota Historical Society possesses a typed copy.

<sup>20</sup>Diary of Gilbert Benedict, an immigrant in the "Idaho Train", June 22. Hereafter cited as: Benedict Diary. The Montana Historical Society possesses a typed copy of this diary.

hat and that ones Blouse or Pants. Books and paper fill the air and confusion is pretty general The Col[']s] Buggy blew quite through the Suttlers Tent endangering not only *property* but *life & limb* I have seldom if ever seen as heavy Wind were there any Trees or Buildings in its range the[y] would most surely suffer in half an hour [I] had my Tent up and prepared to take my rest as usual minus my *Pillow*<sup>21</sup>

The next day Sully's scouts met Thomas' Brigade and led it south to Sully's camp west of Swan Lake (near present Akaska, South Dakota). Both brigades stayed in camp for a few days, while the wagons went over to the Missouri to take supplies from the eight steamboats that had just arrived.<sup>22</sup> On July 3 the First Brigade began moving north for it was reported by the scouts that the Sioux were massing in the area between the Cannonball and Heart Rivers. The Second Brigade followed a day's journey behind.

On July 4, while the First Brigade camped near present Herreid, South Dakota, Major Rice noted in his diary how peaceful it was in comparison with the bombardment of Vicksburg in which he had participated just a year before.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, about twenty miles south some members of the Second Brigade and the Idaho train celebrated Independence Day by getting drunk, while others listened soberly to the orations delivered by Professor Daniel Nois and the Reverend G. P. Harris.<sup>24</sup>

In the meantime Sully had gone along with the supply boats to pick the best site for the new fort. On July 7 he selected a heavily wooded area about eight miles above the mouth of the Cannonball River. That day he wrote to his superior:

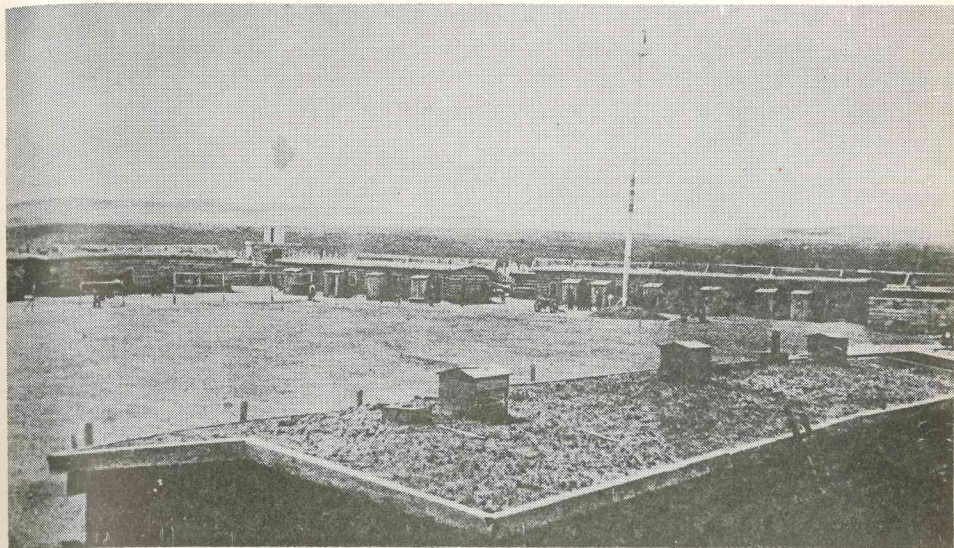
The banks are high here, with sandstone bluffs, good for building. The river is narrower here than at any point I have seen, so it will always be a good crossing. There is a long belt of timber just below this point and several very heavy bodies just above . . . about three miles above is a large bottom of very good grass. I have also communicated with my command by means of scouts, while on my trip up the river, and they will meet me at this point. After discharging the cargoes of the boats I shall use them to cross the command. . . . Day before yesterday some Indians on the bluff made signs to me. They wanted to speak with me. They came aboard, proved to be Yanktonais that were in the fight last year. Seven lodges. They gave themselves up, stating that they had been over a month trying to get away from the camp of the enemy. They got away on the plea of hunting buffalo. They also stated . . . that a very large band, some 1600 lodges, were

<sup>21</sup>Rice Diary, June 28.

<sup>22</sup>Diary of James B. Atkinson, July 1. Hereafter cited as: Atkinson Diary. The North Dakota Historical Society has a typed copy of the diary obtained from a great grandson of the diarist, C. G. Atkinson, 2009 S. Willow, Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

<sup>23</sup>Rice Diary, July 4.

<sup>24</sup>Benedict Diary, July 4; Diary of David M. Jenkins, Co. D, Second Minnesota Cavalry, July 4. Hereafter referred to as: Jenkins Diary. The North Dakota Historical Society possesses a handwritten copy.



*Fort Rice, D. T., built in the Campaign of 1864.*

Courtesy MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

eager for a fight; that I would find them near the head of the Heart River or on the Little Missouri. . . . As soon as I can cross my command and get in shape I shall strike west between the Cannon Ball and Heart Rivers, to the enemy's camp and then to the Yellowstone.<sup>25</sup>

Beginning on July 9, it took the steamers three days to ferry across the nearly 500 wagons, two wagons per trip.<sup>26</sup> Since the boys in the 30th Wisconsin had come up on the boats, they were the first to reach the site. They began immediately to construct the fort, and posted a huge sign with the name "FORT RICE". The Wisconsin boys turned out to be not only good axmen but excellent cooks as well. No sooner were they encamped than they baked apple pies, which they sold to newcomers.

When the immigrants asked to be ferried across, the steamboat captains bargained to do it for a cord of wood per wagon. On July 13, one of the immigrants entered in his diary: "Cut one cord today; one hundred and seventeen wagons made quite a pile of wood; we elected a Mr. Ol. D. Keep our Captain today; the soldiers killed thirteen buffalo out of a herd of 200." He also noted that a Dutchman in camp had a fine young wolf which he had caught swimming in the river.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup>"Official Correspondence," 300.

<sup>26</sup>Doud Diary, July 9.

<sup>27</sup>Benedict Diary, July 10.

### The Race to Killdeer Mountain

Sully spent a week on the Fort Rice site. While hundreds of men helped the Wisconsin soldiers chop down trees and bake bricks for the fort, Sully anxiously awaited more supplies. He had sent some of the unloaded boats back to Farm Island, 200 miles to the south, to pick up a thousand tons of freight dumped there by other steamers. He also sent three light boats up the Missouri with instructions to ascend the Yellowstone and meet him at the mouth of the Powder River. Sully expected to meet the Sioux at Rainy Buttes, fight them, then proceed to the Powder.<sup>28</sup>

The General was greatly displeased by the presence of the immigrant train with its slow-moving oxen and its need for an armed guard of 400 soldiers. He made no secret of his disdain for the immigrants, many of whom he considered cowardly draft-dodgers.

On July 17, astride his fine dappled-grey horse, Sully reviewed his troops. The next day he and his officers rode over to the immigrant camp and he addressed the civilians:

Gentlemen, I am damn sorry you are here, but so long as you are, I will do the best I can to protect you. Tomorrow morning at two o'clock I will leave here and for the first two days there will be no danger. Then I will issue an order though it may seem ridiculous to you, there will be a reason for it, and I don't want you to think it strange if I stop you for a day or two at a time or make you march farther than you would like. I expect to jump an Indian camp and give them hell. I shall go to the Yellowstone river and there establish another fort. Then go on to the Powder River when I will leave you. Keep together for in union there is strength."<sup>29</sup>

The fortune-hunters thereupon vigorously swung their hats in the air and cheered loudly for Sully and for Colonel Thomas, who had led them from Minnesota.

At the first streak of dawn, July 19, nearly 3000 people set out westward, following the north branch of the Cannonball River. That day their number was increased by one when a daughter was born to the Hanchilds. They christened her "Dakota". Another child was born during the trip, but did not survive.<sup>30</sup>

Since the army was now definitely in hostile territory, the Indian and half-breed scouts ranged far and wide to look for signs of the enemy. When the column was only one day out from the fort, the scouts caused a ripple of excitement when they came back with the report that there were 400 Indians 12 miles away. Sully was sure that

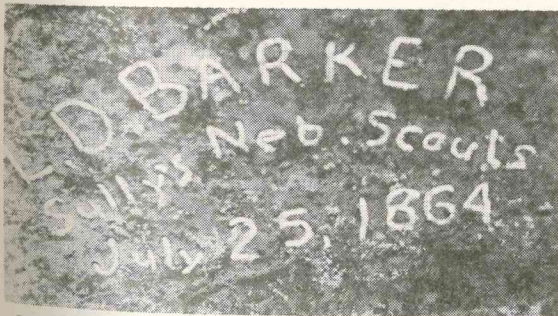
<sup>28</sup>Rice Diary, July 22; "Official Correspondence," 439.

<sup>29</sup>Cooper, "The Tom Holmes Expedition," 3.

<sup>30</sup>Benedict Diary, July 19.



Marker erected by the State Historical Society at the Heart River Corral. The boys are Robert Two Bears and Charles Gress, students at Assumption Abbey.



Carvings in the rocks at the Heart River Corral.  
(See footnotes 33 and 34.)

they were the same redskins he had fought in 1863, and in whose possession he had found fifty white women's scalps.<sup>31</sup>

Tension began to grow when couriers brought back wild reports that the Indians had attacked and driven back the steamboats on the Missouri and that they had killed all the men and taken all the women prisoners at Fisk's immigrant train which had been expected daily at Fort Rice.<sup>32</sup>

Each day the scouts came back with news of fresh signs of Indians ahead, whose trail had now turned northwest. And so on July 24, when the column was in the vicinity of present day New Leipzig, Sully veered to the right and headed for the Heart River. That evening the caravan reached the Heart at a spot about twenty miles southeast of Richardton.<sup>33</sup>

The Summer of 1864 was extremely hot and dry, with grass and surface water scarce. Already the animals were suffering. On the day the caravan reached the Heart River, with the thermometer at a sweltering 110 degrees, twenty-two head of stock died of exhaustion.

Sully surmised that the main body of Sioux was not more than two days' march away, so he decided to corral the immigrant train and his baggage near the river, give it a strong guard under Captain Tripp, and strike fast before the Sioux could escape. All day of July 25 was spent in camp, resting the animals and getting ready for the forced march ahead.

In the diaries and letters of the soldiers and immigrants are recorded their impressions of the Heart River camp. Some amused themselves watching and catching citizens of the prairie dog town near the camp; archeologists were delighted to find fossils and leaf impressions in the rocks; and some "Kilroys" carved their names or initials in the soft sandstone outcroppings. (After a century, some inscriptions are still legible.<sup>34</sup>)

The boys were in high spirits and feelings ran high at the prospect of fighting Indians. Some wanted to fight for excitement while others wanted revenge. Early on the morning of July 26 Sully sent his scouts north to watch for the hostiles, while he prepared to pack his mules with rations and supplies for seven days. This was all according to

<sup>31</sup>Benedict Diary, July 20. An interesting, yet tragic entry in Benedict's diary is that of July 23, written somewhere in the New Leipzig area: "Made 20 miles; crossed Cannon Ball River, found an Indian dead, laid on a scaffold above the ground wrapped in two buffalo robes, with a supply of four bags of tobacco, paint, rings, beads, etc. Pony tied to the post and starved."

<sup>32</sup>Benedict Diary, July 22; Atkinson Diary, July 23.

<sup>33</sup>The exact location of the Heart River Corral is Section 10, Range 91, Township 137. The North Dakota Historical Society has placed a marker on the camp site, near the rifle pits, north of the river and east of the bridge. The site may be reached by going six miles south of the Antelope interchange on I-94, then two miles east, and 4½ miles south on the Burt Road.

<sup>34</sup>The best example of these inscriptions is that on a rock a few rods from the Burt Road, in Section 16. The most legible inscription reads: "L. D. Barker, Sully's Nebraska Scouts, July 26, 1864." Some of the other inscriptions were blasted away by a contractor, over fifty years ago, when he needed rocks for footings on the Heart River bridge nearby.

plan, for General Pope had advised Sully to order special pack-saddles so he could dispense with slow wagons and be able to strike fast.<sup>35</sup> But when he opened the supply boxes he found that there were no saddle blankets so he used gunny sacks. Then he discovered that the belly cinctures, instead of being wide and cushiony, were made of hard, narrow leather that cut into the mules like iron. They did not get the mules far from camp when the animals rebelled against the torture. They kicked and jumped and rolled until they succeeded in breaking the saddles and getting rid of the packs.<sup>36</sup> No record is extant of the General's words of "praise" for the suppliers of the pack-saddles.

It was now nearly noon and Sully was anxious to get started so he could surprise the Sioux. He discarded the pack-saddles and borrowed 45 light wagons from the immigrants. Each was loaded with 1000 pounds of the most essential equipment, leaving behind all tents. It was already 3 p.m. when the column set out, but the men raced along rapidly to get as far as possible by dark. If necessary, they could even travel by moonlight.<sup>37</sup>

After pushing on for about ten miles, the men saw the Captain of the Nebraska scouts coming down from the north as fast as his horse could run. He rode up to Sully and reported that his force had been attacked by a large force of Indians and that all of his men had been cut to pieces. The General saw at once that the Captain was intoxicated, put him under arrest and sent him to march in the rear of the ambulances.<sup>38</sup>

Sully immediately ordered Brackett to take a force of men and hurry ahead to find out the truth and to help the scouts. What had actually happened was that the scouts had had a skirmish with some thirty Sioux in the vicinity of a high hill, probably Young Man's Butte or Custer's Lookout just east of Richardton. The scouts had killed three of the Indians' ponies, while the redskins succeeded in shooting a scout's horse with an arrow and wounding one of the scouts in the knee. The Nebraska boys brought back four buffalo robes, moccassins, leggings, and one enfield rifle as spoils of the clash. Both parties seemed to have been thoroughly frightened by the scrape, for the scouts in their haste to escape left behind a spy glass and a sabre.<sup>39</sup>

Fearing that there might be more Sioux in the broken terrain ahead, Sully put the column in fighting trim. The wagon train went single

<sup>35</sup>*Official Records*, Series I, Volume XXXIV, Part II, 622.

<sup>36</sup>*Official Records*, Series I, Volume XLI, Part I, 141.

<sup>37</sup>Jenkins Diary mentions a beautiful moonlight night on July 24. The time of departure from the Heart River camp varies with the different sources. Sully and Jenkins give 3 p.m., Doud gives 2 p.m., while Rice and Atkinson place the departure at 1 p.m.

<sup>38</sup>Pattee, "Dakota Campaigns," 306.

