

Renville County in the U.S. – Dakota War

Curtis Dahlin, August 2014

- In 1862, the Dakota lived on their reservation on the south side of the Minnesota River.
- The settlers in Renville County all lived within three miles of the Minnesota River. Some had arrived in the spring and summer of 1862. They were a young people, with many adults being in their 20s and 30s, with correspondingly young children.
- The Dakota were unhappy with their situation for a variety of reasons, and decided to go to war against the whites, attacking the Lower Sioux Agency early on Aug. 18, 1862. Then, they quickly moved to cross the Minnesota River and attacked settlers in Renville County.
- Small Dakota raiding parties, often numbering from 4 to 12, attacked settlers in their homes or while they were trying to escape. Most of the settlers were unarmed and unable to defend themselves. Men, women and children were all considered to be fair game for the Dakota, and they fought their traditional enemies, the Ojibway, in the same manner.
- Those settlers who heard word of the attacks quickly moved to flee their homes, with all of them heading toward Ft. Ridgely, which was 13 miles from Morton. Many took with them what they could, including clothing, food, some utensils and money. Many hitched oxen to their wagons. Oxen were very slow moving, which made the settlers vulnerable to the Dakota catching up to them.
- In some cases, the Dakota and the settlers they were attacking knew each other, as the Dakota would regularly leave their reservation to go into the area where the settlers lived. Sometimes the Dakota hunted game or fished, and other times asked the settlers for food or water. Generally, relations between the two people were good, so the settlers were shocked when the Dakota arrived on Aug. 18 with the intention of killing them.
- The Dakota's attacks were devastating, with about 150 settlers killed and another 70 – women and children – being taken captive. In contrast, very few or possibly no Dakota were killed while attacking the settlers in Renville County. The captives were freed at Camp Release, near present-day Montevideo, on Sept. 26, 1862. Not all Dakota engaged in the war, and in late Sept., friendly Dakota and mixed-bloods took custody of the captives, protected them and turned them over to Col. Henry Sibley and his force at Camp Release. Renville County had more killed and more captured than any other county in the state.
- Most of the attacks on settlers in Renville County took place on Aug. 18, with a few on Aug. 19. By the end of Aug. 19, nearly all of the surviving settlers had fled the area, so there were no more settlers left to kill or capture.

- Most of the victims were buried where they were killed by strangers, many by the Joseph R. Brown Burial Party in late Aug. and early Sept., 1862. The graves may have initially had crude wooden markers indicating a burial, but they soon disappeared. Very few Renville County victims were buried in cemeteries. So today, there are nearly 150 graves at unknown locations. It is sacred ground.
- The experience was so traumatic for the settlers that most of them did not return to their homes afterward. This was unlike other areas such as Brown County.
- Statewide, 650 were killed by the Dakota. Of these, 400 were killed within 3 miles of the Minnesota River. Of the 650, about 400 lie in unmarked graves.