A Graphic Representation of the Minnesota Dakota Diaspora

Ronald G. Stover*

Abstract By the early 1800s, the Sioux of the upper Great Plains had divided into three main sub-divisions: the Dakota, the Nakota, and the Lakota. The Dakota occupied most of the territory now known as the state of Minnesota. Throughout the 1800s, they were slowly deprived of much of that territory. By the end of the 1800s, they had not only lost most of their land, they had lost the legal right to live in Minnesota. This manuscript presents a graphic representation of that diaspora.

In the 1800s, the Sioux, a loose alliance of tribes living in the upper Great Plains, had divided into three main sub-divisions. The Dakota (also known as Isanti) were to the east in what is now Minnesota, the Nakota (or the Yankton-Yanktonai) were in the middle in what would eventually be eastern South Dakota, and the Lakota (also known as Titunwan or Teton) were in western South Dakota (Gibbon 2003; Marshall 2004).

In the 1600s and 1700s, the Dakota occupied much of the land in what is now known as Minnesota. But during the 1800s they were slowly deprived of their Minnesota territory by white Americans through discriminatory legislation, deception, illegal activities, threats of violence and actual violence. By the end of the 1800s, not only had the Dakota lost most of their land, they had lost the legal right to live in Minnesota.

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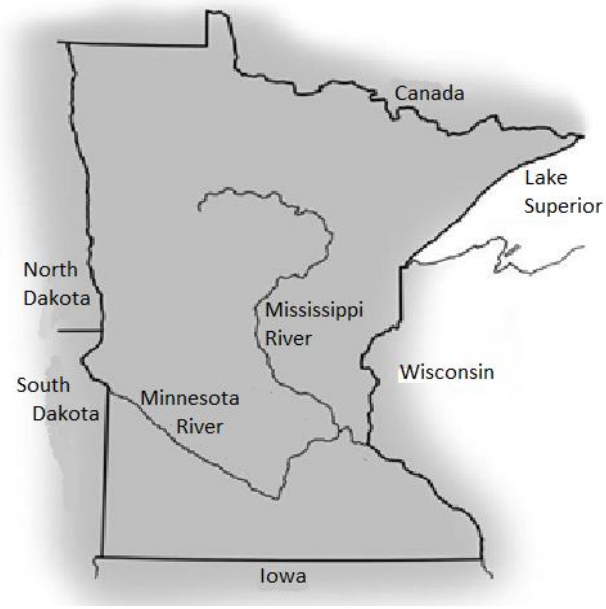
THE LOSS OF DAKOTA LAND

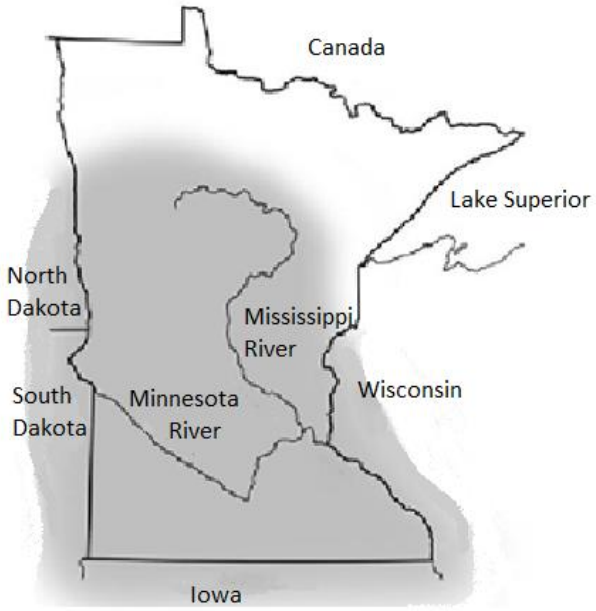
The ultimate cause for the loss of Minnesota by the Dakota was the desire of white Americans for Dakota land. Although they occupied most of Minnesota before the 1800s, they were not alone. There are stories of missionaries and traders moving in and out of this territory. (See Map 1.) There is some evidence of contact and even conflict with other First American societies. Apparently, during the 1700s the Ojibwa coming west were able to force the Dakota southward toward the Mississippi and Minnesota River valleys (Eastern Dakota Time Line: 1660-1869 2004). (See Map 2.)