<sup>39</sup>Doud Diary, July 26; Atkinson Diary, July 26; Corporal John H. Strong of Co. A, Eighth Minnesota Infantry, recorded in his diary that only two Indian ponies were killed. Hereafter this will be cited as: Strong Diary. The original diary is possessed by the Minnesota Historical Society.

file, with mounted men riding on both sides. About sundown they halted for a drink at a little ravine. (This watering place seems to have been a small stream about a mile south of the Antelope overpass on Interstate 94.) Then they hurried on a few miles more until after dark and halted in marching formation. No fires were allowed, lest the lurking Indians discovered them. The men gnawed away at their hardtack, picketed their horses on twenty-foot ropes, and, fully clothed and armed, lay down near their steeds.

If any of the men had intentions of sleeping, they soon abandoned them. The scouts' brush with the Sioux had jangled their nerves. Soon after the men lay down, the camp guards imagined that they heard Indians sneaking into camp and they hurriedly shook every man, and at the order of "Quick! Quick! Fall in line!" every soldier sprang to his horse's head. Though the alarm proved to be false, the men were far from assured and not many eyes closed that night.<sup>40</sup>

At 2 a.m. on July 27 the men readied themselves for a long march and started off northwest as soon as there was light enough to see. By evening they had covered 35 miles, and they camped by a spring near the Knife River.<sup>41</sup>

Wily, Indian-wise Sully was well aware that a favorite Indian stratagem was to surround a camp at night and surprise-attack it at dawn. And so, shortly after midnight of July 28, he ordered his men to saddle up and then lie down with one eye open.<sup>42</sup>

At 3 a.m. the troops were on the Indian trail. After six hours of travel they stopped for a coffee break and breakfast, but there were still no Indians in sight. "This was the third day out from Heart river," wrote one soldier, "and we all began to be discouraged; we did not believe there were any Indians anywhere in that section of the country."

### The Clash at Killdeer

At 10 a.m. the column was on the trail again, and after an hour the scouts and interpreter Frank La Framboise came from the front on a dead run to announce that they had sighted a huge Sioux camp in the hills ahead. They thought that the camp lay just a few miles away, actually it was at least 10 miles ahead.<sup>44</sup> It was estimated that there were 1600 to 1800 lodges with about 6,000 warriors of the Unkapapas Sans Arcs, Blackfeet, Minneconjous, Yanktonais and Santee Sioux.

<sup>40</sup>Myers, *Soldiering in Dakota*, 16.

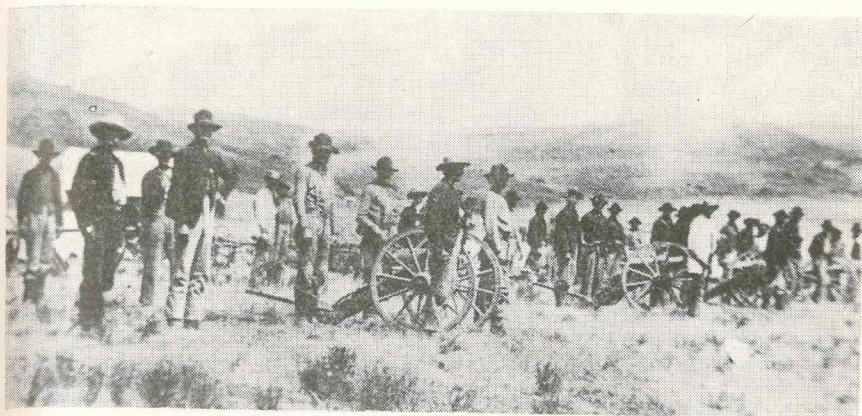
<sup>41</sup>Strong Diary, July 27. Dana Wright thinks that this camp was at Rock Springs, Section 14, Township 143, Range 94. To this day the spring gushes 37 gallons every minute. Some of the people of Manning insist that the camp was made near their town, though this site does not fit the mileage given by the various diaries. It is possible, though, that the "coffee break" stop was made at Manning. (See footnote 49.)

<sup>42</sup>Strong Diary, July 28.

<sup>43</sup>Robinson Letter.

<sup>44</sup>"Official Correspondence," 370.





The dreaded cannons, decisive weapons of the campaign. The picture above was taken in the field near Fort Berthold.

The scouts, as usual before a battle, proceeded to a headquarters wagon and changed their Indian costumes for soldier's uniforms, to avoid confusion in the ensuing fight. The orderlies were soon flying along the lines with orders sticking in their belts for the different commanders to get ready for battle. The soldiers were greatly excited and elated at the prospect of engaging the Indians in battle. J. E. Robinson later wrote: "the troops . . . prepared themselves with plenty ammunition. . . . I was a little excited. The quartermaster, surgeon and some others took a drink of whisky, the quartermaster asked me to take a drink. I told him no, that I would trust my native courage . . ."<sup>45</sup>

Since the boys expected that many would be killed, a great many of them left their watches, pictures and other valuables in the hands of non-combatants while a few hurriedly scribbled a farewell letter to a loved one to be delivered or sent on if they should fall in battle.<sup>46</sup> George Northrup, correspondent for the *St. Paul Press* gave several dispatches to a fellow correspondent and remarked half-seriously: "Send these home, and write my obituary when I am dead."<sup>47</sup>

Sully ordered the commanders of the divisions to take up positions so as to form a large hollow square, a mile and a quarter on each side, with the men three or four steps apart.<sup>48</sup> In the forward line were stationed the 8th Minnesota Infantry on the left, the 7th Iowa Cavalry in the center and the 6th Iowa Cavalry on the right. On the left lateral

<sup>45</sup>Robinson Letter.

<sup>46</sup>Myers, *Soldiering in Dakota*, 17.

<sup>47</sup>Edward Eggleston, "The Kit Carson of the Northwest," *Minnesota History*, Volume 33, 281. The *Press* did carry his obituary on September 6.

<sup>48</sup>Pattee, "Dakota Campaigns," 307.

was the 2nd Minnesota Cavalry while Brackett's battalion held a corresponding position on the right, behind the Iowa boys. The Dakota Cavalry and the Nebraska Scouts guarded the rear. In the hollow of the square were Pope's and Jones' batteries, as well as the wagons, ambulances, and every fourth man holding four horses each. Due to the hilly terrain ahead it was judged that a cavalry charge would be out of question so the men dismounted and deployed on foot as skirmishers. Sully's total force was 2200 men, well armed and backed by the fearsome cannons, the decisive weapons of the campaign.

In this formation the troops advanced four or five miles<sup>40</sup> before encountering the Sioux, who in the meantime, had advanced about the same distance from their huge camp on the south slopes of Killdeer Mountain. According to the soldiers' accounts, the Indians made no effort to flee but awaited the attack, confident of victory.

It may be well, at this point, to consider the start of the battle from the Indian point of view. According to Stanley Vestal, the sympathetic biographer of Sitting Bull, the Indians did not want to fight. For several weeks they knew that the soldiers were coming to their country and so they quickly summoned the renegade Santee, Inkpaduta, to come from Minnesota and direct military defenses, as he had the summer before. Inkpaduta advised the Sioux to choose the rugged country at Ta-ha-kouty (the place where they kill the deer) as best suited to Indian warfare and as a safeguard against cavalry charges. Many of the Sioux had never fought soldiers before so they deferred to his judgment.

It is often claimed that the Indians did nothing to remove their women and children from the scene of battle, but this seems erroneous, for Fanny Kelly, who was a captive of the Sioux, testifies that as soon as the troops were sighted the women began moving back into the hills and woods for protection.<sup>50</sup>

The Sioux were poorly armed for the encounter. They had a number of inferior rifles, but most of them were equipped with only bows and arrows. The Sioux rode out slowly to meet the troops while some women and old men perched on lookout buttes to witness the clash. Here is Vestal's account of the battle's start:

The Sioux waited, and as the soldiers came near, a young man named Long Dog yelled out: "Let me go close to them. If they shoot at me, we will then all shoot at the soldiers." Long Dog had a charm, he was with a ghost, and nobody could kill him. He wanted to find out whether the soldiers were coming to fight, or not.

<sup>40</sup>Jenkins and Doud are in substantial agreement as to the mileage. By their estimates, the army had traveled 15 miles from the night camp to the breakfast stop, then five miles more until the messengers met the column with news of the Indians ahead. Jenkins says that the Indian camp was eight miles ahead while Doud gives seven. Jenkins says that they met the Indians five miles from the Indian camp.

<sup>50</sup>Kelly, *Narrative of My Captivity Among the Sioux*, 92-95.

Long Dog charged toward the line of advancing soldiers, and when he got close, he turned and raced along across their front. He gave them a chance to shoot first, and they did; they began the war. They all shot at him, but he was invulnerable, bullet-proof, and was not hit. When the other Sioux saw the soldiers shooting at Long Dog, they began to shoot back. Long Dog returned to his own line on the hilltop.<sup>51</sup>

The accounts written by the soldiers differ as to the exact time when the battle began. It seems that the battle formation was completed about 11:15 and that they marched about five miles before meeting the Sioux, who were popping up on the hills on all sides. The diarists place the beginning of the shooting between 12:30 and 1 o'clock. Major Rice recorded that the first Indian that approached the lines displayed a white blanket or flag.<sup>52</sup>

Col. Pattee of the 7th Iowa Cavalry gives this version of the opening shot:

When we came in sight of the Indians it was seen that their camp extended about four miles along the foot of the mountain range that extended a long distance along the south side of the Little Missouri river. The ground over which we had to march was rolling prairie with little grass. It was alkali ground; the day was very hot and the boys sweat as they toiled steadily on over the dusty plain and suffered much for want of water. Once we passed a dry bed of a creek or a series of water holes but it was almost impossible to drink as it was so strong of alkali. Just as we came to these water holes we met the Indians scattered all over the prairie on foot and on horseback. They seemed to be in no hurry to meet us, but held back. This was the most formidable array the Dakota Indians had ever seen and they took a good

<sup>51</sup>Stanley Vestal, *Sitting Bull, Champion of the Sioux* (1932), 53-54. Vestal also (55-56) narrates another fantastic episode, which is best told in his own words: "In that camp was a man called The-Man-Who-Never-Walked, a cripple from birth. His twisted, shrunken limbs had never been any good; he could not go on the warpath like other young men. But his heart was that of a bear, full of strong courage. And now, when he saw the soldiers coming right to camp, and the shells dropping among the tipis, he knew his chance had come. He told them to put him in the basket of a travois, or drag, and carry him out to the battlefield. He wished to play the part of a man, like other men, before he died.

"The Sioux about Sitting Bull were sitting on their horses on the hilltop, watching the battle, when there came a man from the camp, singing, and leading a cream-colored horse with a drag tied to its saddle. In the basket of the drag was the cripple with the heart of a bear. When the man reached the Sioux line, he stopped his song, and called out: 'This man has been a cripple all his life; he has never gone to war. Now he asks to be put into this fight and killed. He prefers to die by a bullet, since he cannot be of any use.'

"The Sioux warriors looked at the shrunken, twisted limbs huddled in the basket, and Sitting Bull spoke up: 'That is perfectly all right. Let him die in battle, if he wants to.'

"Sitting Bull's heart was full that day. He was proud of his nation. Even the helpless were eager to do battle in defense of their people.

"So they whipped up the cream-colored horse, and the cripple in the basket of the drag sped away, trying to guide the animal with long reins made of lariats. He could use his arms a little, but he had no weapons. Away went the horse, dragging that strange chariot, galloping straight toward the line of soldiers. The Sioux on the hilltop were watching.

"All at once, down went the horse, shot dead. The-Man-Who-Never-Walked was thrown from the drag, and sat facing the soldiers, singing his death-song. That song soon ended, for he could not dodge the bullets. The soldiers killed him. Later, as they advanced and came upon his body, they were astonished to find this man who had charged them alone so bravely was only a helpless cripple. So died The-Man-Who-Never-Walked, known also as Bear's Heart, because of his dauntless courage."

<sup>52</sup>Rice Diary, July 28.

look at us. About this time an Indian very gayly dressed, carrying a large war club gorgeously ornamented appeared in front of the 6th Iowa cavalry and called loudly to us and gesticulated wildly about one half a mile away. When discovered, Major Wood, chief of cavalry, approached my position and said, "The general sends his compliments and wishes you to kill that Indian for God's sake." I dismounted and called out two men from Company K and one from Company L, 7th Iowa cavalry, who I knew were marksmen and the only men who carried Springfield rifle muskets and directed them to take the best aim possible and fire while I watched closely to see if the ball struck the ground between us and the hill on which the Indian stood, but the balls all passed over the hill. The Indian stood with his left side toward us and immediately stretched himself out flat along the horse's back and plied his left heel vigorously against the flank of his pony and disappeared from my sight over the hill. But the general was some distance to my right and upon much higher ground and afterwards told me that the Indian fell from his horse when nearly down the hill and was put on his horse by other Indians who were on foot and held there till they reached the mountains, then about four miles away. These were the first guns fired. From this on there was a sort of go-as-you-please firing all along the line.<sup>53</sup>

Yelling and whooping out of range of the rifles, the Indians clustered in bands and dashed toward the laterals of the square, discharged their guns and shot their arrows, then scurried back out of range of the rifles. Both Indians and soldiers tried to ambush each other among the low foothills; but slowly the Indians gave way, retreating mile after mile toward their camp around the wonderful Falling Springs. When they were several miles from the huge tepee village, the soldiers saw on a high hill (probably Crosby Butte) a great number of squaws and old men watching the progress of the fight. When about a mile from the butte, Captain Nathaniel Pope ran forward a cannon and sent some shots at it. The first ball exploded before reaching the butte, but the second exploded among the Sioux and in a short time they scattered in all directions.<sup>54</sup>

In the meantime a band of about 500 warriors who had been out looking for the troops came up from the rear, and seeing the baggage train partially exposed, made a mad dash to raid it. Major Brackett immediately helped Captain Jones rush several cannon to the defense. One well placed shot exploded among the attackers, ripping to shreds six Indians and five horses. Thoroughly frightened by this awesome weapon, the rest abandoned the raid.<sup>55</sup>

On all sides of the quadrangle the Indians looked for weak point at which to launch an attack, but they were always driven off by sharp

<sup>53</sup>Pattee, "Dakota Campaigns," 307-308.

<sup>54</sup>Pattee, "Dakota Campaigns," 309; Myers, *Soldiering in Dakota*, 18.

<sup>55</sup>Pattee, "Dakota Campaigns," 309-310.



George W. Northrup, "The Kit Carson of the Northwest," killed in the Battle of Killdeer Mountain. From a daguerreotype supplied by the Minnesota Historical Society.

shooters who emptied many a saddle. It was almost impossible to tell how many Indians were killed, for as soon as one was hit, two or three others would rush for him, throw him on a pony and carry him off. These rescues were outstanding exhibitions of horsemanship, for the pair of riders would ride at full speed, hang down from the side of the horse, and with perfect timing, lift their wounded comrade between them.

