

Survival at Crow Creek, 1863–1866

COLETTE A. HYMAN

In September 1865 a congressional commission investigating conditions on Indian reservations visited Fort Randall and the Crow Creek Reservation, on the Missouri River in Dakota Territory. The testimonies of soldiers, missionaries, and Dakota leaders about life at Crow Creek paint a picture of starvation, disease, and

Colette Hyman, professor of history at Winona State University, has been studying Dakota history and language since 2002. She is working on a book tentatively titled Dakota Women in Exile.

dehumanization. One image that recurs in several accounts depicts what came to be known as “cottonwood soup.” Dakota leader Passing-Hail told the commission that reservation officials “built a box and put the beef in it and steamed it and made soup; they put salt and pepper in it, and that is the reason these hills about here are filled with children’s graves; it seemed as though they wanted to kill us.” Samuel C. Haynes, an army surgeon posted at Fort Randall, testified, “A large vat was constructed, of cottonwood lumber, about six feet square and six feet deep, in connexion with the steam saw-mill, with a pipe leading from the boiler into the vat.” Into this



vat, reservation personnel threw the beef, entrails, some beans, flour, and pork that made up the cottonwood soup. Indian women brought buckets to be filled and then carried them back to their families; some camped close to the vat, while others lived as far as four miles away.¹

The story of this cottonwood soup, sometimes referred to as “greenwood soup,” appears in several other contemporary accounts and lies at the heart of Dakota people’s retelling of the Crow Creek experience today. In both modern and historical narratives, this substance embodies both the brutal conditions of Dakota existence on that reservation and the ruthless policies of U.S. military and civilian officials that structured those conditions.

The cottonwood soup story also raises questions about the meaning of survival under colonization. Genocidal attacks on the Dakota placed survivors in untenable situations where remaining alive meant more suffering and pain—for oneself and one’s family. Certainly, Dakota women at Crow Creek did all they could to overcome illness, death, rotten and insufficient food rations, and humiliation at the hands of soldiers and other white men. They struggled heroically to sustain their children and elders while their men remained imprisoned at Davenport, Iowa, in retaliation for their participation in the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862. Many at Crow Creek did not survive; those who did endured horrifying physical conditions as well as the grief of losing family members and the anxiety of losing their homelands and the lifeways that had sustained them physically and spiritually for generations.

The Crow Creek exile occupies a central place in the history of the Dakota nation.

The U.S.-Dakota War, like all wars, posed significant challenges to women as providers of food and other survival necessities, but the subsequent “ethnic cleansing” of southern Minnesota and the exile to Crow Creek posed particular challenges to Dakota women. It left a large group of them to survive largely on their own, without the assistance of able-bodied men. For three long years, Dakota women, whose culture emphasized the complementary contributions of women and men to community

FACING PAGE: Crow Creek Reservation as it looked in the 1880s or 1890s, on the east bank of the Missouri River in present-day central South Dakota. RIGHT: Dakota in the Fort Snelling prison compound.

subsistence, were forced to sustain themselves, their children, and their elders without benefit of the labor or companionship of fathers, brothers, husbands, or adult sons.

The Crow Creek exile occupies a central place in the history of the Dakota nation. Individuals frequently trace their families back to their experiences at Crow Creek, and tribal histories give a central place to the war and its aftermath: the hanging of 38 Dakota warriors at Mankato, the imprisonment of the remaining adult men at Davenport, and the westward deportation of the women, children, and elders.

The legacies of the removal to Crow Creek remain very present for the Dakota people to this day. Dakota communities remain scattered across three states and two Canadian provinces. Consequently, native speakers of the Dakota language constitute a very small and elderly group, and much of the traditional knowledge about physical and spiritual survival has been lost. While almost all of these communities are scarred by exceptionally high rates of poverty, illness, substance abuse, and suicide, Crow Creek Reservation today holds the distinction of occupying the poorest county in the United States.²

Because of the central place of the Crow Creek internment in Dakota history and its ongoing consequences, the years at Crow Creek warrant close and careful study. In addition, this chapter of Dakota history also explains a great deal about how loss of land base, economic autonomy, and cultural self-determination affected Dakota



women, specifically, and Native women more generally. Native women throughout the U.S. have faced removal from tribal lands, close supervision by soldiers and other agents of the federal government, the elimination of Native men's traditional subsistence and political roles, and the presence of whites using Christianity to erase tribal cultures. The study of the Dakota women's experiences at Crow Creek helps us understand the challenges facing Native women and the different ways in which they have met those challenges. Understanding Dakota women's lives at Crow Creek also provides insight into what survival might mean for women whose nations have been subjected to genocidal policies and actions.³

The cottonwood soup story provides a useful point of entry into the experiences of the Dakota at Crow Creek because it represents the near-starvation state of dependence in which white officials placed the Dakota and the barrenness of the environment that could provide only green wood for fuel and construction. Cottonwood soup also speaks of the strenuous physical efforts that the women at Crow Creek made and the assaults on their dignity that they had to endure in order to keep themselves and their families alive. Keeping alive through the provision and consumption of deplorable substances, however, also resulted in continued exposure to the same degrading circumstances. While conditions at Crow Creek might have been extreme, they suggest nonetheless more general conclusions about the experience of colonization for Native women in North America and about the implications and complexity of survival under colonization.



Camp Release, where Dakota warriors surrendered and were tried before a military commission

The 1862 war brought devastation to communities already transformed by removal from customary lands and resettlement on a reservation. The lands along the southwest edge of the Great Lakes and the upper Mississippi River valley are the birthplace and homeland of the Dakota people. Archaeological and historical evidence dating back to the fourteenth century indicates that, on those lands, the Dakota subsisted during the summer from women's gathering and small-scale horticulture and during the winter from men's hunting and women's preparation of meat and other parts of the animals. Early contact with Europeans, starting in the seventeenth century, left these subsistence patterns largely unchanged, as the Dakota participated as critical partners in the fur-trade economy. As game became scarcer and European American farmers more abundant in Dakota homelands, however, the Dakota's semi-nomadic lifeways came under increasing threat. In 1851 these pressures, combined with continuing entreaties from the U.S. government, persuaded the Dakota to cede their lands in exchange for a reservation and annuity payments.⁴

Life for the Dakota became increasingly difficult in the 1850s.

