

# THE GREAT SIOUX UPRISING OF 1862

*The following account was taken from a document in the Brown County Historical Museum in Minnesota. The original author of this reading is unknown:*



## **BROWN COUNTY AND THE SIOUX MASSACRE**

First word of the Sioux Uprising and Massacre reached the frontier village of New Ulm, Minnesota, sometime between 11 and 12 o'clock noon on Monday, August 18, 1862, when survivors of an attack made their way back to the settlement.

They were the remainder of a happy group that had left the town two hours previously. Traveling in three wagons, the small party had set out to enlist recruits for the Civil War. They had been given a rousing send-off by fellow townsmen as their band played enthusiastically. The children's eyes were sparkling with excitement as the last wagon disappeared over the rise of ground.

Heading out into Milford Township, a rural area bordering New Ulm on the east and the Sioux Reservation on the west, the spirits of the men like the bright August morning were light and gay, their enthusiasm great for a patriotic cause. For six miles they were to remain in this care-free mood and then suddenly to be attacked by the Sioux while crossing a bridge over a ravine. Three were killed outright, several seriously wounded.

About the time these survivors began arriving back in New Ulm, other refugees had begun to pour into the village. On the previous day the first indication of an outbreak had come with the killing of five people at Acton by a small group of Indians. Early the next morning the massacre began at the Lower Agency of the reservation, which on the southeast was but sixteen miles from the settlement

of New Ulm. From the agency the attackers had fanned out into the surrounding countryside. Coming down the Milford road towards New Ulm roving bands of Indians killed surprised victims who had no forewarning of their danger.



*This 1862 photograph show some of the white settlers who fled the area around New Ulm for the safety of St. Paul, Minnesota and other towns to the north.*

Fortunately no direct attack was made on the village that day. It finally came late Tuesday afternoon, August 19th. Though hastily drawn civilian volunteers had been placed in company groups for defense, the inadequacy of the weapons was appalling. Of a list of 110 men assembled, 32 had rifles and 15 had other guns. The remaining defenders were without arms of any kind.

This first attack was continued for about two hours and then a providential rainfall caused the Indians to withdraw.

For three days no further attack was made on the settlement. During this time the Sioux bands roamed the countryside killing, looting and laying siege to Fort Ridgely eighteen miles up the Minnesota River from New Ulm.

The second attack came on the town early Saturday morning, August 23rd. By now outside assistance had arrived to help with defense. This had come from the down-river valley towns as well as the surrounding area. Notable help came from St. Peter, Mankato, LeSueur and Nicollet. Charles Flandreau had been placed in command. Pickets had been set up, barricades and entrenchments strengthened and a lookout post established. But the defenders were still woefully short of firearms, scarcely 250 guns and these were mostly immigrant muzzle-loaders with very little ammunition.

This second attack was made by an Indian force twice as great as that of the defenders. Continuing all day without let-up, the main Sioux body withdrew at nightfall but individuals continued to harass the town during the long night.

On Sunday morning, August 24th, the Indians made a half-hearted attempt to resume the attack but the ferocity of the previous day was missing. Finally they seemed to become discouraged and drifted away.

In New Ulm the besieged people had no way of knowing their fate nor when outside military forces would rescue them. A decision was made to evacuate the town. The inhabitants were barricaded in a small area in the center of the settlement. Supplies and ammunition were critical, sanitary conditions serious.

Two thousand men, women and children with eighty wounded and one hundred fifty-three wagons made up the exodus. They left their possession, many knew not the fate of loved ones, some had seen relatives and friends brutally murdered, many were sick and wounded. This sad procession reached Mankato late that night. Later many were taken on to St. Peter.

For another month, the rebellious Indians continued to attack settlers and engage in hostilities with military forces. On September 28th the Battle of Wood Lake took place. This engagement became the turning point in events, from then on the Indians were pursued and on the defensive. The aroused state had by now gathered sufficient forces to quell the marauders.

For punishment the four Minnesota Sioux tribes were banished from their homes in the state. Some fled north and west to escape punishment. Three hundred and three were tried and convicted for their part in the uprising. Sentenced to be hanged, the death penalty was reduced to forty by order of President Lincoln. Eventually thirty-eight of these were hanged at Mankato on December 26th, 1862. This mass execution, delayed once for the lack of rope, was done simultaneously for all on a single scaffold--the largest execution in the history of our country.

The remaining convicted prisoners remained in prison for the winter and in the spring were transferred to Rock Island near Davenport, Iowa. Here they were imprisoned for almost four years. By the time of their release, one third had died of disease. The released prisoners were sent to join their families in Nebraska, where about 1600 captives had been placed in 1863. The Minnesota Sioux, except for a scattered few, were gone from their beloved Minnesota valley.

The Uprising had killed almost five hundred known dead in western Minnesota. In Brown county over one hundred and forty lost their lives and the destruction of property was tremendous. The fact that Fort Ridgely and New Ulm had been able to withstand the assaults had prevented raids on towns further down the valley.

In the Civil War six hundred and thirty-five Minnesotans were killed. In a little over forty days, two-thirds this number were killed in the Sioux Uprising.

Many markers and monuments in Brown County are dedicated to the gallant settlers and defenders whose sacrifice was so over-shadowed by the great national tragedy taking place at the time.