As the afternoon wore on, it became evident that the Sioux would not make a direct attack but would wait behind trees and rocks. And so Brackett obtained Sully's permission to mount his men and give the Indians a real cavalry charge. With a rush and a yell Brackett's men bore down on a large band of redskins, chasing them several miles to the base of a high hill. This was the most brilliant charge of the battle and resulted in the killing of about 27 Indians with about ten being dispatched by sabres alone.<sup>56</sup> In this charge eight soldiers were wounded

<sup>56</sup>*Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, 582; In his official report Brackett listed 13 Indians killed in this charge while his battalion killed 27 in the entire combat. See "Official Correspondence," 271-272.

and one killed, the famous frontier scout George Northrup, known as the "Kit Carson of the Northwest." The Sioux knew him well and he had many friends among them, but he held a grudge against some of them for having held him a captive five years before.

Once in battle, Northrup dashed out in front of his company, (Company C of Brackett's battalion) and began to shout to the Sioux in their own language. We shall never know if he hoped to parley with them or to challenge them. When the Indians began to shoot at him he felled three of them with his sixteen shooter, but finally fell dead, pierced by a bullet and three arrows. The Indians tried to secure the body to mutilate it, but Major Brackett ordered a corporal to recover it "if it costs the life of every man in your squad." Northrup was popular among the soldiers and many of his battalion long afterwards carried his photograph with them. Years later, the hardened and weatherworn corporal who had recovered the body could not speak of him without tears.<sup>57</sup>

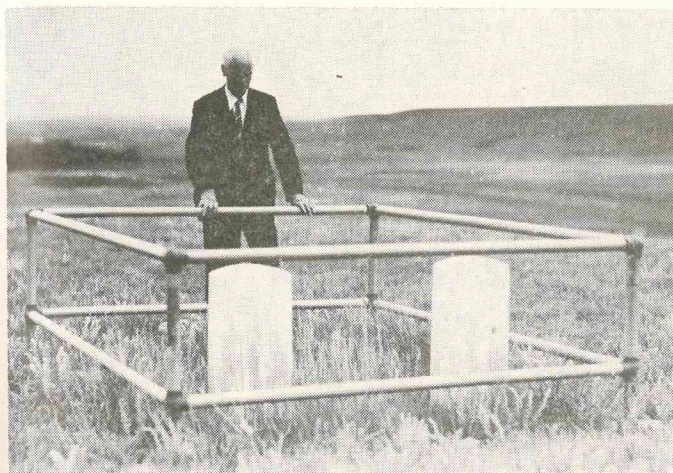
The only other fatality of the battle came as Brackett's men drove the Sioux up the steep slopes on a spur of the mountain. Horace Austin of Company D pitched headlong to the ground with a bullet squarely between the eyes.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>57</sup>*Minnesota History*, Vol. 33, 281; Vol. 19, 392. According to these accounts, Northrup was a most remarkable man. As a boy in central New York he had read Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* and was fired with a desire to see the West and indulge his adventurous bent. In 1853, when only 16, he came to the Red River Valley, taught for a while at Pembina and wandered over the prairies as scout, hunter and mail carrier. He was a close observer of nature and so accurate was his knowledge of zoology that when a group of college professors met him on one of their specimen hunts he astounded even the famous Louis Agassiz, who promptly offered him a job collecting for the Cambridge Museum; he declined the offer, however, for he just wanted to roam. For days at a time he would travel across the country drawing his little hand cart, undisturbed by the Indians who considered him a little out of his mind for traveling this way. At one time an Indian chief wanted Northrup to marry his daughter and Northrup said he would as soon as his whole body would be as dark as his face and hands, for then he would be a real Indian. The Indian seemed satisfied.

In 1861 he was out near Devils Lake as a guide to some Englishmen on a hunting trip. They were captured by some Sioux, robbed, and through the assistance of his "special friend", Standing Buffalo, Northrup escaped and led the Englishmen on foot to Georgetown on the Red River. In 1860, while he served as watchman on the Red River Steamboat *Anson Northrup*, he met Edward Eggleston, who gave this description of Northrup: "He is well known as the Kit Carson of the Northwest, and is employed by Mr. Burbank on account of his wonderful knowledge of the wilderness . . . I had heard so much of him as a voyageur, that I expected to meet a stalwart, weather-beaten son of the forest, far advanced in life. Instead of that I found him a boyish looking man beaten son of the forest, far advanced in life. Instead of that I found him a boyish looking man of twenty-three with soft beard, and flowing brown hair falling on his shoulders, but pushed back of his ears. His complexion is fresh and ruddy, and so far from having the 'brag' that we always associate with the idea of a great hunter, he is modest almost to shyness, though very communicative. . . . His language is always proper, frequently elegant, though as unaffected as a child" (Eggleston, in the *Daily Minnesotian*, July 18, 1860.)

When the Civil War came he enlisted, went South and became the leader of a famous scouting party that raided a hundred miles into North Carolina. The Southerner, Col. Walker, offered \$10,000 for the taking of Northrup's party, "dead or alive." The scouts killed Walker and escaped through Confederate lines to Chattanooga. When he was assigned to Sully's army he wrote to his sister: "If I scout as much here as I did south, it may become a pleasant duty to relate or rather narrate, some very difficult scouts with 'hair breadth escapes,' or the unpleasant duty of comrades to chronical the loss of my hair and inform you of the demise of your friend." (*Minnesota History*, Vol. 19, 390.)

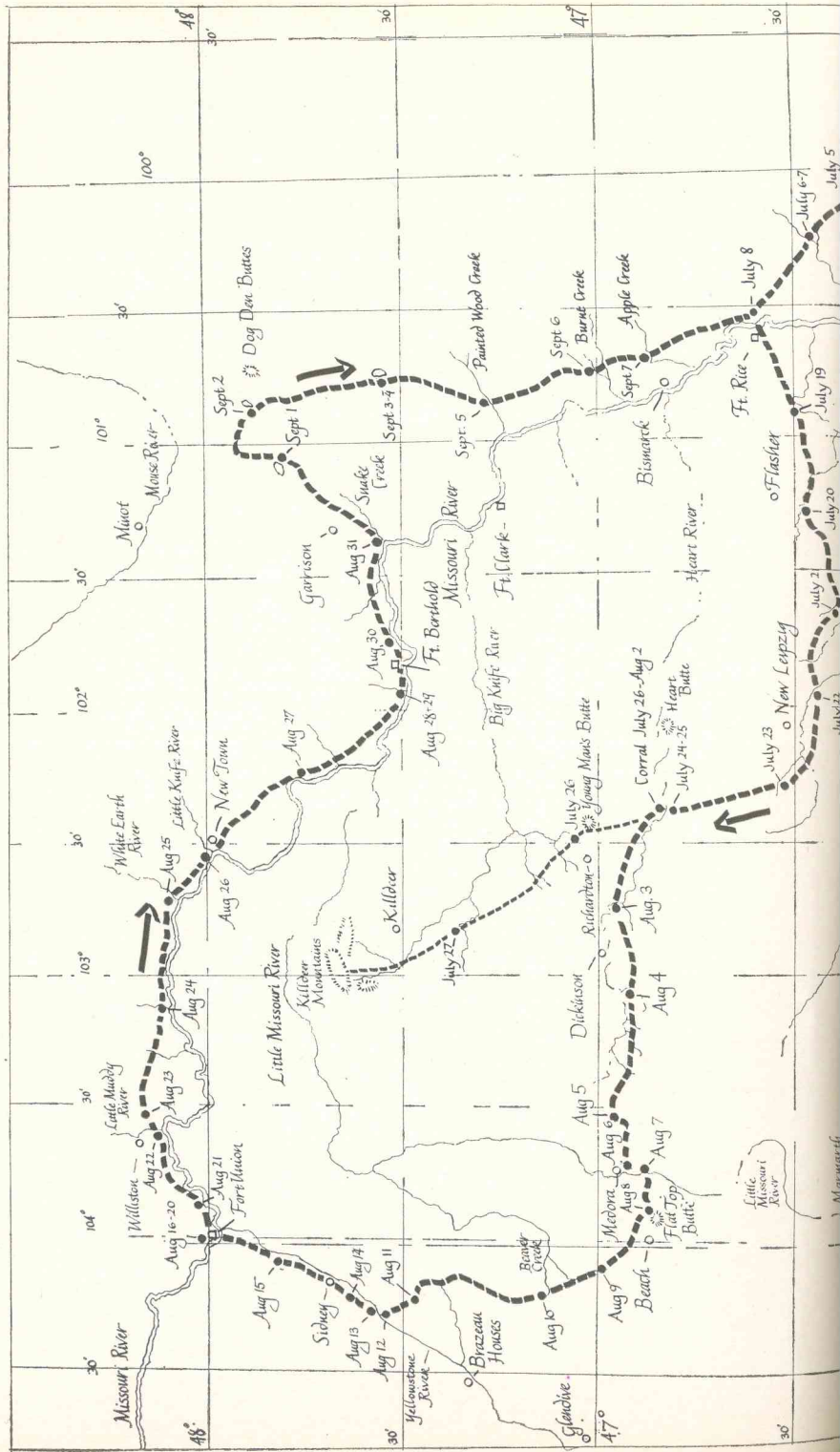
<sup>58</sup>Austin and Northrup were buried during the night, without a light or the sound of drum or bugle. Horses were then picketed over their graves to obliterate them and so prevent the Indians from digging them up and mutilating them. (*Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, 390.) In 1939 John McConnell, who had served in Co. C of Brackett's battalion, visited Killdeer, and the *Killdeer Herald* reported: "On Wednesday, June 14, exactly on [McConnell's] 93rd birthday,



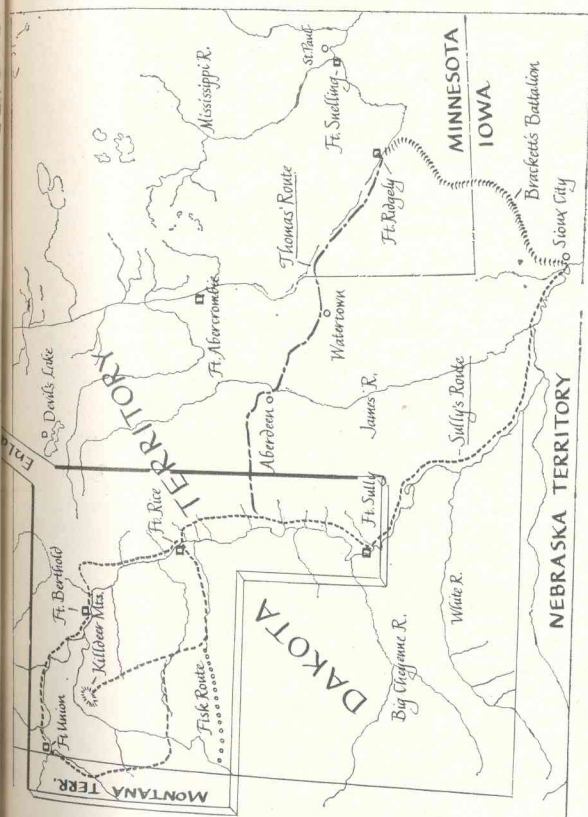
*In June, 1939, the Sully Expedition veteran, John McConnell, visited the grave markers of his comrades, Northrup and Austin who were killed in the Killdeer Battle. (See footnote 58.)*

*On the Diamond C Ranch, McConnell recalled the roar of the battle as he viewed an unexploded shot found by the Dvirnaks on the ranch. Nettie Dvirnak is holding the shell. (She is now Mrs. Dale Maxwell of Denver.)*







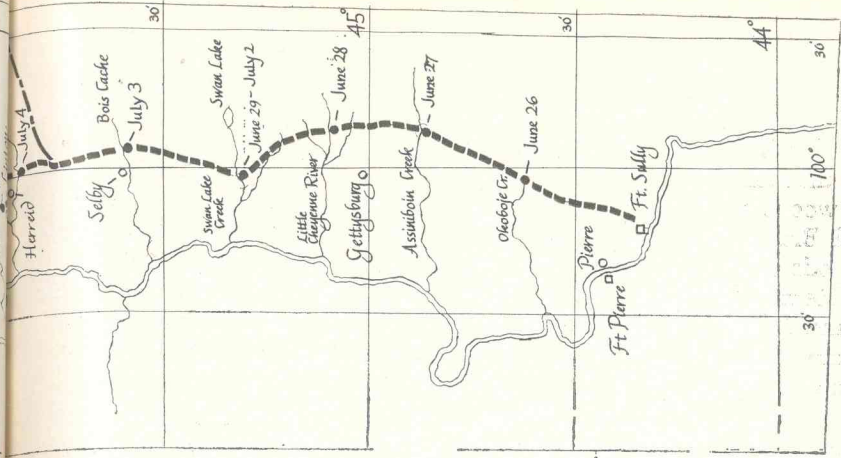


*Route of General Alfred Sully on the Northwest Expedition of 1864. Adapted from the maps of Capt. H. von Minden, A.T.E.*

*Smaller map shows geographical context of entire generic*

*Key of symbols*

- = Present-day community
- = Campsites on Sully Route
- = Forts



Brackett's charge had driven the redskins into the timber-filled ravines that ran back into the mountains. Sully knew that skirmishing in the woods would be dangerous. In the French and Indian War, General Braddock's forces had been cut to pieces by such an attack. The woods and rocks gave the Indian snipers too much protection so Sully determined to flush them out with exploding shells. He ordered Jones and Pope to set up their batteries on the nearby hills and shell the camp and the timbered ravines on what is now known as the Diamond C Ranch.

Here began the slaughter of the Sioux. Shell after shell exploded in the timber, driving the Indians into the open, where they were shelled once more. When they broke and ran for the top of the mountain, the deadly six-pounders were lobbed into their midst. About 6 p.m. a force of 250 to 300 warriors appeared atop a high bluff near the camp. Major George Camp thereupon led four companies of skirmishers from the 8th Minnesota Cavalry up the steep slopes and drove away the Sioux, killing 12 and wounding many more.<sup>59</sup> It seems that the force of Indians was trying to delay the troops so their women and children could escape up Dead Man's Gulch and the other ravines to get to the far side of the mountains. In their hurry to escape they were forced to leave behind almost all of their camp equipment and food. They tossed into hiding places many tons of dried buffalo meat, bundles of robes ready for market, and thousands of brass kettles.