In the years between the establishment of the reservation along the Minnesota River in 1853 and the war and subsequent exile, some Dakota began to adapt to European American and Christian ways of farming, dressing, and living. For most, however, the reservation was only a seasonal home. This was especially true for the Mdewakantunwan, who, of the four Dakota peoples placed on reservations, had been moved the farthest from the lands that had sustained them and their ancestors for generations. Many returned to the Mississippi River bottom and bluff lands to hunt in the winter and to fish and gather plants and fruits during the summer, remaining on the reservation in the spring to plant small crops of corn, beans, and squash, and in the fall to harvest them.

Life for the Dakota became increasingly difficult in the 1850s. The growing presence of European American settlers establishing farms and pastures reduced the habitats of plants and animals that the Dakota required for survival and also reduced access to the forests and streams that had sustained them. Meanwhile, on the reservation, conditions deteriorated. The farms established by Indian agents failed to produce enough to support

reservation populations, and annuity payments were frequently delayed and often seized by Indian traders claiming payment for credit extended to their Dakota customers. In the summer of 1862 a severe drought accentuated these conditions, as did the Civil War, which further delayed annuity payments and distribution of needed food supplies. In late August, driven by starvation conditions and anger at traders with warehouses full of grain, Dakota warriors went to war against the United States. After successes, they were rapidly defeated by the U.S. army, with the energetic support of white Minnesotans.⁵

By October many Dakota had fled toward the plains to seek refuge among other Native peoples. Approximately 2,200 Dakota surrendered to Col. Henry H. Sibley at Camp Release in western Minnesota. The warriors were disarmed and tried before a military commission—the first time that this procedure was used against Native peoples in the United States. Three hundred and three Dakota warriors, the vast majority of those tried, received the death sentence, after “trials” that lasted little more than a few minutes. The army moved the warriors to Mankato, where 38 were hanged on December 26, after President Lincoln reviewed and shortened the list of the condemned. The remaining warriors were kept in chains at Mankato until May, when they were removed to Camp

McClellan in Davenport, where they would remain imprisoned for three years.⁶

Before the hangings, in November 1862, the U.S. army forcibly marched the Dakota women, children, and elders who had surrendered from the Lower Sioux Agency, near Morton, to Fort Snelling on the Mississippi. In the wind and cold, under the taunts and violence of white men and women in towns along the way, this group of Dakota walked the 150 miles to the fort. They remained imprisoned there in a disease-ridden enclosure throughout the winter, subsisting on rations of crackers, flour, and salt pork. Many did not survive this imprisonment. While a December 2 military census counted 1,601 Dakota prisoners at Fort Snelling, only 1,318 remained alive in May 1863, when the federal government removed them from Minnesota.⁷

Of the 1,601 Dakota counted that December, 133 were Wahpekute; 295 were Sissetunwan and Wahpetunwan, called Upper Sioux for their placement upstream on the Minnesota River reservation; and 122 were “half-breeds” without tribal affiliation. The remaining 1,051 were Mde-wakantunwan. Many of the Upper Sioux had not fought against the U.S. but fled to the western plains nonetheless. The Wahpekute who escaped internment also fled westward but turned north as well, establishing Dakota communities in Canada.⁸

Tipis of the captive Dakota in a fenced enclosure on the Minnesota River just below Fort Snelling, 1862–63



Meanwhile, in Washington, lawmakers were deciding the fate of the Indians remaining in southern Minnesota. On February 16, 1863, Congress enacted legislation that abrogated all treaties with the four bands of Dakota, dissolved their reservation, and terminated all other treaty rights. On March 3 Congress passed a law that, among other things, called on the president to establish a reservation for the Dakota beyond the limits of white settlement. Responding to white settlers' fears of all Indians living close to their towns and farms, Congress also voted to remove the Winnebago, who had been removed to a reservation southwest of Mankato just a few years earlier.⁹

The Office of Indian Affairs charged the head of its Northern Superintendency, which included Minnesota, with finding a new location for the Dakota along the Missouri River, as far as possible from both white settlers and other Indians. In April 1863 Superintendent Clark W. Thompson left Minnesota to seek a suitable location for a new reservation; on May 28, he wrote to Commissioner of Indian Affairs William Dole that he had selected a site along the mouth of the Crow Creek. Thompson was still staking out reservation boundaries when more than 1,000 Dakota arrived two days later. Close to 2,000 Winnebago (or Ho-Chunk) arrived three weeks after that, on June 24.¹⁰ Little was in place to provide for the dispossessed Indians, who, after a winter in a crowded, disease-ridden enclosure with inadequate rations and medical care, had found themselves on a terrifying trip to an unknown destination.

The journey began at Fort Snelling. Of the 1,318 Dakota departed from the fort in May 1863, only 176 were adult men; 536 were women and 606, children. U.S. soldiers herded them onto two steamboats; one went as far as Hannibal, Missouri, where federal officials ordered its passengers into freight cars, 60 to a car, for the trip across Missouri to St. Joseph. The Dakota on the second boat traveled to St. Louis, where they boarded the *Florence*. That vessel then made its way up the Missouri to St. Joseph, where the two groups found themselves reunited—and packed even more tightly on the *Florence* for the remaining 100 miles of the hellish journey. When the boat departed St. Joseph, “We all crowded in—I can’t tell where—some around behind the wheel-house—some between the pumps some under the boilers, some on the foredeck but most up on the hurricane roof,” wrote John P. Williamson, a missionary who traveled with the Dakota to Crow Creek. In a letter to his mother, he wrote

