

# Remembering the Dakota Uprising;

## The Renville County Experience

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Renville County, Minnesota is a beautiful place. In his *History of Renville County*, published in 1916, Franklin Curtiss-Wedge wrote: “The soil is black sandy loam with clay subsoil and is very fertile. The northern portion consists of rolling prairie, while the southern portion consists of the beautiful Minnesota valley and a range of bluffs extending back of the river from one-fourth of a mile to one mile in width. The river and creeks are bounded by natural forests.”

But Renville County was not a beautiful place on Monday, August 18, 1862. It began as a very sunny day, but ended as the bloodiest day in Minnesota history. Mary Schwandt, whose German immigrant family had just arrived in Flora Township in the spring, wrote: “The great red sun came up in the eastern sky, tinging all the clouds with crimson, and sending long, scarlet shafts of light up the green river valley and upon the golden bluffs on either side. It was a “red morning,” and as I think of it now, the words of an old German soldiers song that I had learned in my girlhood came to my mind and fitly describes it:

O, Morgenroth! O, Morgenroth!  
Leuchtest mir zum fruehen Tod?  
(O, red morning sun! O, red morning sun!  
Are you shining on me for an early death?

She did not meet her end that day, but most of her family did. Fortunately, she survived and later told her story, as did other survivors. In the area around her family’s farm, in sections 33-35 of Flora Township, thirty-nine people were murdered. In the township as a whole, approximately eighty people were killed. This township suffered the greatest loss of any township during the Uprising. If something like this happened today, it would get worldwide news coverage 24-7.

The Renville County experience reminds us that there were two very different kinds of experiences of the Uprising. If you were at a place with fortifications, such as Fort Ridgley or New Ulm, you were relatively safe. But if you were at a place without fortifications, such as Flora Township, you were not safe. You were on your own. The conflict therefore played out at fortified and unfortified locations. This no doubt led President Lincoln to make a distinction between battles and massacres. The first relates to conflict between armed combatants, whereas the latter relates to attacks on unarmed civilians by armed combatants. This latter category was the case for the pioneer settlers in Renville County.

Many settlers were recently arrived immigrants. They had come to America looking for a better life for their families. They had pulled up stakes in the old country and made the long ocean journey across the Atlantic and then from the coast to Minnesota.

The Uprising was short-lived and devastating, but the conflict was anything but over. It was the first phase of a war that continued for years out onto the plains. Due to continued violence and killings on the Minnesota frontier and the reports of a large Indian camp numbering into the thousands in Dakota Territory, Generals Henry H. Sibley and Alfred Sully led military campaigns in 1863 and 1864. They fought several battles and skirmishes facing as many as five to six thousand warriors, which included the followers of Little Crow, the leader of the Minnesota Uprising, and Inkpaduta, the leader of the Spirit Lake Massacre in Iowa. Also participating in these battles was Sitting Bull who was Lakota Sioux, showing that the Dakota Sioux had linked up with them. As for Minnesota, the 2nd Minnesota Cavalry Regiment had to maintain border patrol until the end of the Civil War.

Not until several years after the Uprising was it safe to return to Renville County. According to Curtiss-Wedge: "Here and there a trapper pursued his calling and found shelter at times in some settler's cabin left standing by the Indians, but for the most part the county was bereft of human activity from the time of the Indian Massacre to the time when a few brave souls ventured back in 1865." At this time, however, there still were, he notes: "small parties of Indians scouting over our frontier." As late as May 1865, the Jewett family was killed near Mankato at Rapidan, demonstrating that the region was still not completely safe.

Many settlers came to Renville County in the following years, but most were new to the area, as the original population of settlers had been decimated and not all of those who survived wanted to return. Its population in 1862 was estimated as having been 700, but now it was basically empty, so it was open for settlement. In 1867, my great-grandmother's parents moved to Flora Township and three years

later she and her husband, my great-grandparents, Carl and Augusta Tolzmann, followed them there. Their farms were adjacent to one another. They were all German immigrants like many of those who had settled there before them.

The farm my great-grandparents settled on had belonged to the family of Mary Schwandt. Later on, Mary came to visit them. She asked if she could seek out the site of her parent's cabin, as her father had hidden gold coins under the steppingstone to it. She found the location and retrieved the coins, and this story became a part of my family history. Not surprisingly, my family became interested in the history of the Uprising.

In 1898, my great-grandfather filed a lawsuit against Renville County to save an historic landmark. A proposal on the part of the county commissioners aimed to change that part of the old Fort Ridgley road "running diagonally through Renville County, so that when changed it would, in the town of Flora, run on section lines." The Redwood Gazette reported: "The petition was bitterly fought at the hearing before the commissioners, and as all of the people of the town, as well as all of the county, were interested, many remonstrations to the petition were filed." One was the lawsuit by my great-grandfather. So why was the road considered important? It had been a lifeline for people in Renville County: the escape way to the Fort during the Uprising.

My grandfather Albert Tolzmann belonged to the Renville County Pioneers Association that was founded in 1902. Its goal was: "to perpetuate the memory of the settlement of Renville County and the strenuous times of those primitive days by frequent social reunions; to preserve the history of those early days and the persons who bore the hardships and privations of that wild frontier life; to cultivate the spirit of good fellowship; and to hallow the memory of those early pioneers who blazed the way to civilization."

In 1906, one of its most active members, William Wichmann, was elected president. Thanks to his vision and dedication, the Association succeeded in reaching its goals of honoring the memory of the pioneers who perished in 1862. His family's experience resembles that of other families that survived the Uprising and the narrative he wrote about it is in the Renville County history.