Before dark set in, the men carried on mopping up operations in the woods. Captain "unChristian" Stufft, later reported that his Indian scouts found three Sioux whom "my Winnebago boys afterwards killed, scalped and beheaded."<sup>60</sup>

The total Indian casualties for July 28 are very uncertain. The Indians claimed that only 31 of their number were killed while Sully estimated the Indian dead at between 100 and 150. Chief Two Bears later reported that 400 to 500 wounded had been carried from the field.<sup>61</sup>

That night the army bivouacked near the mountain. The men had

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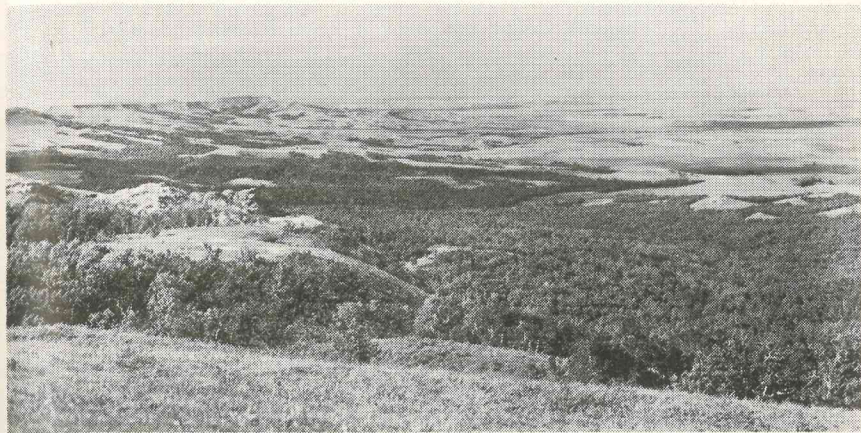
Photographer Leo D. Harris took him to the scene of the last memorable battle between the whites and the redskins. With memory and mind as keen as in the days of his youth, he surveyed the old battle ground with profound interest. At the Diamond C ranch he bent over and drank from the same spring whose sparkling waters quenched the desperate thirst of him and his embattled comrades on that withering, scorching hot day of July 28, almost a century before.

"With head uncovered in silent reverie he viewed the graves of his two comrades, Northrup and Austin, in the lonesome spot where they lie buried, guarded by a fence and marked with gravestones provided by the Legion Post. As he rested his hand reverently on the tombstone of his old comrade, Austin, he looked back through the years and saw him pitch headlong to the ground with a bullet squarely between the eyes as they marched up the mountain slope side by side. Back at the Diamond C ranch he felt again the roar of field artillery as he held in his hand a cannon ball, sinister relic of the grim carnage of long ago." This unexploded shot, and fragments of many others, were found among the trees on the ranch by Alick Dvirnak.

<sup>59</sup>"Official Correspondence," 388.

<sup>60</sup>"Official Correspondence," 375.

<sup>61</sup>"Official Correspondence," 334.



*The south slope of Killdeer Mountains. Facing northeast, Roy P. Johnson took this picture from a high point in the southwest. This was the site of the huge Indian camp.*

marched and fought all day without food or water. Wrote one soldier:

No water was found until about 10 o'clock, when a pool was discovered a half mile from camp. Following the line of men we reached the mud hole, filled our camp kettle and returned to strain the stuff through a towel, which by the way, had not been to the laundry lately. No lights being allowed we had to dig holes in a convenient gulch and build fires to get supper, and about 12 o'clock after fasting some 20 hours, the tired men ate their hardtack and coffee with considerable relish. Three picket lines were formed and every available man was on duty — that is, all who had not learned the art of sleeping with one eye open.<sup>62</sup>

### Mopping Up on July 29

At 4 a.m. of July 29 Sully was ready to continue the pursuit of the fleeing Sioux. With most of his troops he rounded the southwest spur of the maintains and headed northwest. After some five or more miles of difficult travel he reached the deep gorges of the Little Missouri Badlands. He climbed to the top of a high hill to view the jagged mass of tangled buttes and canyons and decided that pursuit in such a terrain was entirely out of question; and so he headed back for the battlefield.

In the meantime Col. Robert McLaren with a force of 700 men had begun the destruction of the paraphernalia of the abandoned Indian camp. It was hoped that this great blow would so cripple the resistance of the Sioux that they would submit to the government. Sully remarked:

<sup>62</sup>Myers, *Soldiering in Dakota*, 20. Unknown to the men at that time, they were near a fine spring, called Falling Waters or Falling Spring, which had been the very heart of the Indian camp, and to this day supplies all the water needed on the Diamond C Ranch, owned by the Dvimaks.

"I would rather destroy their supplies than kill fifty of their warriors." It was estimated that there were about 1500 tepees, with about 200 tons of dried buffalo meat and berries, most of their winter supply of food.

Everything usable had to be destroyed. The lodges were burned and the kettles were punctured. All the little conveniences of the women, their toilet bags and cooking utensils were piled and burned and when all the supplies could not be dragged from the hiding places in the ravines, the woods were set on fire. The task of destruction turned out to be so great that when Sully returned from the futile chase to the edge of the Badlands, he detailed 500 more men to help in the plunder.

Sully had given strict orders that the men in searching should be careful of wounded Indians. Only one such was found and as soon as he knew that he had been discovered he fired in haste at the nearest soldier. He missed. Then the Dakota scouts dragged him out to the edge of the brush, and mounting their ponies they rode around the brush in single file, each one pumping lead into the poor wretch as he passed by.<sup>64</sup>

At another place the soldiers found two small papooses. These they sat upon a buffalo robe and gave them some hardtack, which the little fellows ate with avidity and relish. The men were wondering what they would do with the dusky tikes when some of the Indian scouts (probably the Winnebagoes) bashed in their skulls with tomahawks, saying as they did so: "Nits make lice!"<sup>65</sup>

One aspect of the destruction that the men seemed to have enjoyed thoroughly was the shooting of the dogs left behind. Their number has been estimated as high as 3000, and the boys kept their rifles cracking and the dogs howling all day long. About the only things salvaged from the camp were some ponies and a few choice buffalo robes.<sup>66</sup>

About 4 p.m. the troops left the smoldering remains and traveled six or eight miles southeast before bivouacking near a stream.<sup>67</sup> In vain did

<sup>63</sup>Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 673.

<sup>64</sup>Myers, *Soldiering in Dakota*, 21; Benjamin W. Brunson, "Glimpses of the Nation's Struggles read by Captain J. C. Donahower, Nov. 12, 1901. Typed copy found in the notes of Roy P. Johnson.

<sup>65</sup>"A nit is the egg of a louse. Brunson is the authority for this incident. See also Kingsbury, "Sully's Expedition in 1864," 456. Some years ago a longtime resident of the Killdeer area found the bones of two small children on a high, lonely ledge hidden from view. Presumably they were those of the murdered papooses. (*Dakota Magazine*, September 11, 1963.)

<sup>66</sup>Robinson Letter; Rice Diary, July 29; Strong Diary, July 29; Myers, *Soldiering in Dakota*, 21.

<sup>67</sup>Doud records in his diary: "At 3 pm we moved for camp 30 on the Heart River march six miles and camp on the flats ½ Past five pm. As we cast our eyes to the west we could see the smoke clime the mountains which ascended from their Ruined city." Both Sully and McLaren reported later that just as the troops were about finished with the destruction of the Indian camp some Sioux appeared on a bluff near the July 28th camp and planted a white flag. They may have been the Sioux who wished to call a halt to hostilities and surrender, but we shall never know, because the soldiers fired on them and scared them away. ("Official Correspondence" 364, 389.)

Strong states that the camp of July 29 was six miles from Killdeer Mountain while Brunson estimated it at seven or eight miles. It must have been somewhere along Spring Creek, west of the town of Killdeer.

the tired fighters hope for a restful night. As usual, the camp was guarded by pickets stationed at regular intervals some two or three miles out, totalling fifteen picket posts of three men each.<sup>68</sup> It was planned that these outposts would be moved closer to camp after the horses and mules had been grazed.

From their hiding places in the hills the hostiles saw the pickets take their positions and noted carefully where the horses were herded for grazing. Just as the sun was going down a group of fifty daring Sioux made a dash past one of the posts, which was manned by a trio from Co. D of the Second Cavalry. The men mistook the Indians for their own scouts and let them pass.<sup>69</sup> But when the redskins tried to stampede the herd of horses, it became evident that they were hostiles. The Indians succeeded in running off a few horses before the herds-men chased them away. The guards then brought the herd nearer the camp, where the other boys were preparing for supper.

New excitement shuddered through the camp a few minutes later when some guards came running in from the north shouting: "The Indians are killing the pickets!"<sup>70</sup> The Indians had cut off one picket post and assaulted it with a veritable hailstorm of arrows. One of the trio made a dash for safety, but the arrows mowed down his horse and wounded him. In the twilight he managed to escape and spread the alarm. His companions, David La Plant and Anton Holzgen, fell mortally wounded, one bristling with nine arrows and the other with fifteen.<sup>71</sup>

The Indians quickly stripped the slain of their guns, cartridges and sabers, mounted the pickets' horses and galloped off. In their haste to get away, the Indians omitted the customary scalping of their victims.<sup>72</sup> When the alarm reached camp, the men formed a line of battle and kept up a constant watch all night. But since it was dark no searching party was sent out to find the slain pickets.<sup>73</sup>

In the meantime Sergeant William Campbell of Co. D, Second Cavalry, promptly rallied and consolidated the other pickets and drew them out of the foothills onto the open plain where they could not be surprised and picked off a post at a time. The sergeant tried to lead his men the four or five miles back to camp, but as all fires in camp had been extinguished the men groped around in the dark, ever fearful of being shot by their own men or picked off by the wily foe. Finally, between one and two a.m. the anxious pickets reached the safety of their own lines.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>68</sup>Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 546.

<sup>69</sup>Doud Diary, July 30; Strong Diary, July 30.

<sup>70</sup>Myers, *Soldiering in Dakota*, 21.

<sup>71</sup>Rice Diary, July 30; Atkinson Diary.

<sup>72</sup>Strong Diary, July 30.

<sup>73</sup>Doud Diary, July 30.

<sup>74</sup>Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 546.

Not so fortunate was Sargeant Isaac Winget of Co. G, 6th Iowa Cavalry. About midnight a man of Winget's own company mistook him for an Indian sneaking through the lines and, without challenging, shot and killed him.<sup>75</sup> The men seemed to have been somewhat on edge for the Indians kept howling around all night.<sup>76</sup> They shouted to the scouts that they had not had a fair show because many of their warriors had been away looking for the troops and that they would call in their young men and fight again. The scouts yelled back that that was just what they wanted, and that if the redskins would stand up and fight instead of running away, the bluecoats would kill every one of them.<sup>77</sup>

In the morning, while the main force marched southeastward toward the corral on Heart River, four companies marched back three or four miles to find the slain pickets. They buried them in the valley where they had fallen.<sup>78</sup>

### Return to the Heart River Corral

On the evening of July 31 the jaded troops staggered through a downpour into the camp at Heart River. In two days of forced marching they had covered 66 miles. Crawling into rainsoaked bedding, they anticipated a well earned rest, but once more they were frustrated. Wrote Col. M. T. Thomas:

First the shrill yell of a wolf startled the drowsy senses, and then another, and then the air was filled with piercing, harrowing sounds: a picket gun was fired, and then another and the men seized their arms, and, because they were awakened, damned everything. The officers on duty went to see what was the matter at the outposts; the men thought they had seen something and fired. To reassure them was impossible; the firing was kept up all night long, and only the warm sunshine of the morning dispelled the delusions of the night.<sup>79</sup>

The people of the Idaho train were greatly relieved by the return of Sully's army. They had spent five anxious days while the force had been at Killdeer Mountain. No sooner had Sully departed on July 26 than the people began to fear that a small force of Indians would decoy Sully far away so that the main force of Sioux could wipe out the immigrant train and capture the supply wagons. That day the immigrants, the mule skimmers, and the guard of soldiers crossed to the north side of the Heart and formed the wagons into a corral.

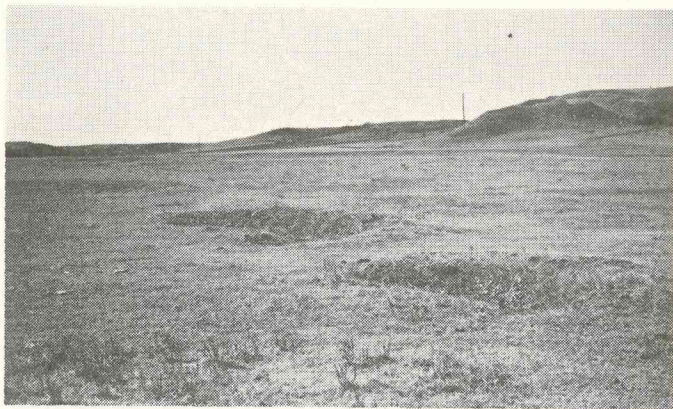
<sup>75</sup>Doud Diary, July 29; Pattee, "Dakota Campaigns," 310.

<sup>76</sup>Atkinson Diary, July 30.

<sup>77</sup>*Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, 391.

<sup>78</sup>Doud Diary, July 30; Rice Diary, July 30.

<sup>79</sup>Hilger, "Sully's Expedition of 1864," 324.



Some of the rifle pits at the Heart River Corral on the Sievert farm. (See footnote 33.)

For better protection, the wary defenders began, on July 27, to dig entrenchments for rifle pits. That day the mules stampeded but were brought back in time. The next day, the day of the Killdeer battle, the Heart River men dug more rifle pits.<sup>80</sup> About 11 p.m. that night the men were routed out and made to lie in the rifle pits and watch for an attack which never came.<sup>81</sup>

So frightened were the defenders that they made a cannon by hollowing out a large log, reinforcing it with iron bands. Several practice shots proved that it was serviceable, and all felt a bit more safe. Major Kimball, the quartermaster, was credited with the invention of the "Quaker" gun — at least he was the one who was razzed about it later.<sup>82</sup>

During the imaginary seige, some of their cattle strayed away from the corral and the immigrants were too scared to venture out and round them up. When Sully returned to camp he sent out the scouts to find them, and they discovered the cattle making tracks toward civilization.<sup>83</sup>

The troops spent two days resting in the Heart River camp while the officers made out their battle reports and planned the next move.<sup>84</sup> The boys were overwhelmingly in favor of returning to Fort Rice and civilization. Sully, however, had other plans. His instructions were to escort the immigrants to Montana and to establish a fort on the Yellowstone.

<sup>80</sup>Diary of Edson D. Washburn, Co. E, Eighth Minnesota, July 27 and 28.

<sup>81</sup>Washburn Diary, July 29; Benedict Diary, July 29.

<sup>82</sup>Strong Diary, August 2; *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, 673.

<sup>83</sup>Strong Diary, August 2.

<sup>84</sup>Doud's diary entry for August 1 reads: "In the Pm 15 Indian ponies come in and are caught. Supposed to have run away from the Savages at the battle field or the ones the Scouts had a Skirmish [with on] the afternoon of the 26 of July." A few days later the scouts caught more Indian ponies and sold them for \$150. each. (Atkinson Diary, August 3 and 4)

### The Badlands Nightmare

Assembling all the Indian and half-breed scouts, Sully consulted them about the course of travel. All but one emphatically insisted that the only passage across the Badlands lay southwestward, west of Rainy Buttes — that the route directly west from the Heart River corral was utterly impassible. The sole defendant of the latter route was a young Blackfoot lad<sup>85</sup> who claimed that he had crossed the Badlands at this point some years before while on a war party, and that he could guide the wagons across if the soldiers would do some digging to make roads through the rough terrain.