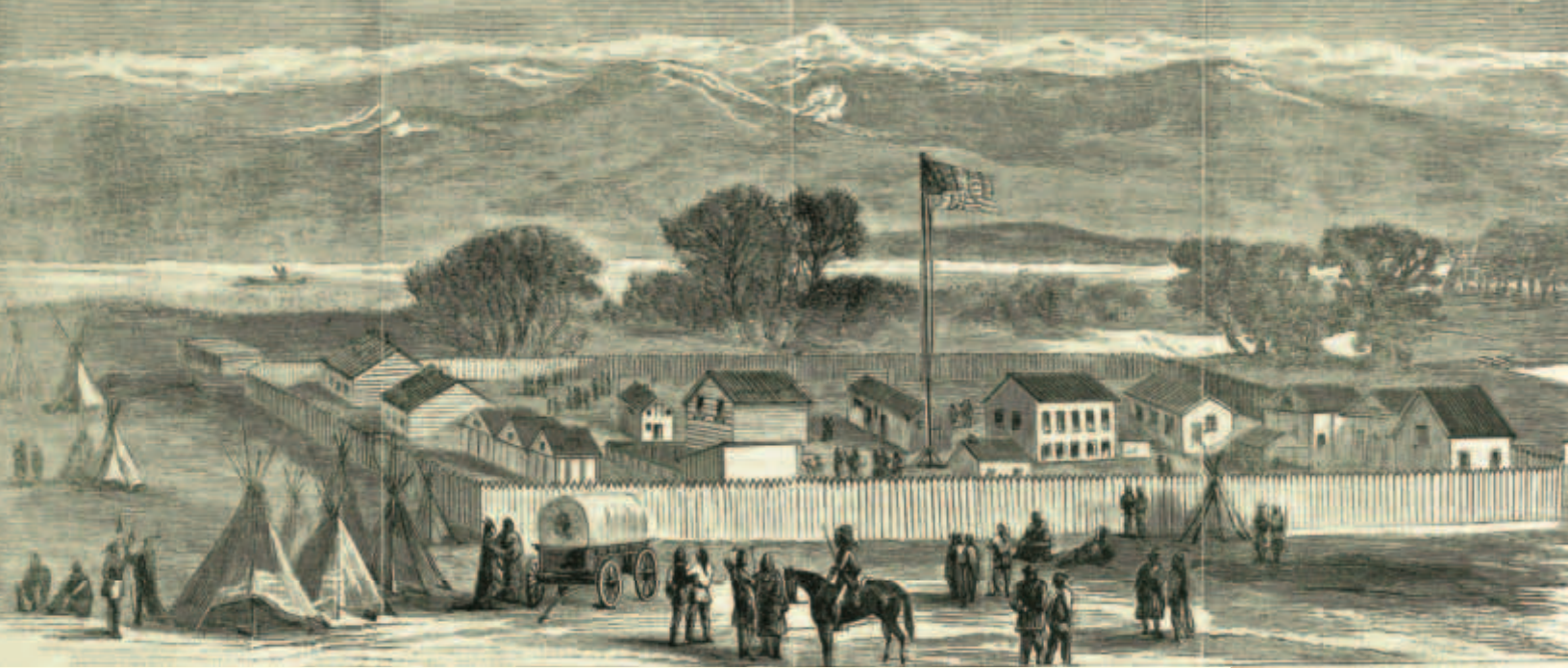
that the Indians were “chained two and two . . . crowded like slaves” on the Middle Passage between Africa and America.¹¹

The Dakota remained imprisoned on the *Florence* for another 12 days. The only food available was “hard bread and mess pork that was not cooked,” and the muddy river provided the only water. “And if one gets right low,” wrote Williamson in another letter, there was not much chance of recovery, “with nothing to eat but fat pork and hard bread.” The prisoners even ate some of the pork raw, because they could only cook it at night when the boat stopped. In still another letter, Williamson noted that there was neither an interpreter nor a doctor on board. Because of near-drought conditions, the human freight, already weakened by hunger and illness, had to walk along the low-water spots on several occasions, carrying their meager baggage.¹²

As William Beane, the descendant of a survivor, notes, the trip led to “hundreds of deaths that started soon after the journey [began],” and the Dakota, prevented from giving their dead the customary burials, were forced to leave them behind in makeshift burial grounds. On



Little Crow's wife and two children at the Fort Snelling prison compound



“Dacotah Territory—Fort Thompson, on the Upper Missouri River, Built for the Sioux and Winnebago Agency,” from a sketch by John Nairn, Harper’s Weekly, October 28, 1865

May 9 Williamson wrote that a Dakota child had died the day before and “was buried last night at a wood yard.” By May 25 he reported in another letter that “there have been thirteen deaths, one man, three women, and nine children, and there are more very sick.”¹³ The deaths continued well after the *Florence* reached its destination. When Williamson described the trip for the congressional commission in 1865, he testified:

For six weeks after they arrived at Crow Creek they died at the average rate of three or four a day. In that time, one hundred and fifty died, and during the first six months two hundred of them died, and I think that at least one hundred of them died on account of the bad treatment they received after they left Fort Snelling.¹⁴

As Beane remarked recently, “It must have been horrendous to make a life in strange surroundings while daily mourning for the many that continued to die.”¹⁵

The surroundings in which the Dakota found themselves when they arrived at their destination on May 30, 1863, could not have offered much comfort to a grieving people. In his report to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Thompson noted that the site of the new reservation had “good soil, good timber and plenty of water” but “on the hills the grass is already dried up.” In any case, the departure of the boats from Minnesota had left him little time to find a better site. As a result, the U.S. government relocated a people whose culture and way of

life depended upon woodland lakes, rivers, and streams to a semi-arid environment and climate ill-suited to the subsistence skills and strategies that had sustained them along the Mississippi and its tributaries. Nor was the new reservation suitable to the agricultural subsistence that missionaries and Indian agents had attempted to inculcate in the Dakota on the Minnesota River reservation.¹⁶

During that first summer, Thompson hired white men to establish farms, but he fully expected that the Indians would take over in short order and produce their own subsistence.

