

Inkpaduta's Revenge: The True Story of the Spirit Lake Massacre

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Inside the small cabin, the rifle blast must have been deafening. Shot in the back, Rowland Gardner fell and died without a struggle. Within minutes, Gardner's wife, daughter, son, and two grandchildren were dead—beaten to death with rifle butts and pieces of stove-wood.

Thirteen-year-old Abbie Gardner saw it happen. Sitting in a chair, holding her sister's baby, she watched silently as her mother and sister were dragged outside, as the cabin was ransacked around her, as her little brother, her nephew, and her infant niece were one by one torn away from her. "All this time I was both speechless and tearless," she wrote later, "But now left alone, I begged them to kill me."

Instead, Abbie was taken captive by the murderers, a renegade band of Sioux Indians under a chief named Inkpaduta. They would not kill Abbie, but they would kill others. Many others.

March 8, 1857 was the first day of the Spirit Lake Massacre, the most notorious crime in Iowa's history. When it was over, 38 victims lay dead.

Though his name can be translated "Red End" or "Scarlet Point," usually he known as Inkpaduta. Abbie Gardner remembered him as a "savage monster in human shape, fitted only for the darkest corner in Hades."

In fairy tales, the villains are ugly. So it was with Inkpaduta. At the time of the massacre, he was old—nearly sixty—and his face bore the deep scars of smallpox, the disease which had killed so many of his people. In legend, he would be seen as a monster, a being more diabolical than human. In truth, Inkpaduta was a violent man who lived a violent life. But as every story exists within a larger story, so does the story of the Spirit Lake Massacre. In the larger story,

Inkpaduta becomes more understandable, at least, if no less guilty.

When the Gardners came to the Spirit Lake vicinity in 1856, they were moving deep into unsettled territory. Abbie recalled that on the way from Clear Lake, “we frequently encountered ‘redskins’ by day, and were entertained at night by the howling of wolves.”

These ‘redskins’ were called *Sioux* by the whites, but they called themselves *Dakota*. The names cause much confusion, for today the word “Sioux” conjures up images of the high plains *Lakota*—and of tipis and buffalo and the Battle of the Little Bighorn. The Dakotas, or Santee Sioux, were people of the woodlands as much as the prairie—and to complicate matters further, lived not in the present-day Dakotas but in Minnesota and northern Iowa. They had a history of friendly relations with whites, a history that went back more than two centuries by the time the Gardners built their new cabin near the shore of West Okoboji Lake.

But by then things were changing—had been for some time—and the Dakotas were on edge.

The Treaties of 1851 were supposed to solve everything. Growing pressure from white settlers in eastern Minnesota, growing hunger in the Dakota camps, and growing Dakota debts to white traders were all to be swept away by a great land sale. The various tribes agreed, under pressure, to sell much of the lands in Minnesota and northern Iowa, keeping a reservation along the Minnesota River. In return, the U.S. government agreed, among other things, to make annual payments of cash and food, and to allow the Dakotas chiefs to govern tribal affairs.

In practice, the treaties were a grand swindle. The Dakotas entered the agreement believing that their new income would help them maintain their hunter/gatherer lifestyle in a world of increasingly scarce game and plentiful settlers. But the whites saw the treaties as a means of destroying that lifestyle and making farmers of the Indians. To them, the reservation was a place where the far-flung Dakotas would at last be concentrated, where the tribal structure could be undermined and replaced with the values

of the American farmer and capitalist. In short, it was to be a school of civilization, with *hunger* as the schoolmaster.

The new reservation was administered with a blend of idealism, graft, naiveté, and incompetence. The Dakotas' money was diverted to the traders, who sold them goods on credit at exorbitant prices. The government food supplies arrived spoiled. In 1854, an army officer reported that upon removal of the staves of a flour barrel, the flour "stood alone and was as hard as a similar lump of dried mortar." It was distributed anyway, along with slabs of rancid pork. Often, there was little else to eat. Under these circumstances, many Dakotas began moving back into the ceded lands, especially to those areas that were as yet thinly settled.

Inkpaduta and his followers were one of those Dakota groups off the reservation. But unlike many of the others, they hadn't been on the reservation to begin with, not in any permanent sense. Though Inkpaduta belonged to the Wahpekute tribe of the Dakotas—one of the groups which had signed a treaty—he hadn't been present at the treaty councils. Had he been there, he'd have opposed the treaty, but he had long been at odds with his own people.

