

The Capture of the Young Women

When informed by relatives that the Dakota were attacking the agency that morning, Joseph Godfrey's first inclination was to take his family and seek protection among the whites. However, Godfrey was not white, at least by Nineteenth Century standards. A mixed breed fur trader had raised him, and his Dakota was much better than his English. His mother was a black woman employed by the trader, and his father was a French voyageur passing through Minnesota in 1835 who left him only his name. Godfrey had married a Dakota woman, the daughter of Wakpaduta and a member of Wabasha's Mdewakanton band, and had received the Dakota name Otake, or Many Kills. Nevertheless, he was not enthusiastic about joining in the conflict that morning. Eventually he was persuaded by his father-in-law to fight with the Dakota, because if he sided with the whites he would likely be killed.

Late that morning Godfrey was driving a wagon that the war party, of which he was now a part, had looted from a farm in the Cottonwood Valley. The Cottonwood River Valley was south and east of the Lower Agency, and most of the whites who had homesteaded there were German immigrants. The war party had already attacked and burned two farms that morning, murdered over a dozen men, women and children, and accumulated enough booty to fill the stolen wagon. Godfrey had not done any of the killing himself but had witnessed a great deal of slaughter. It was his job to gain the confidence of prospective victims with his limited command of English, though most of the German immigrants who lived here did not know the language themselves.

Godfrey could tell that the whites had no idea they were about to be attacked, even though all of the braves, including Godfrey, were painted for battle and wore only their breechcloths. Very few of the farmers owned firearms, and when they were attacked, they hardly put up any resistance at all. The Chippewa were the only other enemy these braves had ever encountered, and they always put up a fierce resistance. Even the Chippewa women and children could be deadly adversaries. Killing the whites was like slaughtering sheep. But this helplessness, rather than eliciting the braves' sympathy, only made them more contemptible in the warriors' eyes.

Satisfied with their morning's work, the war party was headed back toward the agency when they ran into a wagon headed east occupied by

three white men. The men tried to run but were quickly cut down, and the war party added the wagon to their procession. Continuing on to the west, they spotted yet another wagon moving in their direction, one with two horses and a single driver. The warriors gave a whoop of joy at the sight of yet another easy target, this one piled high with goods. Two of the braves on horseback, Tazoo and Mazabomdoo, kicked their mounts into a gallop straight toward the vehicle. Godfrey sighed as he watched them ride away. He had seen enough killing for one day and hoped this would be the last. All he wanted to do was get back to his village. He was a farmer, not a warrior, and was beginning to greatly regret his involvement in the whole affair. This was not war as he understood it, but butchery. If this was indeed the glory of battle that the Dakota braves always talked about, he could not recognize it. Killing ignorant Dutch farmers, what glory or honor was there in that? he wondered. Although he had been raised among the Dakota, Godfrey realized now that he did not think like one.

It had been a long and very confusing morning for Mary Schwandt, as she, Mattie Williams, and Mary Anderson bounced about in the bed of the wagon driven by Francis Patoile. Patoile had explained to them that they were headed for the safety of New Ulm, but the route he was taking seemed like an endless journey in a sea of green grass. They would have been tossed right out by the bumpy ride had it not been for the half-dozen trunks full of trade goods in the wagon bed which they used to brace themselves. Every so often Patoile would say, “It won’t be long now, girls.” But time went by and they never seemed any closer to their destination. The only way they could tell that they were making progress was by the smoke from the burning agency, which at first was ahead of them and to their left but was now slipping behind them. Then thankfully they came to a dirt road and the ride became smoother.

Their relief was short-lived, however, because they now began passing burning farm buildings, and only fifteen minutes after they had started east on the road, they heard Patoile shout out, “Oh, Damn!” All three girls crawled to the front to peer over the seat where they saw a pair of Indians approaching their wagon on horseback at full gallop. Some hundred yards away they could see more braves and horses and several wagons. “Get down, girls! Get down!” cried Patoile. “I’ll talk to them. It will be alright.” But seconds later a shot rang out, and the girls screamed

in terror as they saw Patoile slump down on the seat.

When the two braves reached the wagon, they grabbed Patoile and dragged him to the ground. While they occupied themselves by beating the dead trader's body with their gun butts, Mary Schwandt and the other two girls clambered over the tailgate and started running. None of them really knew where they were going, but Mary remembered willows and tall reeds surrounding a pond they had passed just a few minutes before the attack, so she led them in that direction. By this time more braves had reached the wagon and set off in pursuit of the fugitives. Mary could hear their shouting and laughter as they closed in. She was the first to reach the pond, and just as she dove in among the reeds and bushes she heard a shot.

For a few seconds Mary lay face down in the mud trying to catch her breath. She did not know where her companions were, but she could hear one of them moaning in pain. "God help us! God help us!" she whispered to herself over and over again as she lay trembling. The voices of their attackers were coming closer. She wanted to call out to her friends but was afraid to make a sound.

"You come out now! No hurt!" a voice called out in broken English. "We find. No hurt." Then Mary heard a scream only a few yards away. "No, no, no!" she heard a girl cry and recognized it as Mattie's voice.

"Mattie!" she called out without thinking. Then realizing what she had done, she struggled to her feet and tried to run again. Seconds later she was grabbed by two braves who dragged her off toward the wagons.

"Ask this one where she is hurt," ordered Mazabomdoo.

Joseph Godfrey looked at the girl the brave had just dragged out of the bushes. She had long light brown hair, and her face was wet with mud and tears. Her light blue dress was streaked with mud, and it appeared that she was having difficulty walking. "Where hurt?" Godfrey asked her.

"Here!" she sobbed, pointing to her back.