Nevertheless, the superintendent worked to create an orderly settlement consisting of two Indian agencies (one for the Dakota and one for the Ho-Chunk) and a number of “Indian” farms. Thompson established adjoining reservations for the two peoples and situated the stockade protecting himself, his staff, and his supplies astride the line separating the two. This 1,600-foot barricade, enclosing a 400-square-foot area, was made up of 15-foot-tall posts, which no doubt took up most of the available timber. He carefully mapped out farms for his Dakota and Winnebago wards, each of which was “forty rods wide and [ran] from the timber to the bluff, giving each Indian located a portion of timber, hay land . . . and water at the river.”¹⁷ During that first summer, Thompson

hired white men to establish these farms, but he fully expected that the Indians would take over in short order and produce their own subsistence. As a result, he never made plans to provide food for the Indians removed from Minnesota, and he later blamed their starvation on their laziness and unwillingness to work the land.

The cattle destined to feed the Dakota and Ho-Chunk were emaciated, and the flour and other supplies had begun to rot.

Almost as soon as the Dakota arrived at Crow Creek, officials had to implement severe rationing and, even with additional provisions contributed by the army, it quickly became clear that existing supplies were inadequate. These conditions were further exacerbated by venal and partisan decisions. According to historian William Lass, various political considerations delayed until August Superintendent Thompson's departure for Washington to secure provisions and additional assistance, and then delayed the arrival of much-needed supplies. Instead of securing the necessary provisions from Sioux City, 150 miles downstream on the Missouri, Thompson persuaded the Office of Indian Affairs to award the contract to his political ally James Hubbell, an Indian trader in Mankato. As a result, supplies had to travel 300 miles overland, taking more than six weeks to reach Crow Creek Reservation. Arriving on December 2, 1863, the cattle destined to feed the Dakota and Ho-Chunk were emaciated, and the flour and other supplies had begun to rot. Consequently, rations increased only slightly and were soon reduced again. By mid-January 1864, officials at Crow Creek were building the vat that would contain the cottonwood soup.¹⁸

With deep cold settling over the northern plains, Indian agent St. Andre D. Balcombe, who had been assigned to Crow Creek in the summer of 1863, ordered agency employees to slaughter the cattle and spread out the carcasses to freeze. Then, the dead animals were stacked up in a barn and covered with sawdust for preservation, since there was no salt to cure the meat. When agency personnel went to retrieve the meat in the spring, it was "alive with worms and the stench about it was intolerable," according to missionary Edward R. Pond, who was at Crow Creek with the Dakota.¹⁹

In the summer of 1864 Balcombe attempted to establish farms on the land prepared for that purpose the previ-

ous summer, hiring white farmers to put in crops. Their efforts were no more successful than the belated efforts of 1863: "The drought in the forepart of the growing season, and the grasshoppers in the latter, caused an entire failure to produce crops—literally nothing was harvested," he reported. As a result, a second supply expedition was initiated in the fall of 1864, with the same outcome of delayed, insufficient, and rotting food as the first.²⁰ Hunger and illness continued to plague the Dakota and the few Winnebago remaining at Crow Creek through the winter of 1865.



Indian agent St. Andre D. Balcombe of Winona, about 1858 when he served in the first Minnesota state legislature

Conditions on the reservation improved somewhat in the spring and summer of 1865 due to several factors, including weather more favorable to growing crops, a change in administration, the establishment of a separate Ho-Chunk reservation downriver, and the arrival of Dakota women and men who had been held as prisoners at Davenport. In August 1865 John Williamson wrote to his father, "The season has been very different from the past two. There have not been the continued rains I have seen in other countries, but we have had moderate showers every week or ten days all summer." James M. Stone, who replaced Balcombe in June 1865, reported that the grasshoppers and other bugs had devastated the potato crop, but "the corn is ripening fast, and will undoubtedly be a good crop."²¹

Along with better weather and crops, recent administrative changes would have positively affected the Da-

kota, according to historian Roy W. Meyer. First, Agent Stone appeared to be more sensitive to the needs of the Indians under his charge than his predecessor. Second, the Crow Creek Agency was transferred from the Northern Superintendency, headquartered in St. Paul, to the Dakota Superintendency, much closer in Yankton. The new superintendent, Newton Edmunds, supplied Crow Creek from nearby sources, ensuring more rapid delivery and better condition of provisions when they arrived for distribution.²²

In addition, the establishment of the Winnebago Agency and a separate reservation for the Ho-Chunk lessened competition for scarce resources and eliminated a source of tension. Crow Creek was the third new place in as many decades to which the federal government had moved the Ho-Chunk. In Minnesota, they had established successful farms and had rejected entreaties from the Dakota to join the warfare in 1862. After the war, they were forced to leave behind crops, homes, and livestock because, as Ho-Chunk leader Little Hill put it, “another tribe of Indians committed depredations against whites.”²³

The very first summer at Crow Creek, Ho-Chunk men began making canoes out of cottonwood logs and traveling down the Missouri River to take refuge among the Omaha. By the following summer, the majority of Ho-Chunk had left Crow Creek, and a delegation of their leaders initiated negotiations with the Omaha tribe to acquire the northern part of their reservation. In 1865 the



Ho-Chunk leader Little Hill, 1860s

federal government made this purchase and established a new reservation for the Ho-Chunk.²⁴ No longer were the Dakota living side-by-side with people who blamed them for their losses.

Such modest improvements, however, did little to mitigate the tremendous burden that internment at Crow Creek imposed on Dakota women, who still faced the requirements of daily life—their own and those of the young, the old, and the disabled—under physically and emotionally oppressive conditions. The inadequate nourishment, nonexistent medical care, and insufficient supplies provided by their captors required Dakota women to expend significant amounts of energy to keep themselves and their families alive. These women persisted in their efforts at survival, bearing the weight of grieving for their losses while working to feed, clothe, and heal members of their community.

The demands of survival required the women at Crow Creek to take advantage of every possible opportunity to procure necessities, cash, food, and medicines. They at first turned to the Ho-Chunk, who had more men at Crow Creek than the Dakota, and they made use of the opportunities and resources proffered by the white men whose presence shaped and constrained their day-to-day existence. In addition, they drew on the skills and knowledge that they brought with them from their Minnesota homelands.

In their efforts to feed their families, Dakota women also turned to white settlers living nearby.