Sully put his entire command under the guidance of the young Indian, hoping thereby to reach the Yellowstone the sooner for the quartermaster had assured Sully that they had but six days' rations left. By cutting bread rations one-third and all other stores, except meat, one-half, Sully hoped to make the food last until he would meet the supply boats at the Brazeau Houses on the Yellowstone.

Traveling along the Heart River about twenty miles a day, the caravan camped near the sites of Gladstone and South Heart. Far ahead of the column rode twenty or thirty Sioux Indians, who were evidently scouting on behalf of the hostiles. No attempt was made to capture them.<sup>86</sup>

All was quite uneventful until the afternoon of August 5. As the advance troops of the long column crested the swells of the rolling hills, they caught glimpses in the distance of a most awesome and breath-taking sight. Standing high in the stirrups and craning their necks, the men eagerly pressed on for a better look. Those in the rear hurried forward to see what the leaders found so all-absorbing.

Soon the whole column was perched on the rim of a huge canyon of the famous Badlands (probably Cedar Canyon, or Painted Canyon), gaping in wonderment. One soldier wrote in his diary that evening:

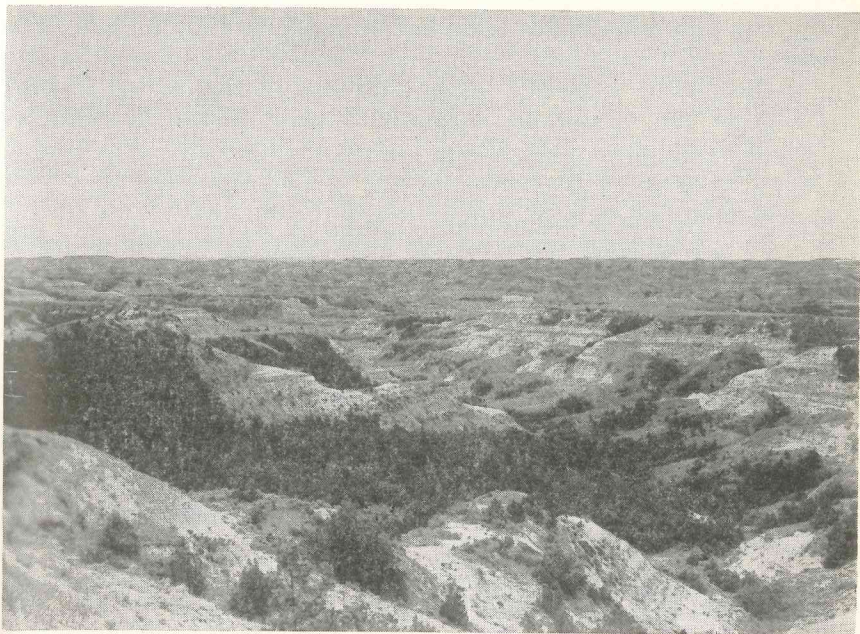
. . . it is the *most remarkable country* on this continent and perhaps in the world. Many men who have traveled in and seen much of foreign countries say they never saw anything equal to it. Italy with her classic alps is far behind this in point of Singularity of unnatural and irregular formation . . . the brightest genius would fail, hopelessly fail, should he attempt to spread upon canvass the subject here spread out by nature before him by the only true and great *Artist*, the God of Nature.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>85</sup>There is some confusion as to the identity of the young scout. Sully said he was a Yanktonias while others classed him as a Blackfoot. Ebenezer Rice gave his name as *Black Fool*, but this may just be a misspelling for Black Foot. There are those who think that he was the Blackfoot half-breed, Robert or William Jackson, who later scouted for Custer.

<sup>86</sup>Pattee, "Dakota Campaigns," 310.

<sup>87</sup>Rice Diary, August 5.





*The majestic, brooding, forbidding Badlands wrung from General Sully the laconic, "I think it is hell burnt out!"*

General Sully shared in the universal delight at the magnificent view. He, too, admitted that he could give no adequate description but wrote:

It was grand, dismal and majestic. You can imagine a deep basin, 600 feet deep and twenty-five miles in diameter, filled with a number of cones and oven-shaped knolls of all sizes, from twenty feet to several hundred feet high, sometimes by themselves, sometimes piled large heaps one on top of another, in all conceivable shapes and confusion. Most of these hills were of a gray clay, but many of a light brick color, of burnt clay; little or no vegetation. Some of the sides of the hills, however, were covered with a few scrub cedars. Viewed in the distance at sunset it looked exactly like the ruins of an ancient city.<sup>88</sup>

As the sun, on that August 5, cast its last golden rays over the purpling pyramids and cones of the Badlands, the last wagons of the long caravan squeezed onto the promontory that jutted between precipitous chasms. It is related that as three cavalymen attempted to pass around a campfire, they were blinded by the glare and stepped over the edge of the bluff, tumbling down on the rocks below. The next

<sup>88</sup>"Official Correspondence," 314.

morning they were found, one of them smashed beyond recognition by the impact.<sup>80</sup>

There was preciously little water for all the men and animals, except some rain that had collected in pools. Some procured water from a spring about a mile away (maybe the place now known as Sully Springs), but many got none. That night the neighings and bellowings of the thirsty animals filled the air.

Sully was so appalled by the forbidding appearance of the Badlands that he was on the point of turning back. Once more he consulted his little Indian guide, and once again the scout assured him, over the objections of the other scouts, that the passage could be made. A huge force of pioneers, as the road builders were called, was accordingly sent ahead to plow and pick, scrape and shovel, cutting down the steep banks and filling in the gullies. Though the men dismounted and helped to lower the wagons with ropes, several wagons got out of control and were wrecked. Winding for twelve miles around the conical hills like a huge serpent, the column managed to reach the Little Missouri by evening, near the site of Medora.

It seems that it was after Sully was in the Badlands on August 6 that he uttered his oft-quoted description of them as "Hell with the fires put out." Some accounts have him gasping the epigram when he first caught sight of them. A more authentic sounding version is that of Judge Nicholas Hilger who places the words on Sully's lips *after* he was in the Badlands. According to Hilger, the troops halted for a rest, on August 6, on a flat covered with piles of black vitreous furnace slag and klinkers which was surrounded by red-burnt peaks. Major Brackett leaned against a huge tower of klinkers and asked General Sully what he thought of the country. Drawing a long breath, Sully answered: "I think it is hell burnt out!"<sup>80</sup>

The next day, August 7, was a Sunday. Though the country round about was parched and the vegetation stripped by grasshoppers, there was good grass in the many gulches and ravines near the Little Missouri camp, and the stock was taken out in herds to graze. Early in the morning a huge detail of pioneers went south up the river to cut down the steep banks for a couple crossings.

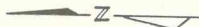
About 9:15 the pickets sighted a few Indians making a dash for the horses of the herd guard. The alarm was sounded and the guards ran in panic toward the camp — all, that is, except John Beltz who

<sup>80</sup>There are various versions of this incident. Cambell states simply that three men fell off the bluff and were badly hurt. (Cambell Papers, 21) Hilger ("Sully's Expedition of 1864," 315) claims that one man fell and was killed. Paxson recorded: "One of Company H, 8th regiment, fell off a bluff and hurt himself very much. Another had his arm broken by a stampede of horses caused by a rolling stone." (*Collections of the State Historical Society of North Dakota*, Vol. II, Part II, 142.) It seems that Hilger let his imagination run wild in this case.

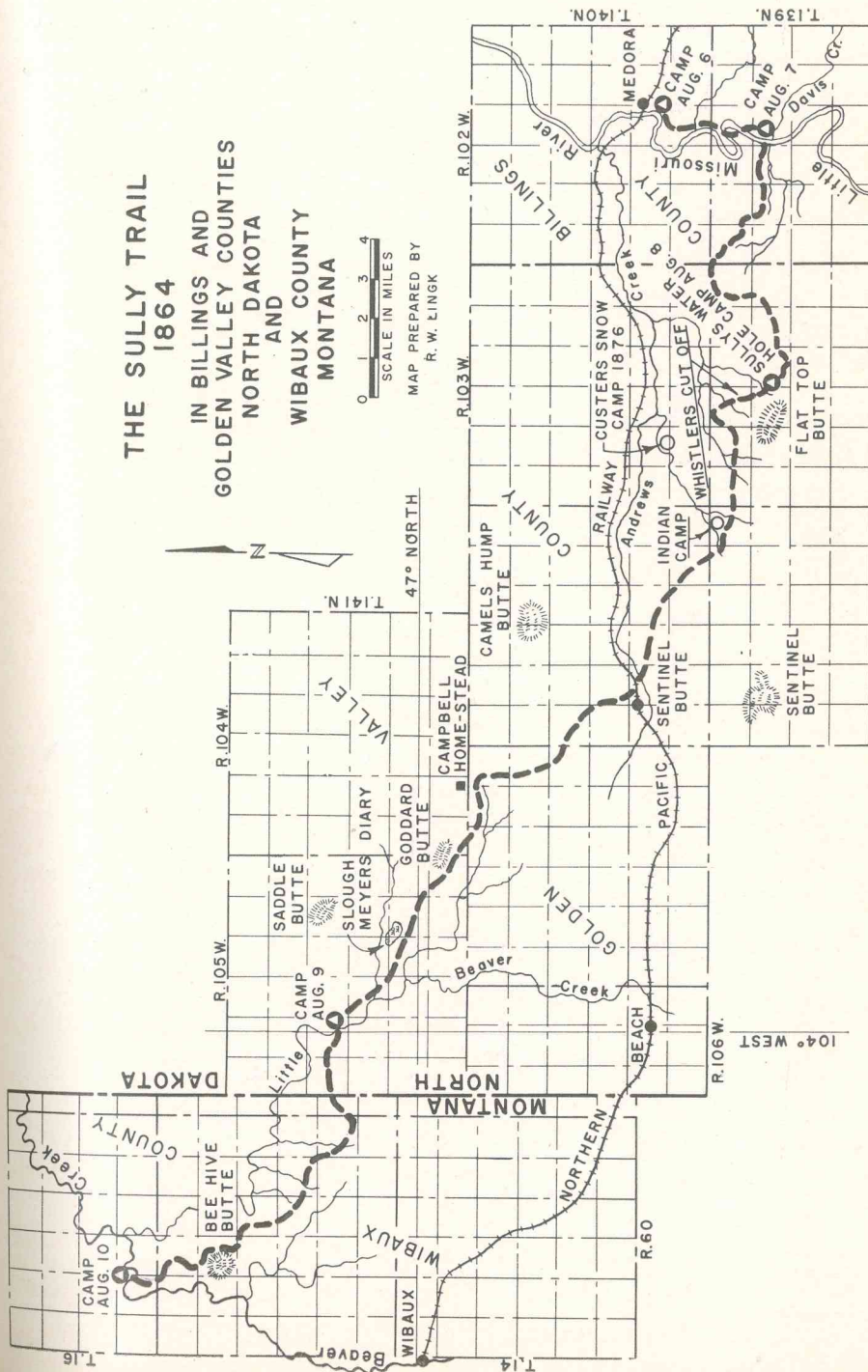
<sup>80</sup>Hilger, "Sully's Expedition of 1864," 317.

# THE SULLY TRAIL 1864

IN BILLINGS AND  
GOLDEN VALLEY COUNTIES  
NORTH DAKOTA  
AND  
WIBAUX COUNTY  
MONTANA



SCALE IN MILES  
0 1 2 3 4  
MAP PREPARED BY  
R. W. LINGK



singlehandedly drove off the Indians with rapid fire from his carbine and revolver. A short while later more whooping Indians appeared and attempted to drive off more horses but were driven back.<sup>61</sup>

More and more revengeful redskins began to appear on the hills so that gradually "hell burnt out" changed to "hell alive." One of the chaplains, after watching the quick, bold and desperate charges of the Indians, exclaimed: "Here we have a true picture of his Satanic Majesty's forces welcoming their new guests on Judgment day."<sup>62</sup>

At 11:30, as the column commenced to cross and recross the Little Missouri, the regimental band, in the words of one of the diarists, played "Music which echoes its mellow Strains over and among the thousand Hills which surround us. The Poet says that Music soothes the aching heart and charm[s] the Savage . . ."<sup>63</sup> The column moved but three miles and camped on a sandy flat on the east bank of the river.

About sundown a larger band of Indians appeared on the high bluff across the river. Some of them who could speak English shouted their taunts that since the Killdeer battle 500 more lodges had joined them and that 10,000 warriors now surrounded the camp. On the morrow, they warned, they would kill or capture them all, steal their horses, and make the officers eat the soldiers. They also boasted that they had a white woman (Mrs. Kelly) in their camp and they dared the soldiers to try to get her.<sup>64</sup>

In answer, the boys in blue fired at them, but they were out of range. A brass howitzer was then brought forward, set almost on end, mortar-like, and shot at the Indians on the bluff. They scattered, but gathered again, found the ball and made fun of the solid shot. The soldiers shot again to get the range and the savage defiance and glee increased. On the third shot the redskins grew bolder still and ran up to the rolling shot; but this one exploded with devastating effect.<sup>65</sup>

The guards were increased for the night, and while wolves and Indians howled around the camp, the guards fired about 3000 shots to keep them at bay.<sup>66</sup> The Idaho men were especially trigger-happy. They shot at every moving object and same so close to shooting the soldiers who were changing guard that the battery men threatened to

<sup>61</sup>Rice Diary, August 7; English, "Dakota Cavalry," 285. English (285-286) narrates the following incident of this raid: "One soldier went to his horse, pulled up the picket pin and started for camp having hold of the end of the lariat rope. An Indian slipped up, cut the lariat, mounted the horse and dashed away. The soldier looked around with a peculiar expression on his face as if to ask 'how was it done?' The Indian made good his escape with the bullets from our revolvers whistling around. He was a horse ahead. The soldier returned to camp musing over the fact that he might have to walk the next day."

<sup>62</sup>Hilger, "Sully's Expedition of 1864," 317.

<sup>63</sup>Rice Diary, August 7.

<sup>64</sup>Pattee, "Dakota Campaigns," 312; Brunson, "Glimpses of the Nation's Struggles," 5.

<sup>65</sup>Cambell Papers, 23.