The seizure of Dakota land by white Americans began in earnest in the early 1800s. In 1805, the Dakota were persuaded to make their first land concession; they sold 100,000 acres at the mouths of the St. Croix and Minnesota Rivers (Coleman and Camp 1988; Gibbon 2003:81). (See Map 3.) In 1837, they were convinced to sign the Treaty with the Sioux, a treaty giving up all of their land east of the Mississippi (First People: Treaties and Agreements 2010; Gibbon 2003:5). (See Map 4.) When Minnesota became a territory in 1849, the first governor of the territory Alexander Ramsey embarked on an effort to persuade the Dakota to give up their land in the southern part of the state to satisfy the land demands of whites who had flooded into Minnesota. Through a combination of political intimidation and ultimately military violence, the Dakota gave in and signed the 1851 Treaty of Traverse de Sioux, a treaty giving up 20,000,000 acres of Southern Minnesota in exchange for a reservation consisting of narrow strips of land on both sides of the upper Minnesota River (Coleman and Camp 1988; Eastern Dakota Time Line: 1660-1869 2004; Gibbon 2003:5; Minnesota Territorial Pioneers, Inc. 2010). (See Map 5.)

The reservation was about 150 miles long and extended 10 miles on either side of the Minnesota River. However, the Treaty contained provisions of which the Dakota were unaware. They were given control of the reservation for only five years, after which they lost that control



Map 1



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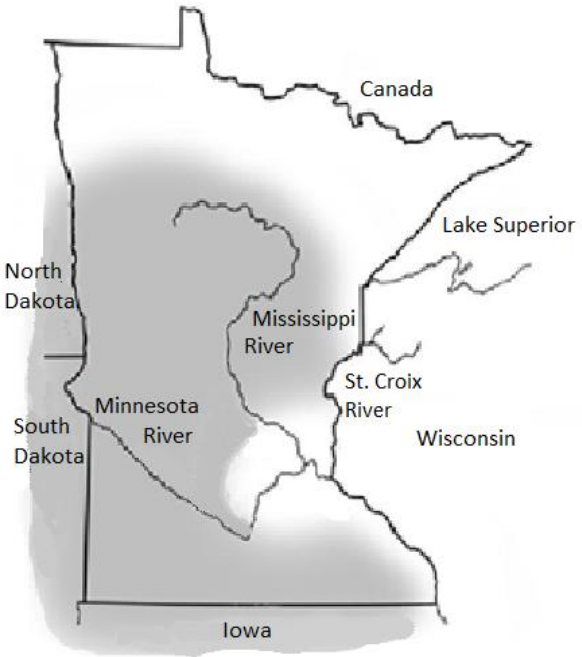
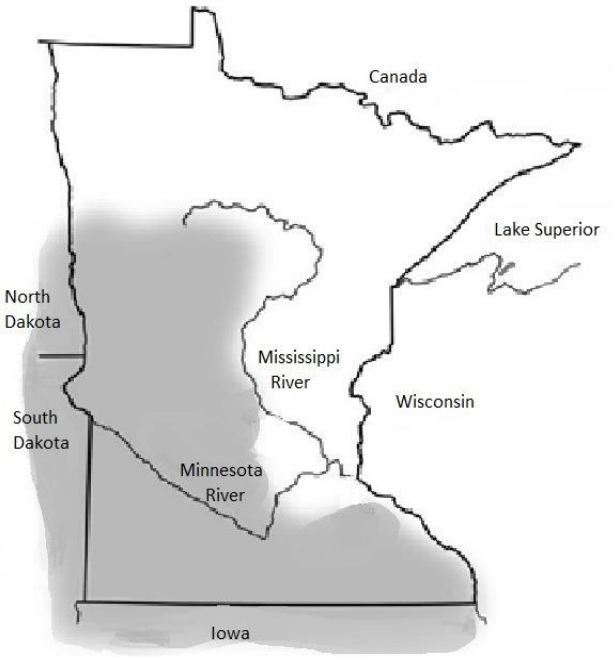


Map 3



Map 4

(Anderson 1988; Berg 1993). When told they had been deceived and owned no land, they were understandably upset. They were then offered full ownership of half of the reservation they had been promised. They reluctantly agreed to the reduction; they had little choice (Anderson 1988; Berg 1993; Coleman and Camp 1988). (See Map 6.) They were thus exiled from their native Minnesota woodlands and consequently deprived of their right to hunt and gather to augment their farming lifestyle.