Despite resentment about being punished for actions of Dakota warriors, some Ho-Chunk took Dakota women into their families and shared their more abundant material resources. Because the Ho-Chunk at Crow Creek all received “more than one blanket a piece,” some Dakota women chose “to marry a Hotanka and get a new suit of clothes,” Williamson wrote to a fellow missionary, using the Dakota name for the people.²⁵ When the Ho-Chunk left Crow Creek, however, the Dakota lost whatever material and emotional contributions they had been able to make.

In their efforts to feed their families, Dakota women also turned to white settlers living nearby. Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve’s great-great-grandmother, Maggie, was

among those removed to Crow Creek. In *Completing the Circle*, her book about her family's history, Sneve notes:

Maggie and other young women labored so that their children and older relatives would survive. They cut and hauled wood to the saw mills, to the boatyard to feed the boilers of the steamships, and to the stoves of the white settlers in the area, for whom they also planted and harvested corn. They cooked and cleaned in the soldiers' mess [and] did their laundry.²⁶

Jeanette Weston, whose mother was a little girl when the U.S. government removed her family to Crow Creek, told an interviewer in 1971, "My mother's mother, she cooked for the Army there, soldiers there. There was 20 women working for them, you know. They cooked and everything."²⁷

Though depleted by hunger, illness, and grief, Dakota women endured heavy physical labor to earn cash to acquire food and clothing, but they also worked in different ways to produce food themselves. They worked the fields established by Superintendent Thompson, and when drought, heat, grasshoppers, and the unsuitability of the soil overwhelmed their efforts, they returned to more familiar ways of producing food: they took part in buffalo hunts and gathered edible plants. Although wanting to

"civilize" the Dakota by moving them away from traditional modes of subsistence, federal officials realized very quickly that food supplies were insufficient to keep their wards alive. As early as November 1863, they distributed rifles to the small number of adult men so that they might hunt buffalo.²⁸ The women participated in these hunts much as they had in their homelands, although without the benefit of all the men, supplies, equipment, or physical health and stamina of previous successful expeditions.

David Faribault, a mixed-blood trader married to a Dakota woman, participated in the first hunt. He testified before the congressional investigating committee that in February 1864 "about 500" Dakota set out with only one pony, which belonged to the missionary John Williamson. "They were compelled to pack the wood on their backs as far as the James River, about 60 miles," he told committee members. "One aged woman became exhausted, and they had to leave her about forty miles out. They had no provisions to leave with her, and she has never been seen since."²⁹

One vital element of survival at Crow Creek was Dakota women's skills in preparing meat and hides; another was their knowledge of nutritional and medicinal plants.

The other women on that expedition and on subsequent ones continued to provide the customary essential labor. Winifred Barton, Williamson's daughter and biographer, recounted the tasks that her father had observed in the February 1864 hunt. When the hunters returned to their camps with game, in the evening, "The women would go out, get their share of the meat, which was equitably divided. Then while they prepared it the men rested and smoked." The women also prepared the skins, which would later be used to make clothing, tents, and bedding, "all of which they were needing badly."³⁰ The death of the elderly woman, the relatively small number of men, and other consequences of undertaking buffalo hunts with inadequate equipment and supplies do not appear in Barton's lyrical description.

While insufficient resources made buffalo hunts dangerous, heat, drought, and grasshoppers severely limited harvests of fruits, roots, and leaves. One vital element



Dakota women winnowing wheat at the Upper Agency in Minnesota, shortly before the 1862 war

of survival at Crow Creek was Dakota women's skills in preparing meat and hides; another was their knowledge of nutritional and medicinal plants. Although the pervasive drought made for limited resources, the women were able to harvest fruits to dry for later use as they, their mothers, and grandmothers had done for generations in Minnesota. According to missionary Williamson, the women "had pretty plenty of berries for a little while," as well as cherries and huckleberries, to supplement meager food rations and failed crops. In an earlier letter to fellow missionary Stephen R. Riggs, he noted that the Dakota could not live on the rations provided by the Indian agency if they did not also pick "a few roots and every thing eatable."³¹



Missionary John P. Williamson (center), about 1880, probably at Oahe Mission, also on the Missouri River in South Dakota

What counted as "eatable" to these women, like cottonwood soup, reflects the horror of their conditions: they collected "a little corn from the cavalry horses that passed through," Williamson wrote to Riggs. Rod Steiner, a descendant of these women, is more explicit: "Women would have to sift through horse manure to find enough grain to make soup."³² Whether the corn had spilled from feedbags or was undigested kernels, the fact remains that these women endured no end of backbreaking and debasing labor in order to feed their families.

In addition, they gathered medicinal plants to help them keep their families alive in the face of pervasive disease. Ida Allen, whose grandmother survived the intern-

ment at Crow Creek, told an interviewer in 1971, "There were no doctors, and the Indians did the best they could with their Indian medicine." There is no direct information on what they gathered, but in recent interviews Hester Fleury, a lifelong resident of the Crow Creek Reservation, and Bernice Blakney, of the Santee Reservation in Nebraska, both recalled their grandmothers and other women using plants to help family and community members recover from various ailments. Fleury and Blakney still harvested plants like *sinkpetawote* (sweet flag or "muskrat food"), used as a laxative, and *wazusteca* (strawberry), for its fruit and its leaves, which were prepared as an infusion to heal a variety of ailments. Both of these plants also grew in their ancestors' Minnesota homelands.³³ If women were still harvesting medicinal plants in the early decades of the twentieth century, it is most likely that their mothers and grandmothers had gathered them while in captivity at Crow Creek in the 1860s.