His family came from Hanover, Germany to America in 1852, first settling in Cook County, Illinois and then moving to Cottonwood Township in Brown County, Minnesota in 1858. In 1860 they moved to Beaver Falls Township in Renville County. During the Uprising, the family fled to Fort Ridgley, where they picked up his brother Fred who worked there. After getting his brother, the family moved to Illinois, not returning to Minnesota until 1864, when they moved to New Ulm. In the spring of 1865, the family

returned to its homestead at Beaver Creek. Although the home had been burned, the stable was still standing and the family lived there until a house could be built. Wichmann wrote: “for a long time our house was a signal tower beyond which settlers would not venture until receiving a safety signal short therefrom.” After several months, he wrote, others began to return.

Aside from his personal narrative, the Renville County History also has a biographical entry on Wichmann, noting that he: “was instrumental in having monuments erected to mark the graves of several slain in the Indian outbreak. In this work, Mr. Wichmann has attained a widespread fame. He has made a lifelong study of the incidents of the massacre, and at the expense of much time and money has labored, through the erection of monuments, markers and otherwise, to perpetuate the memory of those martyrs to civilization who perished at the hands of the revengeful Sioux.” The county history notes: “He served entirely without recompense, and achieved results which could scarcely have been expected had more than twice the amount appropriated been expended. Mr. Wichmann was also the prime mover in the erection of the Schwandt Monument.”

The importance of the historical markers and monuments was commented on in the county history: “Rich as Renville County is in historic tradition, sanctified as her soil has been by the blood of martyrs, notable as her territory is as the scene of some of the most stirring events in Minnesota history, it is fitting that many hallowed spots, here and there, should be marked with permanent marble and granite, suitably inscribed as a memorial to the past and an inspiration to the future.” We can be thankful for the work of the Renville County Pioneers Association. How wise it was of it to establish historical markers and monuments.

Another important kind of memorial consists of survivors’ eyewitness accounts. I had always been interested in the topic, but I only started publishing works on the topic when one particular eyewitness account came to my attention. It was the German-language work of Captain Jacob Nix, who I mentioned earlier. As a veteran of the 1848 Revolution in Germany, he had military experience and when the Uprising broke out, he was placed in command of the defense forces for the first battle of New Ulm. For the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Uprising he published a book about it, but it had never been translated. So, I edited a translation of it. Completing this work made me wonder how many other works there were like this and also if there were older works on the Uprising that had gone out of print. This caused me to seek them out and get them published.

One of my books, *German Pioneer Accounts of the Great Sioux Uprising*, focuses on Renville County and includes the eyewitness accounts of Mary Schwandt and

Wilhelmina Busse (aka: Minnie Busse Carrigan). They wrote of their own personal experiences and also about their neighboring families with names such as: Boelter, Gluth, Inefeld, Kitzmann, Kochendorfer, Krause, Krieger, Lenz, Lettou, Mannweiler, Reyff, Rieke, Roessler, Schmidt, Thiele, Urban, Zabel, and Zitlaff.

I was especially interested in getting this book out, as it dealt with the Renville County experience and also because it reflects my interest in publishing firsthand narratives written by survivors. My goal was to provide access to them, as it is important to see the Uprising through the eyes of those who were actually there. There are many histories of the Uprising, but I place a great importance on eyewitness accounts.

And, here I have to mention my best consultant and advisor for this work: This was my father Eckhart Tolzmann, as he knew the names, places, etc. and helped me whenever I had a question. I found that names were often spelled several different ways. And, he also gave me his copy of the history of Renville County, which I have paged through many times. Often we would go through it discussing the families that are mentioned in it, many of whom he knew.

Just as an earlier generation got together to establish the Renville County Pioneers Association, so too have many come together today to form Family and Friends of the Dakota Uprising Victims. Its purpose is “to recognize our settler ancestors and their sacrifice and place in Minnesota history.” Thanks are due to Janet R. Klein and Joyce A. Klonecz for getting this organized and putting together a valuable website: [www.dakotavictims1862.com](http://www.dakotavictims1862.com).

In 2012, they published a book entitled: *August 18, 1862: Neighbors Share the Tragedy: August 18, 2012: Descendants Honor and Remember*, which records the life stories of those who settled Renville County as told by their descendants. They have now followed up with a book: *What Happened to the Settlers in Renville County? The Aftermath of the U.S.-Dakota War*. It makes an important contribution to the history of the Uprising by further exploring a neglected chapter of its history, a story that needs to be told today.

Mary Schwandt set an example by telling her story. She wrote: “Life is made up of shadow and shine. I sometimes think I have had more than my share of sorrow and suffering, but I bear in mind that I have seen much of the agreeable side of life, too. A third of a century almost has passed since the period of my great bereavement and of my captivity. The memory of that period, with all its hideous features, often rises before me, but I put it down...I have called it up at this time because kind friends have assured me that my experience is part of a leading incident in the history of Minnesota that ought to be given to the world. In the hope that what I have written may serve to inform the

present and future generations what some of the pioneers of Minnesota underwent in their efforts to settle and civilize our great state, I submit my plain and imperfect story.”

She called the Uprising “a leading incident in the history of Minnesota,” but it would be more accurate to call it “the” leading incident, since there is nothing else like it. By commemorating the Renville County experience of the Uprising we follow in the footsteps of the Renville County Pioneers Association in perpetuating historical memory and preserving history. We “hallow the memory of those early pioneers” who came to Minnesota in the hope of a better life for themselves and their families.