<sup>66</sup>Pattee, "Dakota Campaigns," 312.

shell their line if they did not stop endangering the guards. The threat had its desired effect.<sup>97</sup>

Sully was well aware that the Badlands were ideal for the Indian mode of fighting and that he would have a tremendous battle on his hands on the morrow. As he lay ill in his tent, he called for Col. M. T. Thomas, put him in charge of the expedition for the next day and said: "Have everything ready to move at six o'clock in the morning, in perfect fighting order; put one of your most active field officers in charge of a strong advance guard, and you will meet them at the head of the ravine, and have the biggest Indian fight that ever will happen on this continent."<sup>98</sup>

Very early on the morning of August 8, the pioneers crossed the river and started cutting a road up a dry creek that cleft the bluffs on the western bank. Just before the troops set out, Col. Thomas gave last-minute instructions to the field officers, impressing upon them the responsibility for protecting the immigrant train, for the column would of necessity have to be stretched out about three miles in the narrow defiles and steep embankments ahead. "You will remember that under no circumstances must any man turn his back on a live Indian," he concluded. Peering from his ambulance at the array of soldiers, Sully beamed through his pain: "Those fellows can whip the devil and all his angels."<sup>99</sup>

Of the several interesting diaries kept by the soldiers, that of Corporal John Strong contains the best entry for this day:

This flat we are camped upon we find in daylight is a bed quicksand as is also the bed of the river, in the water. We have to keep moving or down we go. Crossed the river for the third time. Immediately after crossing dismounted the 8th [Infantry] at the right and the 2d cavalry on the left. One half were dismounted, the others taking charge of the horses. Those that were dismounted had to climb the hills and deploy while the horses and teams followed which was up the bed of a creek that was almost dry. This we followed for about one mile, when just as we were coming out of it, on the right hand side with the head of the column the sharp crack of the guns was heard in all directions. Every peak in sight was covered with Indians. We kept on over the roughest country that ever a train of wagons was taken over. At some places our road ran along the edge of bluffs that had been washed down on the side to the depth of 200 or 300 feet almost perpendicular. In other places we crossed chasms where our wagons were almost up endwise in going down and coming up out of them. Our guide was shot in the shoulder. He was in the advance with the scouts. He was brought in and put into an ambulance. The train was halted and corraled just as soon as there was room to do so,

<sup>97</sup>*Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, 674.

<sup>98</sup>*Idem*, 392.

<sup>99</sup>*Ibid.*

and half of those left in charge of the horses were ordered out the [to?] assist those already there, who were holding the Indians in check. The batteries were got into position and commenced throwing shell among the groups gathered together on the hills. Our boys were driving them out of the ravines. Occasionally one was seen to fall from his pony. Several ponies came inside our lines. They were covered with blood, and as they were not wounded it was proof their rider was either killed or wounded. There [their] weapons were bows and arrows, but few of [them] having guns they were driven back in all directions and the train moved on again, they rushing in every chance they could get, but they could not do much damage. When we fell back toward the train they would rush up bravely and make their boast that they had been joined by 500 more warriors. We drove them and when we reached our camping ground we found but very little water or thin mud in a couple of holes. We were surrounded with hills, and these were covered with Indians. Our ponies had no water and nothing to eat during the day. A strong guard was thrown out, and the ponies taken out to graze. The Indians [made] an attempt to cut off one party, but the rear guard happened to be coming into camp at the time and they made a charge upon them, but not before they had wounded 6 of our men, 5 of them with arrows and the other with a bullet. Dist. 6½ miles.<sup>100</sup>

From other diaries and reminiscences we know many other exciting details. At the beginning of the battle great panic struck the scouts when they first met the hostiles at the exit from the dry creek. They broke and rushed back, leaving the front of the column exposed. One of the soldiers saved the day by blocking the flight of the scouts and threatening to shoot the chief of the scouts if he did not halt his fleeing men. The order was promptly obeyed and a complete rout averted.<sup>101</sup>

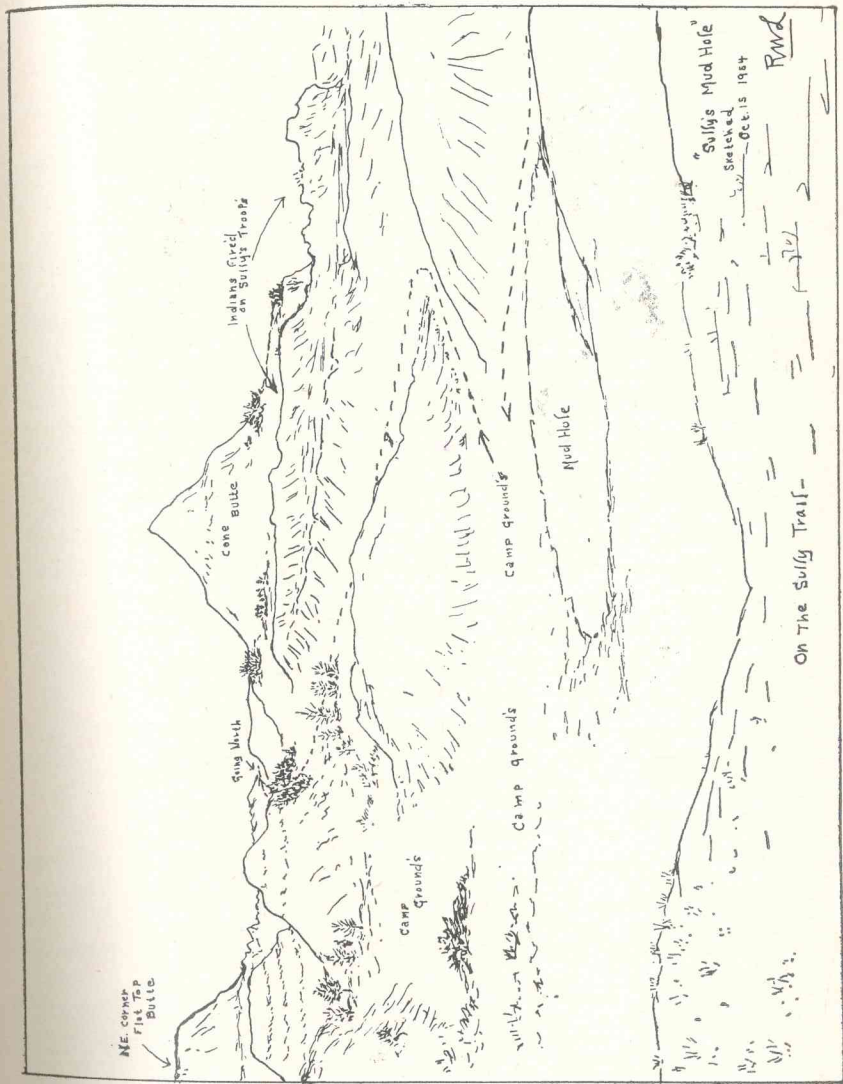
The Blackfoot guide, shot in the breast with the ball coming out just below the shoulder blade,<sup>102</sup> became delirious from the wound and was unable to point out the route to be taken. And so during a portion of the day the soldiers had to find their own way. When the guide had finally recovered from the shock, he was held up in his carriage so that he could point out the course of the route.<sup>103</sup> The little Blackfoot later recovered, but he bore a burning grudge against the hostiles. During the Winter of 1864-1865 he stayed at Fort Sully. There he frequently came to the soldiers for sympathy and while placing his hand over his wound, would say "seachy" — it hurts me. Towards spring he helped

<sup>100</sup>Statistics on the casualties of the Battle of the Badlands are very uncertain. It appears that less than a dozen soldiers were wounded and none killed. The Indian casualties ran probably in the hundreds. Comparing the accounts in the various diaries with the report of Col. M. T. Thomas, I put little faith in his statistics: "We learned afterwards that there were about 8,000 warriors engaged, and that they lost 311 killed, and between 600 and 700 wounded. Our losses were only 9 killed and about 100 wounded." (*Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, 393) It seems like a clear case of exaggeration to make the battle appear one of the greatest in American history. Why shouldn't it be? — Thomas was in charge of the army that day!

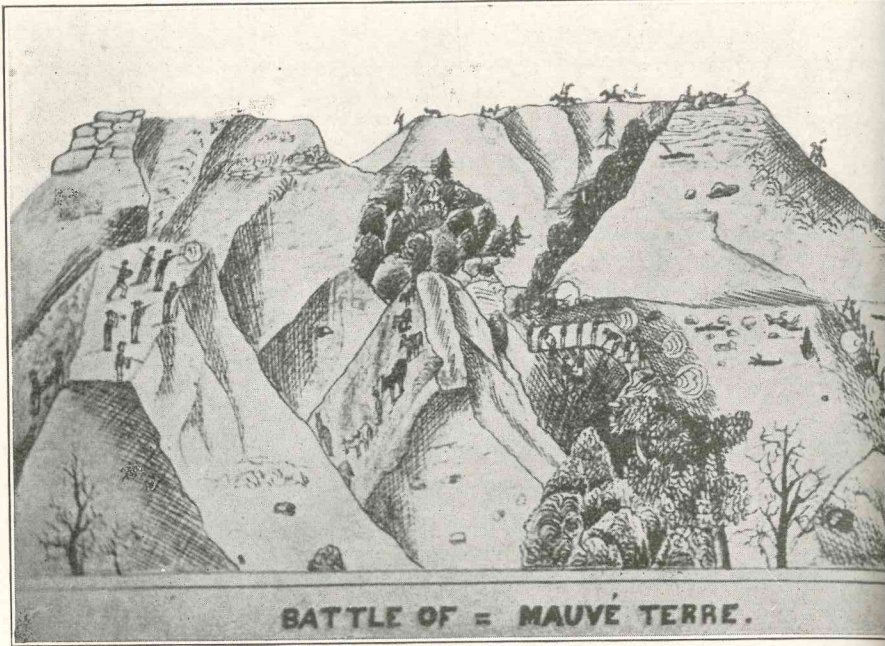
<sup>101</sup>Hilger, "Sully's Expedition of 1864," 318.

<sup>102</sup>Myers, *Soldiering in Dakota*, 25.

<sup>103</sup>Hilger, "Sully's Expedition of 1864," 318.



Sully's "Mud Hole Campsite", of August 8, 1864. A drawing by Ray W. Lingk, Beach, N. Dak.



A drawing by one of Sully's soldiers (Fred Brand or Brandt) of the battle on the north of Flat Top Butte, August 9, 1864. The picture is distorted, for actually the butte miles long. Trenches dug by the soldiers are still visible on the west plateau.

the soldiers arrest three hostiles and bring them to the fort's prison. The soldiers had to be constantly on the watch to prevent the wing guide from killing the prisoners.<sup>104</sup>

The soldiers recalled, further, that a scorching sun beat down on the dust-enshrined caravan. The rear guard burned wrecked wagons and their contents and killed all animals that gave out in order that they might not become of service to the destitute Indians. The soldiers began to fear that most of the animals would die of starvation and

<sup>104</sup>Myers, *Soldiering in Dakota*, 51. For the sake of contrast we are giving in this footnote excerpt from Vestal's biography of Sitting Bull (page 60). It gives the Indian version of Badlands encounter. "While the Sioux were shooting across at the soldiers, someone among the soldiers called out to them, speaking in their own language: 'We want to know what Indians are?'"

"Sitting Bull's powerful voice replied: 'We are Hunkpapa, Sans Arc, Minniconjou, Yanktonais, and others. Who are you?'"

"Back came that voice: 'We are some Indians with the soldiers. One of us is badly hurt shot through the arm. An Indian named Stuck-in-the-Mud is the one shot in the arm. Most of these white boys are starving and thirsting to death. Just stay around, and they will all be dead.'"

"Sitting Bull smiled to his comrades, as they listened. It was clear that the Yankton scouts with the troops had despaired of their lives, and wished to make friends with the Sioux. But he yelled back: 'Why have you come with these soldiers? We have to kill you, and let you thirst to death.'"



thirst, when about 3 p.m. the advance guard drove away the Indians from a pond of rainwater in a large basin situated on the northeast side of Flat Top Butte. The pool of water was quickly drained or churned into a muck-hole by the parched men and animals. Many of the belated immigrants and soldiers offered a dollar for a canteen full of the muddy liquid.<sup>105</sup>

The whole caravan camped in the huge bowl around the mud hole. Just before sundown several hundred Indians dashed over the rim of the surrounding ridge, sending the women and children screaming into the soldiers' camp.<sup>106</sup> The men quickly repulsed the attack with rifles and cannon, and the camp settled down to a tense night. Though the Indians lurked on all sides, there was little shooting that night, and the stillness was broken only by the pitiful bellowing of the cattle and the braying of the mules. This induced many of the civilians to feed their animals flour, bread and anything edible from their scant supplies in order to keep the beasts of burden alive.<sup>107</sup>

Every soldier in the whole command not on the sick list was put on guard, either picket or camp guard, and so they got little or no sleep. The morning of August 9 was all bustle and activity. Though the Indians had lost up to 100 warriors the day before, they came back for more fighting. They swarmed over the buttes, shooting into the column and seeking to surprise some unguarded segment of the long train. The column wound slowly through two large canyons on the north slopes of Flat Top Butte while detachments of soldiers rode on top of the plateaus and drove the Indians back. Again the howitzers were unlimbered and rained exploding shells on the redskins. How many more were killed we will never know.

By noon the caravan had passed the roughest country and was soon rolling over the prairie toward the huge Indian camp a few miles west. The Indians were now in full flight and a great cloud of dust marked their progress westward toward the site of the village of Sentinel Butte and on toward the Yellowstone River. They had precious little to take with them for they were tepee-less since the Battle of Killdeer Mountains. So extensive was the campsite that it took the troops an hour and a half to cross it. So hurriedly had the Sioux departed

<sup>105</sup>Hilger, "Sully's Expedition of 1864," 319. The exact location of the mud hole around which they camped is SW $\frac{1}{4}$  of Section 10, Township 139, Range 103, about seven miles southwest of Medora and eight miles southeast of the town of Sentinel Butte. For a detailed, day by day study of the route from the Little Missouri to the Yellowstone, see Ray Ling's article in *North Dakota History*, Volume 24, Number 4.

<sup>106</sup>Myers, *Soldiering in Dakota*, 27.

<sup>107</sup>Hilger, "Sully's Expedition of 1864," 319.

that they left behind many undisposed bodies of warriors killed in the Badlands and carried from the battlefield to the camp.<sup>108</sup>

One band of Indians headed northward, evidently trying to decoy the troops away from the women and children fleeing westward. Lt. Col. John Pattee was eager to give chase to the westbound redskins, but Sully took his aside and patiently explained that due to the shortage of rations he must abandon the chase and go as quickly as possible to meet the supply boats on the Yellowstone.