The turmoil had started with Inkpaduta's father, Wamdisapa. Wamdisapa and another man were rival chiefs of a village; then the other man was murdered. Most people believed that Wamdisapa and Inkpaduta had been in on it. When Wamdisapa was murdered a few years later, the village splintered. What was left of Wamdisapa's following eventually moved to Iowa, near present-day Fort Dodge. At that time, the village was under the leadership of a chief named Sintomnaduta, thought by some to be Inkpaduta's brother. In 1852, Sintomnaduta was axed to death by a notorious whiskey-trader and horse-thief named Henry Lott. Nearly all of Sintomnaduta's family—nine women and children—died in the brutal attack. Inkpaduta was now in the position of leadership. Surprisingly, he didn't go on the warpath. Instead, he informed an army officer at Fort Dodge of the murder. Surely the whites would punish such a man as Lott. At first, the court appeared to treat the case seriously. Though Lott fled, he was indicted in absentia. But in a flagrant act of contempt—performed in full view of the Dakotas—the prosecuting attorney nailed Sintomnaduta's head to a pole over his house, and left it there. Lott never returned to Iowa,

and no one tried to find him.

Then came the brutal winter of 1856-57. The Gardners and their neighbors huddled in their little cabins, rationing their meager food supplies. Inkipaduta's village camped about ten miles to the north, at Loon Lake, Minnesota. His people were hungry that winter, and one of Inkipaduta's grandchildren died of starvation before it was over.

To the north lay the reservation, where there was supposed to be food. There wasn't any. That winter, the reservation Indians were reduced to begging from white settlers. Inkipaduta may have known this, or he may have guessed it. In December he began moving south along the Little Sioux, deep into Iowa.

By February, Inkipaduta's village was encamped near the town of Smithland in Woodbury County. Here was hope of good hunting, for though the elk had been driven from the prairie by the bitter winds, they had taken shelter in a nearby grove of trees. Local whites, however, were alarmed that the Dakotas were so near, even though one local family was sharing a well with them without any trouble.

Soon, suspicion arose that the hungry Dakotas were stealing corn from the settlers' cribs. Then came a heated dispute over an elk hunt. Finally, a group of armed settlers marched into Inkipaduta's camp and ordered him to leave the area. Inkipaduta said he would depart the next day, promising to go downriver to the Omaha Indians. But the settlers feared a night ambush, and took away the Dakota's guns, telling Inkipaduta he could retrieve them on his way out of town.

The guns were never redeemed. Instead of heading south, Inkipaduta immediately headed north up the Little Sioux. Perhaps he feared that the whites were planning an ambush. Perhaps he was just enraged. Passing through the settlements of Cherokee and Peterson, his people stole weapons and killed cattle as they went. Word spread—breathless tales of rape and plunder—and the frightened settlers let the angry Dakotas do as they pleased. None of the settlers were killed.

However, no word reached the cabins at West Okoboji. They were too remote. When Inkipaduta arrived there on March 7, he was neither expected nor feared.

They came to the Gardner cabin just as the family was sitting down to breakfast. It was Sunday morning, March 8. Crowded into the cabin, Inkpaduta and his people demanded food and ammunition. It was given to them. Even so, the situation grew tense. Two men, Dakota and white, struggled over a powder horn. The Dakota raised his gun; the other man pushed it away. Then two neighbor men arrived, and the Dakotas left the cabin.

It was nothing; it will pass, said one of the neighbors. Rowland Gardner thought otherwise. They will be back. He wanted to warn the other settlers, to gather everyone together. Only about forty whites were then living in all of Dickinson County, and their cabins were spread out, isolated from each other, vulnerable. But the neighbor men were unconcerned, and they went home.

Two men living with the Gardners went out to spread the word. About an hour later, at three o'clock, the Gardners heard shots fired. Then nothing. For two hours they waited anxiously in their cabin, till Rowland Gardner could stand it no longer. He went to investigate. The sun was setting; it would be dark soon.

He hadn't been gone long when he rushed back into the cabin. "Nine Indians are coming," he said, "And we are all doomed to die!"

Gardner wanted to barricade the door and prepare for a siege. "While they are killing all of us, I will at least kill a few of them!" he said. But Mrs. Gardner protested. Maybe there was still hope; maybe a fight could still be avoided. So the door was left unbarred, and Inkpaduta and his men entered and demanded more flour. Gardner, turning toward the flour barrel, stood briefly with his back to the Dakotas. A moment later he was dead.

After her family had been killed, Abbie was taken back to Inkpaduta's camp, about a mile away. It was dark now, but the camp was lighted by a burning cabin nearby. The men inside were still alive, screaming. Outside, on the ground, Abbie recognized the bodies of her neighbors—including the men who had thought there would be no trouble. Their rifles

lay in the snow beside them. They had put up a fight, at least, though Abbie saw only one Dakota who had been wounded.

Inkapaduta held a war-dance that night. Twenty people had died that day. More would die tomorrow.

