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History 530 - Minnesota 1862
Reading Journal Week 3

Throughout the period comprising approximately the first half of the 19th century, the United States, its representatives and agents, and Indian tribes of the northwestern region that would become Minnesota repeatedly engaged in activities that led to several treaties between the parties. Beginning with the treaty negotiated and secured by Zebulon Pike with the Dakota in 1805, a process that would eventually lead to cessions of almost all of their former homeland began for the Dakota and ultimately a war that would force them away from their traditional territory completely, began. Each treaty after the 1805 treaty subsequently encroached farther into the land that the Dakota had called home for hundreds of years, as well as encroached further against the Dakota's ability to sustain themselves without dependence on the government. Agents of the United States repeatedly presented the Dakota with treaty terms that they argued were designed to ensure the long-term viability and safety of the tribe; the terms were, of course, much more favorable to the United States and the fur traders who demanded repayment of dubiously defined debts owed by the Dakota. As the language letters from the Dakota prisoners at Camp Kearney reveal, the conditions the Dakota prisoners experienced was precisely what the government agents had argued the treaties would prevent.

According to historian Mary Wingerd, from the Dakota perspective "the arrival of the Americans represented another trading opportunity" and that an American post was "a positive, [a] reliable source of trade goods that they had long been seeking".[1] If Fort Snelling was to be created as Pike suggested, it meant easier access to and potentially better terms for trade. No such fort or post would be established for well over a decade. The Treaty of 1825 was also presented to the Dakota as a means to improve their condition by creating a lasting peace through setting clear territorial boundaries between all of the tribes in the area, particularly the Dakota and Ojibwe. In reality, Westerman and White assert that these boundaries "may have

[1] Mary Wingerd and Kirsten Delegard, *North Country: The Making of Minnesota,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (2010), 77.

been as much for facilitating treaties of cession for the lands as for establishing peace".[2] By establishing tribal boundaries, "ancestral homelands" were drawn within the dominion of other tribes' territory, while also not completely quelling inter-tribal violence.[3] The 1837 treaty with the Dakota was justified to tribal leaders as creating a protective buffer between their territory and the Whites who were fast approaching from the east, and that retained Dakota land to the west would more than sustain them in perpetuity.[4] During negotiations at Traverse des Sioux in 1851, Dakota leaders were assured that unnamed tribes were prospering after signing treaties with large land cessions, and that they too would enjoy a position of prosperity after signing away their land.[5] Negotiations for the Treaty of Mendota from the same year included many of the same claims, while additionally warning the Dakota that it was not in their interest to be surrounded by Whites now that land to the west had been ceded.[6] It is clear that treaties were repeatedly presented to Dakota leaders as favorable and actually opportunities for their bands to prosper. In reality, prosperity went to deceitful fur traders and speculators, capitalists and cronies.

Letters from Camp Kearney sent by Dakota prisoners of war use language that reflects the exact opposite of the prosperity that government representatives and agents promised to Dakota leaders decades earlier. The war in 1862 between the Dakota and the United States was a result of unfulfilled promises and deceit from treaties and land cessions of the previous 57 years. Clifford Canku and Michael Simon's translations of these letters, the pain experienced in Camp Kearney was immense. In letter #1, A Woman explains that her "her heart is very broken . . . we are without, we are all suffering" (pg. 3). Four Lightning explains in letter #2 that he and others are experiencing "great difficulty . . . [because of others' actions] now we're defeated and suffering because of it" (pg. 9). Truly Passes On acknowledges in letter #5 participating in a battle, but "now I'm suffering greatly for it" (pg. 29). Letters #6 and #7 both describe terrible

[2] Gwen Westerman & Bruce White, *Mni Sota Macoke: The Land of the Dakota,* St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, (2012), 149.
[3] Ibid, 152.
[4] Ibid, 158.
[5] Ibid, 168-169.
[6] Ibid, 182.

conditions, sickness, or death.[7] The letters go on in this manner, describing a situation that many describe as suffering. From the first treaty to Camp Kearney, it is clear that the prosperity promised in the treaties ended in immense suffering.

[7] Clifford Canku and Michael Simon, *The Dakota Prisoner of War Letters: Dakota Kaŝkapi Okicize Wowapi*, St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press (2013), letters 1,2, 5, 6, and 7.

Works Cited:

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