Still, the harshness of life at Crow Creek was all-pervasive. The extreme gender imbalance persisted, as did the deaths and the emotional and physical toll that they took on survivors. When he became Indian agent in the summer of 1865, James Stone found "one thousand and forty-three Indians belonging to this agency; of that number over nine hundred were women and children." According to Meyer, "The death rate must have remained high even after the first six months, when casualties were heaviest," as the Dakota had no physician to ameliorate the worst of their health conditions until after their removal to Nebraska in 1866. Mae Eastman, a granddaughter of Crow Creek survivors, recalled learning that "almost every day, a funeral procession left the camp for the cemetery on the hill outside."³⁴

The emotional burden weighed heavily on the Dakota women at Crow Creek, adding to the physical struggle of survival. The obituary of one, who lived another 50 years after the removal to Nebraska, speaks clearly of the many different kinds of burdens these women carried. Pazahiyawin, *She Shall Radiate In Her Path Like The Sun*, was born in Minnesota in 1839. She was 24 when she experienced the traumatic journey to Crow Creek. Although her husband had not participated in the warfare, he was taken from his family and imprisoned among the Dakota men at Davenport for three years. The night he was taken prisoner, Pazahiyawin gave birth to her fourth child. Throughout the years at Crow Creek, she worked hard to provide for her children and others, her hard work

heightened by the absence of her husband. According to her obituary, she “would take her share of the burden of supplying the camp with food, notwithstanding the heart sorrow because of not expecting to see her husband again, the burden of carrying one child all the time, and the care of the others and the old mother.”³⁵

While coping with the arduousness of food gathering and other physical labor, disease, death, and “heart sorrow,” the Dakota women at Crow Creek also faced sexual assault, the aspect of internment that causes the most anger and pain in their descendants. Rod Steiner still seethes when discussing the sexual violation of his grandmothers and other women: “The soldiers raped [the women] and the women were called filthy hags,” he said in a speech in June 2002, commemorating the Dakota women and children who died at Crow Creek.³⁶

The journal kept by Colonel Robert W. Furnas from 1864 to 1866 provides evidence from a contemporary observer of the sexual abuse at Crow Creek, but it also explains the pervasiveness of the attitudes that allowed it to occur. Because Furnas was the commander of the Second Nebraska Volunteer Cavalry, his journal constitutes an official account of the activity of regiment. In writing about his unit’s stop at Crow Creek, he noted that “the Isantee Squaws . . . swarmed our Camp from ‘early morn to dewy eve’ their dusky forms frequently seen flitting in the pale moonlight performing their ‘rites’ among the shrubbery and stumps to a much later hour—filthy hags whose ugliness was only equalled by their want of anything like modesty or virtue.”³⁷

Furnas’s account reflects the pervasive European American assumption that Native women’s bodies are, in the words of scholar Andrea Smith, “sexually violable and ‘rapable.’”³⁸ As the leader of a military unit, Furnas served as a model for the soldiers under his command,

and, through his attitudes, gave them permission to rape Dakota women. The attitudes and behavior of these men, in turn, signaled to other white men that such violence was acceptable and even unremarkable. Furnas and his soldiers thus created a climate of sexual victimization that pervaded life at Crow Creek, as it did Indian-white relations more generally. For Dakota women, survival at Crow Creek thus meant enduring rape as well as the violence of brutal physical conditions.

This climate of sexual victimization, coexisting with the lack of food and other necessities, forced women into impossible choices for themselves and their daughters. When Hannah Howe Frazier told Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve, her great-granddaughter, about the experiences of her mother-in-law, Maggie Frazier, at Crow Creek, she revealed that Maggie and other Dakota women at times “prostituted themselves to earn money to feed their families.”³⁹ The absence of able-bodied men to help provide for families heightened the need for women to use all means possible to acquire food and supplies, and the sexually degrading views of white men, combined with their economic and military power over the Dakota, increased the sexual exploitation of women at Crow Creek.

This exploitation was well known to officials at the time. One of the questions asked by the congressional commission studying conditions at Crow Creek was: “Do you know of [Dakota] women being pressed so hard with hunger that they prostituted themselves in order to get something to eat?” When commissioners posed this question to David Faribault, he replied:

I know of many such cases—women who were virtuous before they came here. Others, who had daughters, would sell them for something to eat. . . . Numbers of women have left the agency and gone to Forts Sully,

Fort Thompson, Dakota Territory, about 1890



Randall, Wadsworth, the Yankton agency, and other points, to obtain their living. I think, if they had plenty to subsist on here, they would not leave the agency.⁴⁰

In his terse reply, Faribault challenged dominant assumptions about Native women, and, at the same time, held officials at the internment camp responsible for the dehumanization of Dakota women. The son of a white trader, Faribault was well informed about European American attitudes toward women and was intent on asserting the “virtue” of Dakota women, establishing their common humanity with the wives and mothers of the white men interrogating him. At the same time, he also drew attention to the depth of their degradation and placed the blame for this squarely at the feet of those responsible for conditions at Crow Creek: Had those in power provided Dakota women what they needed to subsist, “they would not leave the agency.” Faribault’s indictment of officials starkly states the kinds of choices that those surviving the internment at Crow Creek faced: selling their own or their daughter’s body in order to keep themselves and others alive. Keeping others alive,



David Faribault, about 1904. Exiled to Crow Creek, he testified about conditions on the reservation in 1865.

in turn, meant placing them in the position of facing the same unbearable choices.

Living with such pain and degradation also required its own strategy for survival, and for many, this meant keeping silent about the horrors experienced at Crow Creek. Rod Steiner did not know about his grandmother’s experiences until he was an adult, and he learned about them accidentally from his mother. Other survivors also kept these experiences from their own children and spoke of Crow Creek guardedly. Minnie Trudell’s mother never talked to her about it, although she did tell stories to others, and Ida Allen knew that her grandmother and others spoke about the times at Crow Creek out of earshot of the children. “I think what happened was they tell these stories,” Allen recalled in her later years, “they tell these stories at night, and I’d go to sleep and some of the stories I didn’t hear.”⁴¹

The internment at Crow Creek came to an end in 1866 when officials decided to move the Dakota to a more promising location farther down the Missouri River.⁴² Yet the physical, cultural, and emotional losses that they suffered remained with them even as they strove to establish themselves on the new reservation in Santee, Nebraska, and as some left to establish a new community in Flandreau, South Dakota, and to reestablish communities in Minnesota. To this day, the experience of the women, children, and elders at Crow Creek in the 1860s lives on in the anguish of their descendants, who, like Rod Steiner, cannot speak of that experience without pain and anger, or who, like many others, have not been able to speak of it at all.

