

**RENVILLE COUNTY DEDICATION CEREMONY -- AUGUST 23**  
**Luncheon Talk**

My name is Dan Munson, and I've written a book about a Minnesota family and four of their children -- the Kochendorfer children, ages 11-, 9-, 7- and 5-years of age at the time -- who lived alongside Middle Creek in August 1862 and who escaped the attacks and, after watching their parents and younger sister killed, then made it 25 miles to Fort Ridgely, and then went on to live very admirable lives. Their descendants now live throughout the country. Quite a number of them are here today. I'm not one of those descendants (I came upon their family name and their story quite by accident), but it's a good story, and I'll be glad to sell you a copy of the book I've written about them. Today, however, I would like to talk about all the folks who were farming alongside the Kochendorfers in the Minnesota River valley those 152 years ago.

That was along time ago: 1862. It's important to consider just how long ago it was, and how different the world was then, and how different were the prospects of each of those folks living here back then.

It had been only sixty years before that a somewhat obscure English pastor named Thomas Malthus had published a pamphlet entitled "Essay on the Principle of Population." Malthus fancied himself a bit of a mathematician, and he set out to make a mathematical argument. He stated in his pamphlet that human populations in a world of plenty would tend to increase in numbers in a geometrical, or "exponential" manner: 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, etc. He argued that the food supply, however, would only tend to grow in an "arithmetical manner: 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, etc. The conclusion he drew from this was obvious: humans would tend to find themselves short of food, because the food supply would always grow more slowly than the mouths it would have to feed.

Here was a happy thought! Humans will tend to live on the verge of starvation. Have a nice day! Ever since that time, theories that are very pessimistic concerning the prospects for humanity have been labeled "Malthusian," in tribute to that great demographic pessimist, Thomas Malthus.

When Malthus published his pamphlet in around the year 1800, it was difficult to show that he was clearly wrong. Humans had been routinely on the verge of starvation, and even in a place with as much good farmland as England, hunger and starvation were not unknown. There was a sense in which Malthus appeared to be correctly diagnosing a problem, and his pamphlet was very popular. All the well-educated people read it. In one of her letters, the great English novelist Jane Austen -- the woman who gave us "Pride and Prejudice" and "Mansfield Park" -- commented that in her literary circle "everyone was reading 'the pamphlet'."

Thomas Malthus is now a largely forgotten figure to all but college Humanities students. He had both good and bad luck in the timing of the publication of his pamphlet. Good luck in the sense that he seemed to correctly diagnose much of the plight of humanity up

to that time. Bad luck in that he published at the dawn of the century that would change everything: the 19th.

The 19th century was the century that took all the scientific knowledge that had been slowly growing and percolating in the 17th and 18th centuries and suddenly extended it into the lives of the ordinary citizen: steam power, electricity, the railroad, the automobile, the airplane (very early in the twentieth century, actually).

The "progress" set powerful gears in motion, and in those gears certain people and their institutions got caught. Here in the Minnesota River valley the Native American and their way of life got caught in those gears.

Superior farming techniques were developed in Western Europe, and steam power allowed that farm produce to be shipped quickly to wherever it was needed. Governments suddenly realized that all these new modes of transportation made it possible to put far-flung farmlands into production, and to transport that farm produce hundreds of miles from where it was grown to where it was wanted.

That is what those immigrant farmers were doing down here in this Minnesota River valley in 1862. They were here, most of them, because of the Homestead Act that was signed by President Lincoln on May 20th of that year. Lincoln and the Republicans were "progressives" in the sense that they championed this new technological future of steam power, and railroads, and spreading farmland and cash crops far and wide. Those Minnesota River Valley farmers of 1862 knew that here in this rich soil underneath our feet they could generate "bounty" -- food in amounts far greater than that required for their own needs -- and get it to markets hundred of miles away, something that even fifty years before would have been impossible.

Progress, material progress, was a much more intoxicating concept then than it is perhaps nowadays when we have so much. We're occasionally bored, perhaps even jaded, by the flood of products and options we have today. I mean, do we really need another internet search engine? Or another drug to combat arthritis pain? Or a faster, quicker car engine (when there is a clearly posted speed limit and the traffic often comes to a crawl)? It is important to try to remember what "progress" meant then, not what it means now. For them, progress was not another internet search engine -- it was indoor plumbing! For them, progress wasn't a new turbo-charged engine (slightly better than last year's model), but a railroad that could allow them to travel overland without bouncing up and down in wagons being pulled very slowly by work horses! (The story of the Kochendorfers involves a mother's letter that describes the trek the family made from central Illinois to St. Paul in 1857 by covered wagon. It was not easy!)

In the process, they and others like them throughout the world were taking that clever little pamphlet of Thomas Malthus' with all its clever arithmetical reasoning and politely throwing it in the trash can!! (Intellectually speaking, of course. They had too much respect for the printed word to actually throw it away!) Their descendants can be proud of the effort they were making.

If I could, I would like to say a word or two about the Kochendorfers and the book I've written about them. The Kochendorfers were like so many others living here back in August 1862, with one small but very important exception. Mother Catherine Kochendorfer was a dedicated letter writer. Some others here in August 1862 undoubtedly wrote lots of letters, but Catherine's descendants can prove it, because the folks who received some of her letters saved them. (Those same people were often told in those letters that they should sit right down and write a good long letter back to Catherine.) Catherine liked writing `em, and Catherine liked getting `em.

Her sister Rosina Ebert back in Illinois saved quite a few of the letters she got from Catherine. (Catherine Kochendorfer's first letter written from here in Renville County to her sister back in Illinois is dated May 21st, the day after President Lincoln signed the Homestead Act.) Those letters are very interesting, and in those letters we hear a little of the loneliness that must have been a part of pioneer life. We also learn all about that family, the Kochendorfer family, that lived alongside Middle Creek on August 18th, 1862. There were five Kochendorfer children: ages 11-, 9-, 7-, 5-, and 3-years of age. Seven people in all. Like I mentioned, four of the children made it to Fort Ridgely. (At intervals, the oldest son carried his 5-year old sister, probably on his back, when she could walk no more.) They survived the two attacks on the Fort, and then were sent from Fort Ridgely back to St. Paul around the 1st of September.

Consider those four children stepping ashore onto the St. Paul landing in September 1862, following the death of their parents and younger sister. Those four children were about as vulnerable as it is possible to be. The three girls were less than ten years old, and their nearest relatives, their only relatives in all of North America, are a single family farming near Peoria, Illinois – hundreds of miles away. They are orphans living in the center of a large continent, a continent on which they have only one set of relatives -- such a thing is actually quite impossible in human history up to that point: to be so young, and to have so few relatives on the same continent on which you are living, the only continent on which you have ever lived! All their other relatives were back in Germany, people the children did not know at all. (These four children were not unique here in the Minnesota River Valley in September 1862, of course. I'm making the point that the situation faced by the remaining adults throughout this area back in 1862 was in some ways unique in human history.)

Not only did those four Kochendorfer children survive – they thrived. There is no other way to put it. The church their parents had joined on arriving in Minnesota in 1857, the St. Paul Evangelical Church community, found homes for them. The children went on to have families of their own - boy did they ever! (Between the four of them, they had 26 children.) The descendants of those four very vulnerable orphans who stepped onto the St. Paul landing in September 1862 with nothing but the clothes on their back now number over one thousand. This story, the Kochendorfer story, is a tribute to the resilience and good sense and charity -- and tolerance -- of those early Minnesotans.