

*Document 7.2***The Hanging of Thirty-Eight Indians (1862)**

With the nation's attention focused on the Civil War, tension between Minnesota's settlers and the Santee Sioux continued to mount as the Indians saw their ancestral lands dwindle. Starvation and crop failures along with the reluctance of the federal government to pay annuities to the Sioux in a timely fashion led to the murder of white settlers in August 1862. This incident ignited the Minnesota uprising which resulted in the deaths of close to five hundred settlers and property damage of over one million dollars. After federal troops under General John Pope put an end to the conflict, a military court sentenced 303 Sioux to death. However, President Lincoln intervened and selected the thirty-eight that he deemed most culpable to death. On December 26, 1862 they were executed in the largest mass hanging in American history in Mankato, Minnesota.*

As those at the head of the procession came out of the basement we heard a sort of death-wail sounded which was immediately caught up by all the condemned and was chanted in unison until the foot of the scaffold was reached. At the foot of the steps there was no delay. Captain Redfield mounted the drop, at the head, and the Indians crowded after him as if it were a race to see who would get up first. They actually crowded on each other's heels and as they got to the top each took his position without any assistance from those detailed for that purpose. They still kept up a mournful wail and occasionally there would be a piercing scream.

The ropes were soon arranged around their necks, not the least resistance being offered. One or two, feeling the noose uncomfortably tight, attempted to loosen it, and although their hands were tied, they partially succeeded. The movement, however, was noticed by the assistants and the cords rearranged. The white caps which had been placed on the top of their heads were now drawn down over their faces, shutting out forever the light of day from their eyes.

Then ensued a scene that can hardly be described and which can never be forgotten. All joined in shouting and singing, as it appeared to those who were ignorant of the language. The tones seemed somewhat discordant and yet there was harmony in it. Their bodies swayed to and fro and their every limb seemed to be keeping time. The drop trembled and shook as if all were dancing. The most touching scene on the drop was their attempts to grasp each other's hands, fettered as they were. They were very close to each other and many succeeded. Three or four in a row were hand in hand swaying up and

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down with the rise and fall of their voices. One old man reached out on each side but could not grasp a hand. His struggles were piteous and affected many beholders.

We were informed by those who understood the language that their singing and dancing was only to sustain each other, that there was nothing defiant in their last moments, and that no death-song, strictly speaking, was chanted on the gallows. Each one shouted his own name and called the name of his friend, saying in substance, "I'm here! I'm here!"

Captain Burt hastily scanned all the arrangements for the execution and motioned to Major Brown, the signal officer, that all was ready. There was one tap of the drum, almost drowned by the voices of the Indians, then another and the stays of the drop were knocked away, the rope cut and with a crash down came the drop. One rope broke but not until the neck of the victim was dislocated. His body came down on the drop with a heavy thud and a crash of the boards. There was no struggling by any of the Indians for the space of half a minute; the only movements were the natural vibrations occasioned by the fall. In the meantime a new rope was placed around the neck of the one who fell and it having been thrown over the beam he was soon hanging with the others.

After the lapse of a minute several drew up their legs once or twice and there was some movement of the arms. One Indian, at the expiration of ten minutes, still breathed but the rope was better adjusted and life was soon extinct. It is unnecessary to speak of the awful sight of thirty-eight human beings suspended in the air. Imagination will readily supply what we refrain from describing.

After the bodies had hung for about half an hour the physicians of the several regiments reported that life was extinct. Soon after, several United States mule teams appeared and the bodies were taken down and dumped into the wagons without much ceremony. They were carried down to the sandbar in front of the city and all buried in the same hole. The half-breeds were buried in one corner of the hole so they would be disinterred by their friends. Everything was conducted in the most orderly and quiet manner.

As the drop fell the citizens could not repress a shout of exultation, in which the soldiers joined, but that was the only demonstration of feeling. As the wagons bore the bodies of the murderers off to burial the people quietly dispersed, and few, we take it, who witnessed the awful scene will voluntarily look upon its like again.