Descendants of the Dakota who remained at Crow Creek when soldiers came to remove them to Nebraska continue to suffer the aftereffects of internment. Residents report frequently finding human remains in unmarked graves and sensing the disturbing presence of the restless spirits of ancestors who did not receive proper care and burial. As one lifelong resident recently put it, “How do you think it feels living on what was a penal colony?”⁴³ Finally, the deep poverty that makes Buffalo County, which encompasses most of the reservation, the poorest in the nation is, for many like writer and Crow Creek native Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, one more consequence of the internment there almost 150 years ago.⁴⁴

In recent years, members of the Crow Creek community have brought traditional ceremonies back to the reservation in an effort to facilitate healing from the his-

torical trauma of internment. In addition, Dakota people in South Dakota, Nebraska, and Minnesota have come together to break the silence about the experience. In June 2002, representatives of Dakota reservations in the



Santee Dakota woman and children at Flandreau, South Dakota, 1889

U.S. and Canada laid a marker on the dam that crosses the Missouri River just above Crow Creek.⁴⁵ This marker, along with the small park surrounding it, stands as a memorial to the women and children who endured the exile at Crow Creek. It testifies to the survival of the Dakota and to the numerous ways in which Dakota women—through illness, hunger, cold, heat, drought, and exploitation—mobilized all the material and cultural resources at their disposal to ensure that their children would live through the ordeal.

Writing about the Dakota Commemorative Marches of 2002 and 2004, which memorialize the forced march of Dakota women and children from Lower Sioux to Fort Snelling in November 1862, Gabrielle Wynde Tateyuskaskan noted, “This Dakota narrative is not finished.”⁴⁶ While she was referring specifically to that march, her words also have meaning for the experience at Crow Creek. The internment officially ended in 1866 with the removal to Santee, and the hard work and perseverance of Dakota women, during those three years, made it possible for survivors to start new communities with their own institutions and cultures. At the same time, the losses and traumas experienced at Crow Creek have continued to trouble descendants, leaving the narrative of those years unfinished. The women at Crow Creek worked tirelessly for the survival of their families, but survival would carry its own particular burden. □

Notes

The author would like to thank Linda D’Amico, Annette Atkins, John Campbell, Diane Wilson, and Waziyatawin for their many contributions to this article.

1. U.S. Congress, Joint Special Committee, *Condition of the Indian Tribes: Report of the Joint Special Committee, Appointed Under Joint Resolution of March 3, 1865* (Washington, D.C.: G.P.O., 1867), 401, 407. I am indebted to William Beane for this citation.

2. For a discussion of conditions on Crow Creek Reservation, see “Below the Poverty Line,” in Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, *Notebooks of Elizabeth Cook-Lynn* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007), 194.

3. The Eastern Dakota, whose homelands ranged from the Great Lakes to the Missouri River, have received little scholarly attention, particularly when compared to the Lakota and other Western Dakota groups. Indeed, the only comprehensive historical study of the Eastern Dakota—Roy W. Meyer, *The History of the Santee Sioux:*

United States Indian Policy on Trial (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968)—is 40 years old. (Santee derives from the Eastern Dakota word *isanti*, meaning knife.) Though path-breaking, this work focuses largely on the political and administrative histories of the people and their reservations. Dakota social relations and culture have been the subject of valuable anthropological research, but again, the bulk of scholarship focuses on the Western Dakota. Research for this article is part of a larger study of the Dakota women of Minnesota in the nineteenth century.

4. Gary Clayton Anderson, *Kinsmen of Another Kind: Dakota-White Relations in the Upper Mississippi Valley, 1650–1862* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984); Guy E. Gibbon, *The Sioux: The Dakota and Lakota Nations* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003).

5. Meyer, *History of the Santee Sioux*, 109–32.

6. Meyer, *History of the Santee Sioux*, 123–24, 137; Gary Clayton Anderson, *Little*

Crow, Spokesman for the Sioux (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1986), 164, 259.

7. For accounts of the march to Fort Snelling and the internment, see Waziyatawin Angela Wilson, *In the Footsteps of Our Ancestors: The Dakota Commemorative Marches of the 21st Century* (St. Paul: Living Justice Press, 2006).

8. Meyer, *History of the Santee Sioux*, 137.

9. Meyer, *History of the Santee Sioux*, 140–41. According to Meyer, p. 141, this action “constituted something of an innovation in United States Indian policy,” in that it abandoned the concept of Indian participation in decision-making. “Now a precedent had been set for the unilateral abrogation of treaties and the management of Indian affairs by Congress, without even the illusion of the Indians’ consent.”

10. Clark W. Thompson to Hon. William P. Dole, U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for the Year 1863* (Washington, D.C.: G.P.O., 1864), 316; Meyer, *History of the Santee*

Sioux, 146; "The Winnebago at Their New Reservation," *Mankato Weekly Record*, July 11, 1863, p. 1.

In 1994 the Wisconsin Winnebago, at Black River Falls, officially adopted a new constitution that changed their name to the Ho-Chunk Sovereign Nation. Ho-Chunk, "People with the Big Voice," is their historic name. The Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska did not change its name but calls its economic development agency Ho-Chunk Inc. This article uses the two names interchangeably.

11. William E. Lass, "The Removal from Minnesota of the Sioux and Winnebago Indians," *Minnesota History* 38 (Dec. 1963): 353–63; John P. Williamson to Stephen R. Riggs, May 25, 1863, Stephen Return Riggs and Family Papers, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), hereinafter, Riggs papers; Winifred Williamson Barton, *John P. Williamson, A Brother to the Sioux* (1919; repr., Clements, MN: Sunnycrest, 1980), 73.

12. John P. Williamson to My Friends The Riggs, May 25, 1863, Riggs papers; John P. Williamson to My Dear Father, May 9, 1863, Thomas S. Williamson Papers, MHS, hereinafter, Williamson papers.

13. William Beane to author, e-mail, July 20, 2004, in author's possession; Williamson to My Dear Father, May 9, 1863; Williamson to My Friends The Riggs, May 25, 1863.