The next day's victims were taken by surprise, cabin by cabin. Four families were destroyed, although two of the women—Lydia Noble, age 20, and Elizabeth Thatcher, 19—were taken captive. Mrs. Thatcher's husband was away at the time; Mrs. Noble was not so fortunate: she witnessed the deaths of her husband and two children. A few days later, 17-year-old Margaret Marble was taken captive near Spirit Lake after her husband was murdered.

The four captives were given moccasins and told to braid their hair and paint their faces in the Dakota style. Eventually, they wore Dakota clothing as well. Like the Dakota women, they chopped wood, put up the tents, cooked the food, and carried heavy packs as they traveled. The men would do none of these things.

They headed north into Minnesota. Inkapaduta's warriors attacked the town of Springfield (now Jackson), then withdrew, heading west toward the Big Sioux River. Though it was March, the snow was still deep and the weather severe. A Fort Dodge company of militia, which started for the lakes on March 25, had to cross snow drifts fifteen to twenty feet deep. Fourteen militiamen suffered frostbite, and two others who separated from the group froze to death in Palo Alto County. So remote was the region that their bodies were not found for eleven years. Through such conditions Inkapaduta and his people traveled—men, women, and children—wading across icy streams, while the captive women often went two or three days at a time without food.

Mrs. Thatcher was the first of the captives to die. Shortly after her capture, she had become ill with phlebitis and other ailments. One limb swelled and turned black; veins burst; she was too weak to carry her pack. Remarkably, after six weeks of travel, she recovered somewhat. Then, while

crossing the Big Sioux River, a young Dakota took away her pack and pushed her into the icy current. Somehow, she managed to swim to shore, but was clubbed back into the channel by other Dakotas. Finally she was shot. Horrified, Mrs. Noble tried to convince Abbie to go back to the river with her so they could drown themselves together. Abbie refused.

They continued westward through springtime, through present-day South Dakota. On May 6, two reservation Dakotas bought Mrs. Marble, taking her to the Minnesota authorities in St. Paul. About a month later, Mrs. Noble angrily refused to leave a tipi when ordered to do so by Inkpaduta's son Roaring Cloud. He dragged her outside and bludgeoned her to death.

Abbie was now alone among her captors, traveling northwest across a prairie so vast that "I despaired of ever seeing a tree again." She had long since despaired of seeing freedom again.

In fact, her rescue was not far off. Inkpaduta had entered the territory of the Yanktons, to which Abbie had been sold. The Yanktons in turn sold her to three Dakota men who had come—at great risk to themselves—in order to rescue her.

"Our conduct shows the heart of the Indian toward the whites," said one of the rescuers, Hotonwashte ("Beautiful Voice"), upon Abbie's return to St. Paul. "We threw away our lives to benefit the whites, in Inkpaduta's camp; but the Great Spirit had pity on us and preserved us. It shows that the Wahpetons [the Dakota tribe to which he belonged] are good people."

Beautiful Voice knew that all Dakota people were being held responsible for the massacre. It was even proposed to withhold all Dakota annuity payments until Inkpaduta was captured. The plan was eventually dropped. Meanwhile, "friendly" Dakotas like Beautiful Voice found themselves in a tricky position, for many Dakota people, growing bitter about the treaties, sympathized with Inkpaduta. Meanwhile, in the white settlements, militia companies were being raised even as settlers fled eastward with their possessions. In the confusion, militiamen ambushed innocent Indians, but were unable to locate Inkpaduta.

Freed after three month's captivity, Abbie Gardner lived a long and turbulent life, enduring a failed marriage, two house fires, the deaths of her children, and years of poor health. In 1891, she bought her parents' farm and set up shop in the cabin, operating it as a tourist attraction from which she sold frontier memorabilia and copies of her book about the massacre. The cabin stands to this day.

After 1857, Inkpaduta became a legend among settlers, a storybook monster who was often rumored to be somewhere nearby, lurking. Relations between Dakotas and whites staggered on, finally exploding in 1862 with a massive uprising in Minnesota, which claimed the lives of nearly five hundred white settlers and an unknown number of Dakotas. Inkpaduta was there, but his role—if any—is unclear.

As the uprising collapsed, he fled westward onto the plains, eventually falling in with the Lakotas and becoming friends with Sitting Bull. Lakota holy man Black Elk lists Inkpaduta as one of the great men present at the Little Bighorn in 1876, when Custer was “rubbed out.”

As Lakota resistance disintegrated the following year, Sitting Bull and his people fled to Canada. Inkpaduta, old and increasingly nearsighted, went with them. Unlike Sitting Bull, he never returned to the U.S., never surrendered, was never captured. He died in Manitoba in 1881.

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