As part of the agreement, the Dakota were supposed to be compensated for their loss. According to the terms of the treaty, substantial sums of money were to be provided to pay for the costs of removing the Indians to the new reservation, educating them, establishing agencies and providing supplies and annual cash payments. Unfortunately for the Dakota, most of the supplies and money they were to have received were siphoned off through fraud and mismanagement before getting to the Dakota and thus they received few of the promised resources (Berg 1993; Coleman and Camp 1988).

A decade later, in 1862, many of the Minnesota Dakota faced starvation on their reservation. Crops had failed the year before, the winter had been long and harsh, and the annual disbursement of supplies and money had been delayed by bureaucratic red tape. As a result, thousands of Dakota gathered at the two reservation agencies -- the Upper Sioux Agency near the Yellow Medicine River and the Lower Sioux Agency near the Minnesota River -- seeking the food to which they were entitled. They were told no supplies would be released until authorization was provided (Coleman and Camp 1988; Eastern Dakota Time Line: 1660-1869 2004).

In August, Dakota at the Upper Sioux Agency demanded the food and supplies due them in June. When they were again rebuffed, they stormed the agency warehouse and took 100 sacks of flour. A military detachment quelled the incident (Coleman and Camp 1988).

Little Crow, perhaps the most prominent Dakota leader and one of the leaders who had signed the 1851 treaty, rushed to the Agency to try to mediate the crisis. At a meeting of the Dakota and the white traders at the agency, Little Crow suggested the Dakota be given the supplies they sought, to be paid for when the authorization was given and the reimbursement arrived.
A compromise was worked out and the crisis was apparently resolved (Anderson 1982-1983; Anderson 1986; Coleman and Camp 1988).

August 17th, 1862 was a Sunday. Four young Dakota males were returning from an unsuccessful hunt. They neared the farm of Robinson Jones and asked for water. Jones and his family had no reason to fear the young men since Dakota had been seen in the area before. The young men turned their guns on the whites and within seconds had killed Jones, his wife, her son, an adopted daughter, and a neighbor who had just arrived from Wisconsin (Anderson 1986; Coleman and Camp 1988).

The four Dakota warriors sought refuge at the Shakopee village near the Lower Sioux Agency on the Minnesota River and recounted what they had done. Little Crow and the other senior Dakota knew there would be a white response. After a night of discussion and debate, these leaders decided to launch a war against the whites. Little Crow warned the other Dakota that the whites were too powerful to be defeated and cautioned against the war. Out voted, he agreed to lead the Dakota in a last-ditch effort to restore the Dakota homeland (Anderson 1986; Coleman and Camp 1988).

Over the next several weeks, the Great Dakota Conflict played out in the Minnesota River Valley. (See Map 7.) It is estimated that at least 500 Minnesotans – men, women, and children were killed. (Coleman and Camp 1988:14; Dakota Time Line: 1660-1869 2004:8; The Dakota Conflict of 1862 2012). An unknown number of Dakota were killed; some estimates put the

number at about 60 (Eastern Dakota Timeline: 1660-1869 2004; The Dakota Conflict of 1862 2012).

