

## **Rose's Great Escape**

Yesterday was the 147th anniversary of the murder of my great-great grandparents and their 3 year-old daughter at the beginning of the Dakota Conflict in 1863. Below is a blog post I wrote several years ago after Quinn and I made a pilgrimage to the Minnesota River Valley to look for the site of the massacre.

In March of 1862 my great-great grandparents, Johann and Kathryn Kochendorfer with their five children, John, 11, Rose (my great grandmother) 9, Kate 7, Margaret 5 and Sarah 3, to a homestead located in Flora Township in the southwest corner of Renville County, Minnesota, just upstream and on the other side of the Minnesota River from Redwood Falls. The farm sat at the edge of the prairie, where it began sloping down to the river valley. It's a beautiful spot for a farm, with fertile fields in front, and the backyard dropping off into a wooded hillside. They had spent the spring and early summer living in a tent while they broke the ground for farming and built a log house to shelter them for the winter.

Around noon on August 18th of that year, Johann and John had returned to the house from the fields for lunch, Kathryn was in the kitchen cooking, and the girls were doing laundry when a group of Indians armed with rifles appeared. After a short conversation, one of the Indians took an axe that was leaning against the woodpile and threw it down the hill into the woods. Johann told John to get the axe and return it. As he stood speaking with the intruders, he had his hands on Rose's shoulders as she stood in front of him. Suddenly one of the Indians shot him. Kathryn ran to the door of the house and was

also shot. The girls ran into the house and hid under the beds but they heard John yelling for them to run for the woods. They all ran from the house except for little Sarah who would not come.

There is a steep ravine right behind where the cabin was. It's easy to conceive of young children playing hide and seek in that dark wooded gulch to pass away the summer. The knowledge they gained would save their lives. As they ran into the woods, their dying father motioned to them to go to the Schwandt farm, their closest neighbor, below them in the valley. As the girls ran through the woods they were reunited with John and then started to make their way to the neighbors. When they cleared the woods and looked down, they saw that the Schwandt farm was also under attack and they witnessed the murders of the entire Schwandt family. A pregnant woman was cut open, the fetus pulled from her body and nailed to the barn door. What they didn't know was attacks like these were occurring up and down the valley. It is estimated that as many as a thousand settlers were killed in the next few weeks.

John remembered that his father had told him that Fort Ridgley was downstream from them, but they weren't sure how far. But they decided that they had no choice other than trying to walk there. For the next several hours they made their way toward the fort, hiding in the tall prairie grass and stopping at streambeds to rest and drink. When the little girls were too tired to walk any farther, Rose and John carried them on their backs. Late that afternoon they joined several other settlers who were headed to the fort in ox carts. By nightfall they reached the fort, eighteen miles away, only to be told that they could not come

through the barricades, for fear that the Indians would rush through with them. They spent the night hiding under the wagons and in the morning they were allowed to enter the fort. The fort was manned by 180 soldiers, with 250 civilians who had escaped the massacre. The fort was not in a good defensive position, sitting on high ground surrounded on three sides by ravines that allowed attackers to get unseen into rifle range. But it did have six artillery pieces, which were stationed on the four corners of the fort with the two lighter 12-pounders in the central parade ground to be moved quickly where they were most needed.

On the 20th around noon they were attacked by a force of about four hundred Indians led by Little Crow, the commanding chief of the Indian forces. After a fierce battle they drove the attackers off. But Little Crow returned again two days later with 800 men. Outnumbered four to one and facing wave after wave of Indians attacking from the ravine, the soldiers fought for six hours using the cannon to break the charge after charge. A final assault came at the northwest corner of the fort, right where the biggest gun was waiting with a double load of canister shot. As the attackers came up from the ravine the big gun and both the twelves fired simultaneously, ripping huge holes into the advancing line. At that point the fighting stopped and the Indians never returned to the fort. Casualties in the fort were three dead and thirteen wounded.

There are many stories to be told about the Dakota Conflict, stories of bravery, cowardice, brutality and sacrifice, on both sides. There were two other major battles, in New Ulm and at Birch Coulee.

I haven't spoken of the events that led up to the conflict: the Indians were provoked by cruelty and broken promises; they were starving and feared that their families would not last through the coming winter. If you are interested in finding out more of about the Dakota Conflict, *Over the Earth I Come*, by Duane Schultz is an excellent read and covers the events very thoroughly.

After Henry Sibley arrived at the fort with reinforcements, parties were sent out to bury the dead. Johann, Kathryn and little Sarah were buried in unmarked graves near the house. In 1891, the man who had taken over the homestead found them while digging a post hole. John, by then an adult, returned to the farm and brought the bodies back to St. Paul where they are now buried.

The children made their way to St. Paul and stayed with relatives. A year later they were returning from a visit to St. Louis when the steamboat they were on caught fire and sank. Rose ended up going to stay at the Keller farm near Ellsworth, Wisconsin. She took a shine to one of the Keller boys, Ted, and they were married. They moved to South St. Paul where they owned an orchard. Rose lived into her eighties, long enough for my brother and sister to know her. I come from tough stock.