### Death March to the Yellowstone

The Indians had been decisively beaten, and they broke up into two small bands and scattered in all directions. Except for a few sporadic attacks, they did not bother the troops anymore. But there was another fight at hand. It may be called, "The Death March to the Yellowstone." The men, weakened from lack of rations and good water, reeled in the saddles of their staggering horses. A letter written at that time portrayed in one sentence the awful horror that lay ahead: "There, with their horses staggering with weakness under them, I saw veterans of three years service, who had fought their way from Fort Donelson to the heights of Mission Ridge without a murmur, grow pale at the prospect before them."<sup>109</sup>

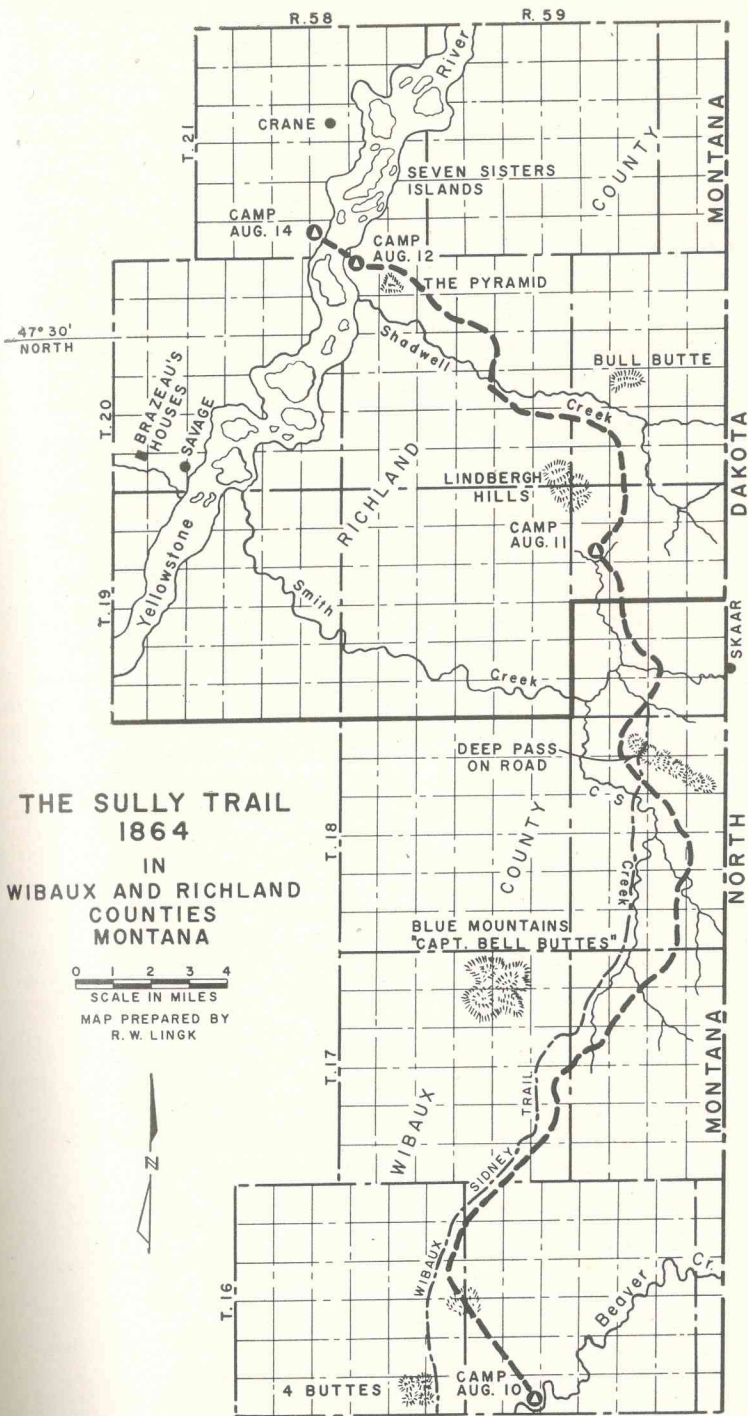
The intense heat and the lack of fodder took a terrible toll of the stock. On August 11 alone an estimated \$30,000 worth of stock died or had to be shot. It was a piteous sight. The soldiers frequently walked miles rather than allow their worn-out ponies to carry them.<sup>110</sup> Corporal Strong records in his diary for August 11:

This is the severest day of the expedition. Our company was rear guard too, and we had a good chance to see the results of the last few days marching without feed for our animals. Horses, mules and oxen were left behind. They would [fall] down and lay there and when we came up to them, if they could not be made to travel our orders were to shoot them, and our road today will be marked with their skeletons. We did not arrive in camp till 11 o'clock at night. After dark we did not dare shoot the animals for fear of shooting the Idaho emmigrants [sic] who were trying to coax their cattle to camp. About 30 mules were left after dark. We saw women belonging to the Idaho train pulling grass among the brush in the ravines forgetting the Indians, in their anxiety to save their cattle. They watered them out of the kegs they had on the wagons and after all were obliged to leave some of their cattle behind. The water where we camped was strongly impregnated with salts. Distance 28½ miles.

<sup>108</sup>Hilger, quoting Thomas, said that the camp was three miles long by ¾ of a mile wide. Sully ("Official Correspondence," 318) said that the main Indian bivouac was over a mile long, half a mile wide, with smaller camps all over the country nearby. It was located about five miles southeast of the town of Sentinel Butte.

<sup>109</sup>Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 581.

<sup>110</sup>Benedict Diary, August 11; Myers, *Soldiering in Dakota*, 29.



**THE SULLY TRAIL  
1864**  
IN  
**WIBAUX AND RICHLAND  
COUNTIES  
MONTANA**



MAP PREPARED BY  
R. W. LINGK



Ebenezer Rice recorded in his diary for August 11: "Many [animals] have died today, some cases where the horses appeared tolerably well, immediately after drinking the water, fell and could not be got up again. I hear some bitter complaints against the management of Gen. Sully. Were I to say anything it certainly would be *strong language*."

For four days the northwesterly "horror march" lasted; then, on August 12, hope was revived when one of the scouts came riding back frantically waving something in his hand. Though he held only a chip of wood that he had fished out of the Yellowstone, it told volumes of good news. It was freshly cut and evidently came from the upstream steamboats laden with food and fodder for man and beast.

Cannons were fired and signal shells thrown high to discover the boats. Answering shots assured them that the *Chippewa Falls* and the *Alone* lay upstream. (A third boat, the *Island City*, bearing nearly all corn, had struck a snag near Fort Union and sunk.) Fortunately the boats had been prevented by low water from going upstream to the mouth of the Powder River.

The men quickened their march and by 2 p.m. reached the Yellowstone about fifteen miles south of present Sidney, Montana.<sup>111</sup> The joy of the men knew no bounds. Col Thomas records that:

... when the bank of the beautiful river was reached, for the moment all discipline was forgotten, men and animals rushed into the stream and swallowed the life-inspiring fluid, and joy and happy shouts took place of misery in the command. I wanted to, but did not quite lose my self-possession. Dismounting, I sat down upon the bank, and an orderly brought up several bucketfuls of the water; my staff gathered around and swallowed cup after cup of it, and under its inspiring effects a happy intoxication pervaded the senses, and fatigue and hardships were forgotten, and then we would toast the yellow fluid "The Nectar of the Gods."<sup>112</sup>

The stock was sent into the bottoms for rushes and rosebuds while the men directed a fusillade of bullets at the buffaloes, elk, blacktail deer, antelope, bears and wolves which they had scared out of the belt of timber along the river.<sup>113</sup> Soon they were roasting luscious ribs and steaks in the campfire blaze. Most fortunate for the men was the abundance of berries and choke cherries in the timber for they worked

<sup>111</sup>The exact spot where the army reached the Yellowstone is open to dispute. The *Frontier Scout*, published at Fort Union a few days later, gave the location at Latitude 47 degrees and 2 minutes, Longitude 104 degrees and 30 minutes. Rice noted in his diary: "... I have only to state that all the fine talk of the Yellow-Stone Country is *Romance* and should not be believed. *Stay Home, White Folk!* at least women & children. We found on arriving at the River that 2 Boats were here or a few miles up, there is a Trading Post some 5 miles above called the Brazers House. Brazers' Houses were located near present Savage, Montana.

<sup>112</sup>*Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, 393.

<sup>113</sup>Rice Diary, August 15; Brunson, *Glimpses of Our Nation's Struggles*, 7 6.

as a wonderful remedy for the dysentery so torturingly present in the command.<sup>114</sup>

Just at sundown the steamboats came floating down the stream and tied up at the bank. The ships' crews reported to the boys in blue that the Union forces had succeeded in capturing Richmond.<sup>115</sup> Though the report was premature, it caused joy to soldiers. As a fitting finale to a happy day the regimental bands sent their silvery notes echoing up the Yellowstone Valley.<sup>116</sup>

By now Sully was fully convinced that he could not follow his original instructions to go to the Powder River. The Yellowstone was falling fast and his supplies were running out, so he informed the immigrants that he would give them protection as far as Fort Union, at the mouth of the Yellowstone, and that they would have to go to the goldfields by way of the Missouri.

Preparations were made immediately for crossing to the tableland west of the river. A large detail of men cut trees and lashed them together as a raft, but it proved a failure.<sup>117</sup> The command then decided to ford the swift current. The boats ferried across the heavy baggage, but the animals with the wagons had to plunge into the water and swim across. Many of the wagons were water-tight so they floated like boats. The horses and most of the cattle crossed readily, but the mules got scared of the deep water and swam about trying to get into the floating wagons. About thirty of them drowned in the swirling water.<sup>118</sup>

One of the steamer captains agreed to ferry the immigrants across at the rate of five dollars per wagon, but after one trip he refused to transport any more so the people were forced to swim their animals and float their wagonboxes like the soldiers had done.<sup>119</sup> While herding the cattle across, two men stepped off a sandbar into deep water, and while others looked on helplessly they were swept downstream and drowned. One of the victims left a wife and five children in Shakopee, Minnesota. A soldier, too, lost his life and was buried on the east bank of the Yellowstone.<sup>120</sup>

On August 15 the army started for Fort Union, thirty-five miles downstream. The men were anxious to escape the sandy, windswept

<sup>114</sup>Kingsbury, 'Sully's Expedition in 1864,' 458. At many places along the route in Dakota the troops had feasted on berries. Paxson's diary is so full of references to this that he could very well be nick-named "The Berry Picker." One entry is especially interesting: "Sunday, June 26, 1864 - Sermon, Mark 11:2. I made out muster roll of staff and field. Lieut. Randolph, Hayes, Geo. Workman went with me after June berries, Oh, what a feast we had. Two dead Indians in the tree top. I felt sick and vomited." (*Collections of the North Dakota Historical Society*, Vol. II, Part II, 138.)

<sup>115</sup>Doud Diary, August 12.

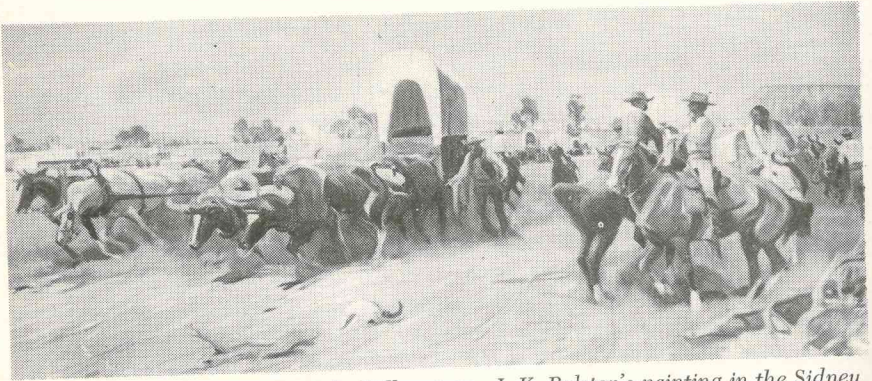
<sup>116</sup>Myers, *Soldiering in Dakota*, 32.

<sup>117</sup>Rice Diary, August 13.

<sup>118</sup>Cambell Papers, 35; Strong Diary, August 14.

<sup>119</sup>Cooper, "Tom Holmes Expedition," 5.

<sup>120</sup>Strong Diary, August 15; Rice Diary, August 14; the various diaries do not agree on the number of men and animals drowned. Paxson (142) lists 35 mules and 6 men.



*The Sully Expedition crossing the Yellowstone. J. K. Ralston's painting in the Sidney post office. Photo donated by O'Neil Jones of Sidney, Montana.*

plain, laid barren by myriads of omnivorous grasshoppers. Sandbars, too, were emerging as the Yellowstone continued to drop, and army wagons were needed to unload the steamers so they could get downstream.<sup>121</sup>

No Indians had molested the train for several days, but they now appeared once more, setting fire to the woods in front of the column. The soldiers thereupon took extraordinary precautions so that no burning limbs would fall upon the ammunition wagons.<sup>122</sup>

Shortly before the troops arrived at Fort Union, the Sioux had stolen all the horses at the fort except two and had killed six friendly Indians.<sup>123</sup> Sully, who had gone on ahead of the main column, ordered some troops to catch the thieves, but the fleeing Sioux scattered in all directions and left no trail.

On August 18 and 19 the entire train crossed the Missouri about five miles above the mouth of the Yellowstone. The boats ferried over the saddles and baggage while the men swam the horses over the Big Muddy. One of Sully's men and several horses drowned in the attempt.<sup>124</sup>

Stationed at the old fur trading post of Fort Union since June 13 was Company I of the 30th Wisconsin. While the Wisconsin boys guarded the military supplies stored at the fort, they tried their hand

<sup>121</sup>Rice Diary, August 17.

<sup>122</sup>*Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, 548.

<sup>123</sup>*Ibid.*; Atkinson Diary, August 18.

<sup>124</sup>The *Frontier Scout*, published at Fort Union on August 17, 1864, recorded: "A soldier by the name of Jerome McCarty, belonging to Co. L, Seventh Iowa Cavalry, was drowned at this place last evening, while attempting to swim his horse across the river. He is reported as being a good swimmer and it is supposed that he was injured by his horse."

at printing a newspaper, the *Frontier Scout*, and they developed their skill at baking. When Sully's army reached Fort Union the printers ran off another edition of the "rag" with the hot news of the battles of Killdeer Mountain and the Badlands. The bakers, too, proved very popular with the boys in blue, who quickly bought all of their dried-apple pies at half a greenback each.<sup>125</sup>

It was at Fort Union that there was a grand parting of the ways between the soldiers and the immigrants. Some of the gold hunters had had enough of western rigors and decided to head back East with the troops.<sup>126</sup> The remaining immigrants hired a half-breed from Fort Union to guide them to Fort Benton, and when they set out westward on August 19 a number of army mule drivers joined them.

Some thirty or forty soldiers also deserted to join the fortune seekers, taking with them one or two horses each.<sup>127</sup> Sully immediately sent Captain Miner with a detail of soldiers to pursue and capture the deserters, but they had gone far ahead of the immigrant train and could not be found.<sup>128</sup> The Sioux found them, however, and killed one of them before they could rejoin the immigrant train.<sup>129</sup>

Along the Missouri the grass was better and so the command rested near Fort Union for a few days. While the half-starved stock grazed, the topographical engineer, Captain H. von Minden, surveyed and marked out the four mile square military reservation for the future Fort Buford.<sup>130</sup>

### Homeward Bound

On Sunday, August 21, the chaplain preached an appropriate sermon on "Patience," developing the scripture quotation "Count it all joy that ye fall into diverse temptations."<sup>131</sup> Whether or not the nightmarish march to the Yellowstone had been "all joy," at least now the boys brightened up at the news that they were to go back toward Fort Rice.