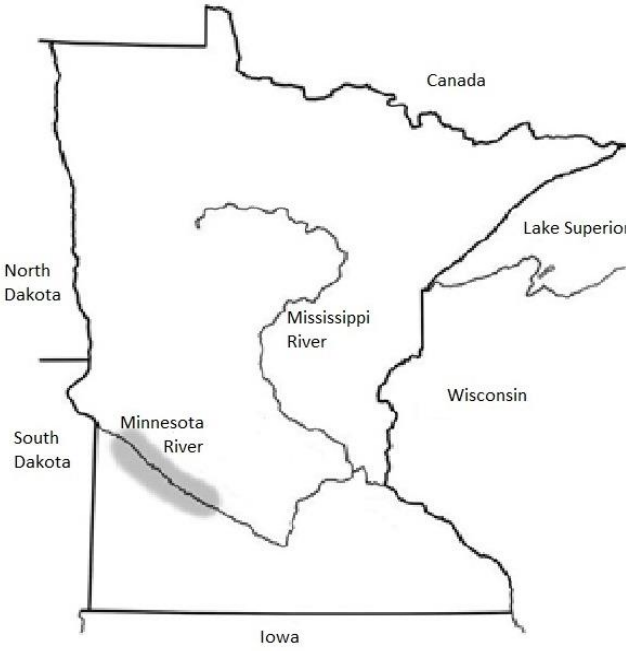
By the end of September, the war was over. After suffering a decisive defeat at the hands of the U.S. Army on September 23, Little Crow and some of his followers began fleeing the state (Anderson 1986).

Many Dakota were captured. Trials quickly began for the captured warriors. The trials, heard by a five-man military commission, concluded on November 5. More than 300 Dakota were sentenced to death. President Lincoln, hearing of the sentencing, intervened in the trials. He ultimately approved of the hanging of 39 Dakota. One was subsequently pardoned. On December 26, 1862, in Mankato, Minnesota 38 Dakota men were hung simultaneously. It was the largest one-day mass execution in the history of the United States (Coleman and Camp 1988; East Dakota Time Line: 1660-1869 2005; Hudetz 2006).

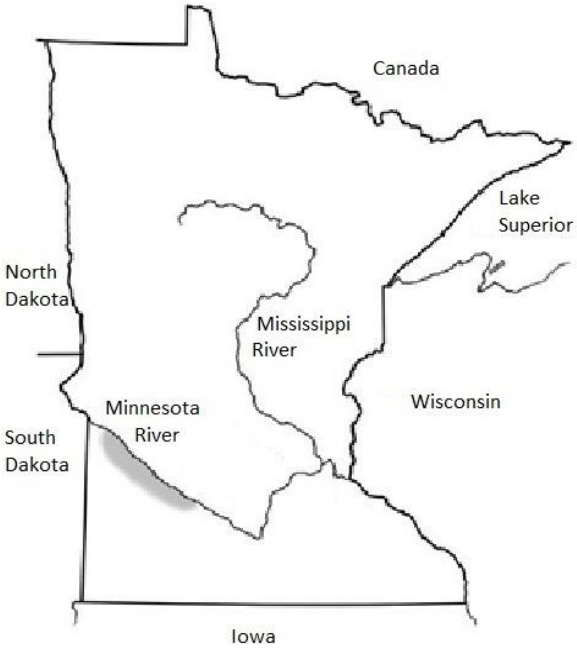
There immediately followed a mass exodus of Dakota from Minnesota and the state was virtually depopulated of Dakota. Fearful of being the victims of white violence, Dakota fled to present day Canada, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota.

In 1863, the U.S. Congress punished the Dakota by nullifying all treaties, revoking all financial agreements, and enacting a law mandating the expulsion of the four subgroups of the Dakota – the Sisseton, Wahpeton, Mdewakanton, and Wahpekute -- from Minnesota (Berg 1993; Eastern Dakota Timeline: 1660-1869 2004). (See Map 8.) Although the law, entitled an Act for the Removal of the Sisseton, Wahpeton, Mdeawakanton, and Wahpakoota Bands of Sioux or Dacotah Indians, is no longer enforced, the law has not been repealed (Busch 2009).

Most Dakota never returned to Minnesota (Coleman and Camp 1988; Gibbon 2003). Little Crow did. In 1863, he and his son were discovered raiding a farmer's garden. The farmer shot and killed Little Crow. Although Little Crow's son tried to conceal his father's body, it was quickly