14. John P. Williamson testimony, Sept. 9, 1865, Joint Special Committee, *Condition of the Indian Tribes*, 413–15.

15. Beane to author.

16. Clark W. Thompson to Hon. William P. Dole, June 1, 1863, in Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, 1824–1881, National Archives and Records Administration microfilm no. 234, roll 599. On the land's unsuitability for crops, see Michael L. Lawson, *Dammed Indians: The Pick-Sloan Plan and the Missouri River Sioux, 1944–1980* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982).

17. Clark W. Thompson to Hon. William P. Dole, July 1, 1863, in Letters Received, microfilm 234, roll 599.

18. William E. Lass, "The 'Moscow Expedition,'" *Minnesota History* 39 (Summer 1965): 227–40.

19. Edward R. Pond testimony, Sept. 5, 1865, Joint Special Committee, *Condition of the Indian Tribes*, 409. Balcombe had been the Indian agent at the Winnebago Agency in Minnesota in 1862.

20. St. A. D. Balcombe to Col. C. W. Thompson, Sept. 23, 1864, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1864*

(Washington, D.C.: G.P.O., 1865), 410; Williamson testimony, 414.

21. John P. Williamson to My Dear Father, Aug. 8, 1865, Williamson papers; J. M. Stone to Hon. N. Edmunds, July 30, 1865, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1865* (Washington, D.C.: G.P.O., 1865), 219.

22. Meyer, *History of the Santee Sioux*, 151–52.

23. Little Hill testimony, Oct. 3, 1865, Joint Special Committee, *Condition of the Indian Tribes*, 417.

24. David Lee Smith, *Ho-Chunk Tribal History: The History of the Ho-Chunk People from the Mound Building Era to the Present Day* (1996), 56.

25. John Williamson to Rev. S. R. Riggs, Jan. 16 [1864], Riggs papers; Meyer, *History of the Santee Sioux*, 148.

26. Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve, *Completing the Circle* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 58–59.

27. Jeanette and Virgil Weston, Flandreau, SD, interview by Herbert Hoover, July 17, 1971, tape 726, American Indian Research Project, South Dakota Oral History Center, University of South Dakota, Vermillion.

28. Williamson testimony, 414; John P. Williamson to My Dear Father, Dec. 24, 1863, Williamson papers.

29. David Faribault testimony, Sept. 5, 1865, *Condition of the Indian Tribes*, 405.

30. Barton, *John P. Williamson*, 85–86.

31. John P. Williamson to Dear Bro. Riggs, July 26, 1864, and Williamson to Rev. S. R. Riggs, July 5, 1864, both in Riggs papers.

32. Williamson to Riggs, July 5, 1864; Steiner, quoted in David Melmer, "Dakota Sacrifice Honored," *Indian Country Today*, June 19, 2002, www.indiancountrytoday.com/archive/28217624.html (accessed Oct. 3, 2008) and on videotape of event. The author thanks Rod Steiner for a copy of this tape.

33. Ida Allen, Flandreau, SD, interview by Vince Pratt, tape 752, American Indian Research Project, University of South Dakota; Hester Fleury, Fort Thompson, SD, interview by author, July 21, 2008; Bernice Blakney, Santee, NB, interview by author, Aug. 9, 2004, tapes in author's possession; Melvin R. Gilmore, *Uses of Plants by the Indians of the Missouri River Region* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977).

34. J. M. Stone to Hon. N. Edmunds, Oct. 3, 1865, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1865*, p. 228; Meyer, *History of the Santee Sioux*, 153; Mae Eastman, Flandreau, SD, interview by Vince Pratt,

July 28, 1971, tape 754, American Indian Research Project.

35. Ramona Stately, "Pazahiyayewin and the Importance of Remembering Dakota Women," in Wilson, *In the Footsteps of Our Ancestors*, 194.

36. Melmer, "Dakota Sacrifice Honored"; see also videotape.

37. Richard D. Rowen, ed., "The Second Nebraska's Campaign Against the Sioux," *Nebraska History* 44 (Mar. 1963): 4, 16. I am grateful to Rod Steiner for this citation. Furnas was appointed Indian agent for the Omaha, Winnebago, and Ponca tribes shortly after his service with the Second Nebraska and then served as Nebraska's second governor. His career underscores just how mainstream his attitudes toward Indians were. See Robert C. Farb, "Robert W. Furnas as Omaha Indian Agent, 1864–1866," *Nebraska History* 32 (Sept. 1951): 186–203.

38. For a discussion of the centrality of sexual violence against indigenous women in the colonization of North America, see Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2005), 10. See also Robert F. Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), pt. 1. The recently released Amnesty International report, *Maze of Injustice: The Failure to Protect Indigenous Women from Sexual Violence in the USA*, confirms that these attitudes persist, leading to the high proportion of women experiencing rape today; see www.amnestyusa.org/women/maze/report.pdf (accessed Sept. 9, 2008).

39. Sneve, *Completing the Circle*, 59.

40. Faribault testimony, 405.

41. Moses Trudell and Minnie Trudell, Santee, NB, interview by Herbert Hoover, Aug. 11, 1970, tape 545, American Indian Research Project; Allen interview.

42. Meyer, *History of the Santee Sioux*, 155–57.

43. Virginia Bad Moccasin, Minneapolis, interview by author, July 16, 2008; Jerald Lytle, Fort Thompson, SD, interview by author, July 22, 2008 (quoted), tapes in author's possession.

44. See Cook-Lynn, *Notebooks of Elizabeth Cook-Lynn*, 194.

45. Bad Moccasin interview; Melmer, "Dakota Sacrifice Honored."

46. Gabrielle Wynde Tateyuskanskan, "The Terrible Truth of a Beautiful Landscape: The Dakota Commemorative Walk of November 7–13, 2004," in Wilson, *In the Footsteps of our Ancestors*, 171–72.

The photographs on p. 148 and 158 are courtesy the State Archives of the South Dakota State Historical Society; p. 159 is courtesy William Beane. All other images are in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society.