Guided by a half-breed from Fort Union,<sup>132</sup> the column moved along by easy marches north of the Missouri, camping on the Missouri or its tributaries. Some of the soldiers shot fish in the river, bagging

<sup>125</sup>Cambell Papers, 37; English, "Dakota Cavalry," 291; Larpenteur, *Forty Years a Fur Trader on the Upper Missouri*, 304; Doud recorded in his diary for August 21: "Saw one old Crow Indian a chief 100 & 5 years old & Sev. Spaniards. Co. I of the 30th Wisconsin garrisoned the fort."

<sup>126</sup>Hilger, "Sully's Expedition of 1864," 320.

<sup>127</sup>Atkinson Diary, August 21.

<sup>128</sup>English, "Dakota Cavalry," 292.

<sup>129</sup>Benedict Diary, August 29.

<sup>130</sup>Pattee, "Dakota Campaigns," 315; "Official Correspondence," 323.

<sup>131</sup>*Collections of the Historical Society of North Dakota*, Vol. II, 143. Paxson evidently gave the wrong reference here. He cites Romans 5:3; actually this is St. James 1:2-4.

<sup>132</sup>"Iowa Troops in the Sully Campaigns," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, Vol. 20, diary entry for August 22.

some spoon fish six feet long.<sup>133</sup> The ambulances in the caravan were practically empty for the sick and wounded had been placed on the steamers for their ride to Fort Rice.

On August 26, near the present site of New Town, the command crossed the trail of some Indians they had fought at Killdeer Mountain and the Badlands. The scouts guessed that there were 1000 Indians in the band, that they had passed there ten days before and were now headed for Devils Lake.<sup>134</sup>

Two days later Sully arrived at the beautiful Nishu site, some five miles west of Fort Berthold. The column rested here for a day while waiting for the supply boats which had been delayed by sandbars upstream. The men profited by the delay to rest and get acquainted with the friendly Mandan, Arikaree and Hidatsa (or Gros Ventres) Indians who lived near the fort. The Indians had several thousand acres of corn, pumpkin and squash in the lowlands, all ready for the harvest so Sully sent a company of soldiers to guard the fields against kleptomaniacs in the entourage.<sup>135</sup>

The Fort Berthold Indians reported that when they first beheld the cloud of dust raised by Sully's approaching army, they feared that the hated Sioux were coming to attack their village. The Sioux were such an ever-present danger that the three allied tribes kept pickets on duty at all times to give the alarm. They felt so happy to have the soldiers nearby that they looked upon the visitation as a deliverance from slavery.

Many of the friendly Indians came to visit the soldiers. They strutted in their finery, raced their sleek "Oregon" ponies near the camp and played cards with the soldiers. They traded roasting ears of corn and Indian artwork for sugar and coffee; and they swapped horses with the soldiers, generally getting the better end of the trade.<sup>136</sup>

Sully held a council with the chiefs on the afternoon of August 29, during which he promised to help the three tribes in their fight against the Sioux. Three interpreters from Fort Berthold explained the Indians' speeches to him, one of which is recorded in the diary kept by George Doud:

I am the Mandan Chief and an old man. Once I governed a Strong nation. But the Sioux has been continually at war with us. And now we are few in number and very poor. For the last two years we have had to garison our Selves against them. If they found us out they would kill us or our wives or our children. And we Cant hunt the buffalo at all. And sometimes we go hungry. We have joined the rees and

<sup>133</sup>Atkinson Diary, August 26-27. This sounds like a "fish story", but that is what Atkinson has in his diary.

<sup>134</sup>Atkinson Diary, August 26; "Official Correspondence," 324; English, "Dakota Cavalry," 293.

<sup>135</sup>English, *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup>*Ibid.*; Atkinson Diary, August 30; Myers, *Soldering in Dakota*, 35.



grovines or vants [Rees and Gros Ventres] and only number 600 warriors in all. You leave us men to fight for our wives and children [and] we [will] go fight the Sioux & kill the buffalo & Soon be rich.

Doud notes further in his diary:

The band serenades them after the Council. They trade horses with the boys & the boys buy many other trinkets. Some of the Mandan woman [women] have blue eyes as said in McCauls history. The fort is very comfortable and Co. G. of the 6 Iowa cavalry was left to garison the fort.

The braves of the three tribes were greatly pleased by the news of the recent battles. They regretted that they had not been able to join Sully on the expedition, but they volunteered to help the next time, if Sully so desired. The Rees all agreed that the Sioux, whose trail Sully had crossed two days before, had gone to Dog Den Butte. This would be about three days' march away, and Sully itched to make one more raid on the elusive fugitives.<sup>137</sup>

Further news of the Sioux came from a friendly Yanktonais who reported to Sully that he had just come from the Sioux camp at the head of the Little Knife River. A party of British half-breeds was supplying the hostiles with ammunition; Chiefs Black Catfish and Medicine Bull wanted to make peace but were afraid to surrender. Sully sent the Yanktonais messenger back to invite the destitute Indians to repair to Fort Rice for a parley.<sup>138</sup>

As the troops marched by Fort Berthold the next day, there was mutual curiosity on the part of the soldiers and the squaws and papooses to get a good look at each other. The men inspected the earth lodges and a few of them bought supplies from the traders' store, paying exorbitant prices.<sup>139</sup>

Sully was glad to get his command away from the fort for the Indians debauched the soldiers with whiskey obtained from the British half-breeds.<sup>140</sup> One soldier recorded that some soldiers slipped by the guards and returned to Fort Berthold to join the traders and Indians in a big drunk. A certain George McLeod was left there drunk and without a horse.<sup>141</sup>

On August 30 the troops camped five miles below Fort Berthold,<sup>142</sup> and the next day reached Snake Creek, where the Missouri turns sharply to the south. Since it was rumored that the old rascal Inkpaduta with a

<sup>137</sup>"Official Correspondence," 325.

<sup>138</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>139</sup>Doud Diary, August 30; English, "Dakota Cavalry," 294.

<sup>140</sup>"Official Correspondence," 327.

<sup>141</sup>Atkinson Diary, August 31.

<sup>142</sup>Dana Wright places the camp of August 30 in the SW¼ of Section 8, Township 147, Range 87, south of Blackwater and west southwest of Garrison, on the land formerly farmed by Byron Wilde, but now in the reservoir area.

band of his Santees was with the Sioux at Dog Den Butte, Sully finally decided to make one more try to spank the hostiles before turning south. He hoped to overtake the Indians before they would escape into British territory, so he hurried northeast as fast as the condition of his wearied horses would allow.

### Huge Herds of Buffalo

The men were glad that the rate of marching had to be moderated for they now encountered huge herds of buffalo and they wished to have some sport hunting the monarchs of the plains. Sully permitted about a hundred men to attack the herd, and soon the air rang with rifleshots. In his diary for September 1, Doud wrote:

Buffalo Seen in heards of thousands from 10 a m to 3 pm . . . After we camped at the lake there was from 8 to 10 thousand buffalo in Sight on the hills 1½ miles off. Boys Shooting all the time in every direction. Some 50 buffalo shot. One of the 2 cavalry rode up to See his game. The buffalo turned on him, Broke the horses hip and the young chap was dismounted & had to Skedadle for Sweet life.

The next day Sully forbade all shooting, lest the Sioux ahead should hear it and escape. He sent Col. Rodgers ahead to look for the Indians, but he returned to report that "Inky" and his band had abandoned their camp and were headed north. So hastily had the Indians departed that their campfires were still warm when Sully's scouts arrived.<sup>148</sup> From the heights of Dog Den Butte the soldiers could see that the redskins had such a head start that pursuit would be futile, so Sully turned around and headed for Fort Rice.

Lieutenant Martin Williams has left us an interesting episode of this raid:

At this point occurred a small engagement with some of Ink-pa-du-ta's rear guard, in which only two of our men were engaged. Major [Robert] Rose and Captain [James] Paine of our regiment obtained permission of General Sully to remain in the rear of our troops for a little sport, running buffalo, which were almost without numbers, and visible in every direction. Waiting, according to orders, until the command was out of hearing distance, they commenced their attack on the bulls, each taking a different direction, although keeping within sight of each other. Each had succeeded in killing his bull and cutting out his tongue, when they in turn were attacked by a party of Ink-pa-du-ta's warriors who had been watching their movements. But luckily they were not surprised, and met them with shots from their carbines, unhorsing one or two of them and holding them in check. At this time our command was on the march, and distant some ten or twelve miles, but they succeeded in gaining the smooth ground of the open plains, where they had a fine race with some fifteen or twenty redskins. They were soon discovered by Captain P. B. Davy of Company H of

<sup>148</sup>Doud Diary, September 2; *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, 548; Kingsbury, "Sully's Expedition in 1864," 461.

the Second Cavalry, who was in command of the rear guard, composed of two companies of cavalry and a section of artillery, and who, taking one company of his best mounted troops, rescued these officers, who otherwise might have fallen into the hands of the Indians.<sup>144</sup>

From this point all the way back to Fort Rice the column was constantly endangered by wave after wave of buffaloes that wandered through the lines, threatening to wreck the wagons and trample everyone in a stampede. One soldier estimated that he saw between 50,000 and 100,000 in a herd. Another noted in his diary: ". . . talk of starving the Indians, it is damed nonsense [sic]"<sup>145</sup>

A chilling fall rain set in, and one of the soldiers recalled that the men in the caravan were so wretchedly cold that they would not pull their guns from under the blankets to fire at the fraternizing bison. By now some of the wagons were empty so the boys picked up a few calves that got tangled in the mule harnesses and threw them into the wagons to take along.<sup>146</sup>

Sunday, September 4, was a day of rest for the entire column. Church services were held in one section of the camp while only twenty rods away some of the boys played poker.<sup>147</sup> Somewhat rested, the weary caravan plodded on for four more days towards Fort Rice. Though the pace was somewhat slower, the months of constant travel under the worst conditions took its toll, and on one day, near Apple Creek, fifty horses died of exhaustion.

Then, on September 8, Fort Rice loomed in view across the river. Joy filled the hearts of the fatigued soldiers as they received the first mail since their departure from that point on July 19. For some of the boys the joy was short lived. There was great excitement at Fort Rice about the plight of some 200 immigrants led by Captain James Fisk, who had been surrounded by the Sioux about 160 miles west of Fort Rice, near the present town of Marmarth, North Dakota. Messengers had managed at night to slip through the cordon of Indian guards surrounding the desperate fortune seekers, rode furiously to Fort Rice and reported that unless relief came soon the entire expedition would be wiped out. The Sioux considered the immigrants part of Sully's forces and were intent on exterminating them in revenge for their humiliations at Killdeer Mountain and the Badlands.

Sully knew that if the Indians should capture the Fisk expedition, they would be emboldened to continue the war. Hence, though Sully

<sup>144</sup>Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 549.

<sup>145</sup>Atkinson Diary, September 3 & 5. Estimates of the number of buffaloes in the herds vary with the diarists. Jenkins guessed 10,000, while Paxson set the figure at 50,000.

<sup>146</sup>Cambell Papers, 38.

<sup>147</sup>Doud Diary, September 4. Poker was a favorite game for some of the men. The diary of Captain W. L. Silvis, Co. I, Eighth Minnesota Volunteers, has several references to his gambling gains and losses. Silvis was also quick to notice if an officer misbehaved, and he noted on July 21 that Sully was drunk.

considered Captain Fisk a swaggering braggart and the immigrants a bunch of cowardly draft-dodgers, he consented to send a rescue force of 900 men for the sake of routing the Sioux and saving the innocent women and children. The people later declared it the happiest moment of their lives when they saw the relief party approaching.

### Sully Satisfied, But Not Fully

The campaigning for 1864 was about over and, except for garrisons at Fort Rice, Fort Berthold and Fort Union, all the troops departed for other posts in Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa and the battlefields in the South. Sully's draft animals were so worn out that they could not pull even empty wagons, so the soldiers built barge-like boats to float men and supplies from Fort Rice to Sioux City.

Before leaving Fort Rice, General Sully wrote out a report for General Pope, expressing general satisfaction with his summer's excursion:

The Indian expedition . . . has been a success in every respect as far as it was in the power of anyone or any body of troops to make it so. Circumstances over which no human being had any control prevented it from being a perfect success. Had the Missouri risen in April instead of June, the boats . . . would have got up to Sioux City and other points of starting sooner; the command would have been in the field sooner. . . . Had not two of the boats sunk and one become disabled, more supplies would be on hand, and if the usual amount of snow had fallen last winter the river would have been higher, the Yellowstone would have been navigable, there would have been grass and water, not alkali, which has helped to kill off many of my animals, the post on the Yellowstone would have been established. But in spite of all this, the expedition has met the combined forces of the Sioux . . . completely routed them, destroyed a large portion of their camps . . . and scattered them in all directions. . . . I think they will never again organize for resistance. . . . Yet, owing to the vast extent of the country over which these Sioux can rove, the peculiar nature of a large portion of the country, such as the Black Hills, the mountains near the Big Horn, the Bad Lands, extending ten miles and over, on both sides of the Little Missouri . . ., so broken up in places with narrow ravines, hundreds of feet deep, the sides of which are perfectly perpendicular, it is not only easy then to lose Indians you may be in pursuit of, but even lose yourself; and then, again, the safe refuge the Indians have in the British possessions under the protection of the half-breeds of the north, who urge the Indians to keep up the war, so they may be benefitted by their trade, it will be exceedingly difficult to bring all the Sioux bands to a complete subjection.<sup>148</sup>

Many of the Indian bands later came to Forts Rice, Sully and Randall and asked for peace. They admitted that they had been badly

<sup>148</sup>"Official Correspondence," 331.

defeated at Killdeer Mountain and the Badlands, that the destruction of their supplies at Killdeer had been a terrific blow, and that they had broken up into small parties to subsist.<sup>149</sup> And so Sully considered the expedition a success, but not a complete one; as a unit the Sioux were no longer a threat, but they could still do much harm as small bands of raiders.

Whether Sully's expedition of 1864 was wise or just is hard to judge. Certainly there are two sides to the story. If this story has seemed a bit "white-flavored," keep in mind that the diaries from which the material was culled were written by whites; the Indians left us no documents to present their side. With this in mind, we quote in conclusion the judgement of one of Sully's soldiers:

The command . . . arrived at Fort Ridgely on October 8th, after an absence of four months and two days. In that time we had marched sixteen hundred and twenty-five miles; had whipped the savages at an estimated loss to them of four or five hundred killed, and many wounded; and had forever settled the Indian question east of the Missouri river. Thus it was made possible for white immigrants to settle and develop a territory equal in area to the New England states.<sup>150</sup>

The Indian question, however, was far from settled. For a dozen more years tension mounted, culminating in the famous "Custer Massacre" of 1876.

<sup>149</sup>English, "Dakota Cavalry," 300.

<sup>150</sup>Kingsbury, "Sully's Expedition in 1864," 461.