Map 5



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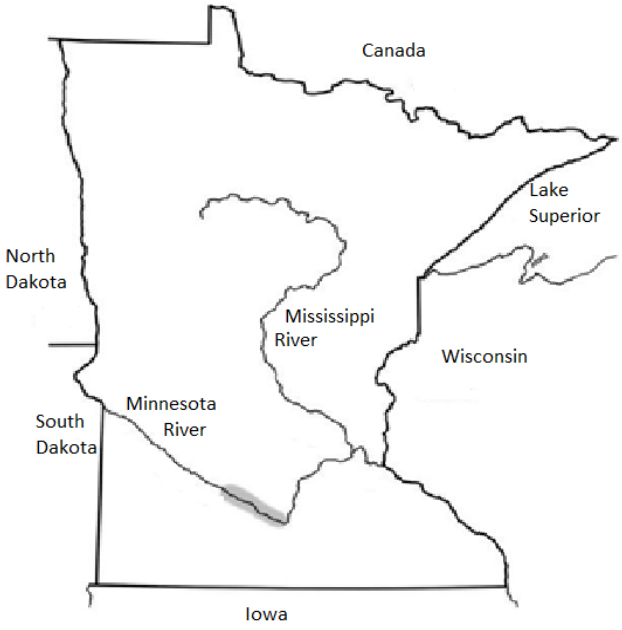
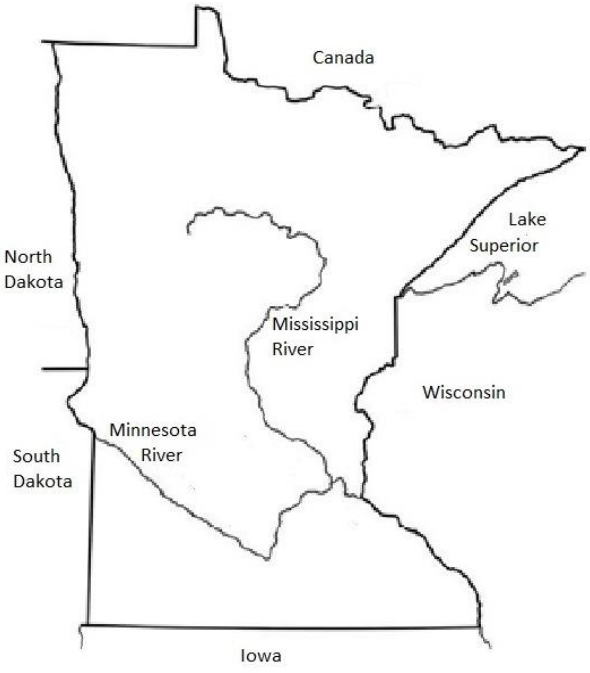


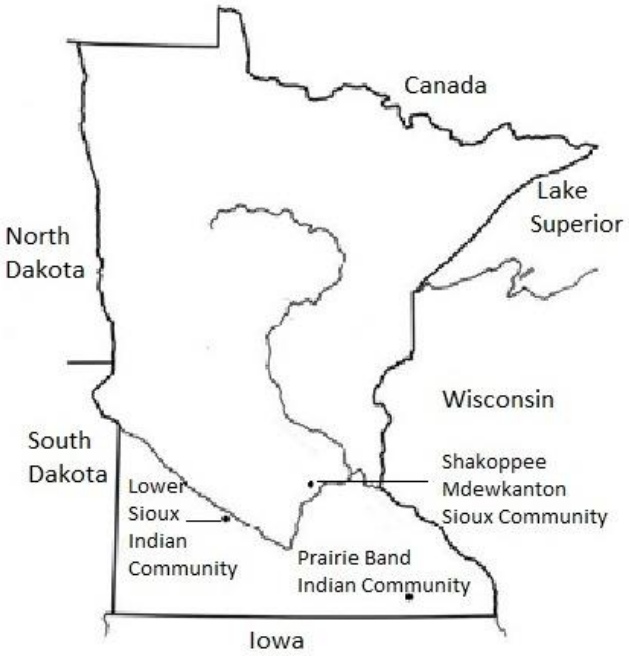
Map 7



Map 8

discovered and mutilated. The remains were eventually recovered and displayed by the Minnesota Historical Society. Little Crow's body was finally buried at Flandreau, South Dakota 108 years after his death (Anderson 1986; Gibbon 2003).

As of July, 2007, the Great Dakota Conflict reappeared as a current issue in a federal court (Hudetz 2006). The case, entitled Wofchild vs the United States, involves the descendants of the Mdewakanton tribe of the Dakota Sioux. The Mdewakanton did not attack the whites and in some cases actually saved some white Minnesotans from Dakota warriors. In 1886, the federal government documented 208 of them and bought three tracts of land for their benefit and that of their descents. (See Map 9.) Casinos have now been built on those three tracks of land by the Shakopee, Prairie Island, and Lower Sioux Mdewakanton bands. Sioux who can document their descendancy from the original 208 Dakota are suing for a share of the profits from the casinos (Hudetz 2006).



Map 9

DISCUSSION

The fate of the Minnesota Dakota provides surprising examples of the mal-treatment of some Americans by other more powerful Americans. For instance, it illustrates the powerlessness experienced by some First American societies in their dealings with white America. Surprisingly, that powerlessness has a legal foundation. Once white Americans gained ascendancy, they withdrew the right of First American societies to own their own land. In the early nineteenth century, the United States accepted the European-invented legal theory called the discovery doctrine that stated that only European nations could own newly discovered lands. Natives in those lands had only the rights of occupancy, not ownership, and could be deprived even of those rights through compensation or sometimes violence. "The United States officially embraced the discovery doctrine in 1823 through the Supreme Court case of Johnson v. McIntosh" (Utter 2001:11). The inability to own your own land is perhaps the most extreme example of powerlessness.

That fate provides an example of the shallowness of the commitment of the United States to fairly negotiate inter-national treaties. There were cases in which the Minnesota Dakota were manipulated into signing treaties or agreements written in English that contained disadvantageous provisions of which they were unaware. In other cases, they were threatened with military action if they did not sign the treaty or agreement being negotiated.

Further, that fate documents that even when white Americans succeeded in obtaining the treaties or agreements they wanted, they often failed or refused to honor them. It was this failure that lead to the Great Dakota Conflict.

The trials of the Dakota warriors captured at the end of the Great Dakota Conflict provide an example of the denial of American justice. The War was effectively over on September 23 when the Dakota suffered a decisive defeat. Captured warriors were quickly put on trial. The

trials, heard by a five-man military commission, concluded on November 5. In the span of twelve days, from September 23 to November 5, the military commission tried and sentenced to death 300 Dakota warriors. Only the intervention of President Lincoln prevented this miscarriage of justice from being even more extreme. Because of his intervention, only 38 of the original 300 Dakota warriors were hung simultaneously in the largest one-day mass execution in the history of the United States.

Finally, this history provides an example of continuing legal racism. The law the U.S. Congress passed mandating the expulsion of four subgroups of Dakota from Minnesota was clearly a racist law. Surprising the law has not been repealed.

It is important to acknowledge that the fate of this one society is not exceptional in the history of the United States. There are many other instances in which First American nations lost their land to the virtually insatiable desire of white Americans for land. Other well-known examples are the forced removal of the Cherokee from north Georgia (Golden Ink 1996 & 1997; Sturgis 2006), the forced removal of the Seminoles from Florida (Hysup 2004), and the illegal confiscation and continued occupation of the Black Hills in South Dakota (Ostler 2010). Throughout its history, the United States has used ethnocentric beliefs like manifest destiny, discriminatory legislation like the federal law which drove the Dakota from Minnesota, and illegal activities like President Andrew Jackson's "trail of tears" forced removal of the Cherokee from Georgia to deprive First Americans nations of most of their land in the North American continent.

SUMMARY

The experience of the Dakota Sioux represents a dark chapter in the history of inter-ethnic relations in the United States. The story starts with a First Nation occupying virtually all of the state of Minnesota. It proceeds with the loss of virtually all of their land through the use by white

Americans of legal and illegal means, by intimidation and manipulation, and even by force. By 1862, Dakota land had been reduced to a very small reservation on the west side of the Minnesota River. The story ends when, in the summer of 1862, pushed to act by perceptions of mal-treatment by the federal government, by the traders in the Indian agencies, and by the threat of starvation, the Dakota went to war with the United States. They were quickly defeated. Many Dakota warriors were captured. Thirty eight Dakota men were hung in Mankato, Minnesota in the largest one day mass execution in the history of the United States. Many captured warriors were shipped out of Minnesota. The remaining Dakota fled the state, going to Canada, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota. The U.S. Government completed the expulsion of the Dakota from the state by passing legislation banning the Dakota from Minnesota.

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