Mazabomdoo turned her about roughly, and Godfrey examined the area she had pointed to. It took a moment to find the wound because of all the mud. A small hole in the middle of her back was slowly seeping blood. There did not appear to be an exit wound, so Godfrey surmised that the bullet was still inside her. He could see that the girl was in a great deal of pain, but he had no idea how to help her, or whether

Mazabomdoo would let him if he could. “It does not look very bad,” commented the brave.

“Not much blood,” agreed Godfrey. “But the ball must still be inside.” He knew enough about wounds to know that that was not a good thing.

“Put her in your wagon,” ordered Mazabomdoo. “We are leaving now.”

Godfrey nodded and helped the girl walk to his wagon. He lifted her as gently as possible into the wagon box and made a place for her to lie down directly behind the seat. She moaned and cried in pain as she was being moved, but once settled in the wagon she seemed more comfortable. Godfrey climbed up onto the seat and shook the reins.

“What your name?” he asked her once they got rolling.

“Mary Anderson,” she replied, sniffing back tears.

“Did you see what happened at the agency?” he inquired.

“No, we were out on the prairie. Are we going to the agency now?”

“Yes, we go agency now.”

“Good, I hope there is a doctor there. I think I’m hurt very bad. Will you take me to a doctor? Please? I don’t want to die!”

“Yes, I try,” replied Godfrey, feeling very sorry for the girl and not knowing what else to say. He did not mention that if the doctor was at the agency, he was probably dead.

Mary Schwandt lay curled up in the wagon box, praying harder than she had ever prayed before. She was separated from her two friends, and she knew that Mary Anderson had been shot but did not know if she was still alive. All she knew was that Mary was in the wagon in front of her and Mattie was in the one behind. The braves had been most cruel to her and her friends, especially at first. She had been pushed and slapped around, and they had put their hands up under her clothes and laughed and beat her when she protested. Thankfully for the last hour or so they had left her alone, but now it was beginning to get dark, and she was terrified of what might happen next.

She did not dare raise her head over the side of the wagon to look about, but she sensed that they were nearing their destination and moving through some sort of village. The wagon came to an abrupt stop and she could hear some of the braves arguing in Dakota. The argument continued for several minutes when she heard a woman’s voice at the rear of the wagon. “Come, come!” Mary raised her head. An elderly Dakota woman was motioning for her to climb down, which she did

reluctantly.

The woman took Mary by the arm and guided her to a small frame cabin next to the road. “Go now!” ordered the woman, and Mary stepped through the door. To her surprise and relief, the only occupants of the cabin were a white woman and three young boys. Seconds later Mattie was also escorted through the door, followed by an Indian brave who carried Mary Anderson. The white woman rushed to help the brave lay Mary down on some blankets while Mary Schwandt and Mattie hugged each other and sobbed. They then turned their attention to their friend. The white woman was down on her knees next to Mary, and the brave was showing her the location of a bullet wound. It was then that Mary Schwandt noticed something odd about the brave. He looked much more like a Negro than an Indian.

“Do you think you could get a doctor for her, Mr. Godfrey?” the white woman asked him.

“I don’t know. I try,” he replied, shaking his head.

“Will she be alright?” asked Mattie.

The woman looked up at them, and Mary could tell by the look on her face that she did not think so. Without answering Mattie’s question, she said, “Girls, I am Janette De Camp. Those are my boys. There’s a jug of water over there. Please go get a drink. I’ll look after your friend.”

“Where are we?” asked Mary.

“This is Wacouta’s village,” replied Janette. “I hope and pray that he will protect us.”

At that moment one of the braves stuck his head in the door and let out a war whoop. Mary and Mattie screamed and stumbled backward. The three little boys began to cry. The brave just laughed, said something in Dakota, and disappeared.

“What did he say?” Janette asked Godfrey.

“He say he be back,” Joseph replied.

Janette DeCamp was horrified when a group of young men came that evening to the house where they were being sheltered. She had been trying to distract her children from their plight while also comforting the young girls, especially Mary Anderson with her painful bullet wound. Women from Wacouta’s village had brought them food and water and Mrs. DeCamp pleaded with them to help her get Mary to a doctor. The women were sympathetic but said that there was nothing they could do.

“The young men go crazy,” one woman told her in broken English.

When the braves arrived, it was clear to Janette what their intentions were. They started to drag the girls away, even the wounded one. When Mary Schwandt protested, she was slapped on the face hard enough to draw blood. Torn between the need to protect her children and her desire to defend the young girls, Mrs. DeCamp cried, “Please, please don’t hurt them! She is only fourteen!”

The braves laughed and one of them said, “She belongs to us now.” His threatening manner made Janette back off, but tears poured from her eyes as they dragged the girls away. She felt like a coward, but what could she do? What if they raped me in front of my children? she thought. It was an impossible situation and not her fault at all, she knew, but the thought of what was about to happen to those poor young girls made her physically ill. “God help them! God help them!” she said over and over to herself.

Mrs. DeCamp sat in the dark for what seemed like hours, fearful for herself, her sons and the three young girls. Eventually the boys fell asleep. Thank God they have taken them far enough away that we cannot hear their screams, she thought, then instantly hated herself for it. She prayed hard for forgiveness and for God’s deliverance from this evil.

When the girls were returned, she thanked God for sparing their lives. Their clothes were disheveled, and their eyes looked vacant and devoid of hope. It broke her heart to look at their swollen, tear-stained faces, but she tried to comfort them as best she could. The wounded Mary Anderson could not walk and was delirious. Janette put her arms around her and the young girl cried until she eventually fell into a fitful sleep.

Janette DeCamp, her three children, and the three teenage girls were moved to Little Crow’s village that afternoon, along with most of the other captives. Different warriors claimed each of the three girls, but Janette remained under the protection of Wacouta’s people. When they were about to be separated, Janette begged to be allowed to stay with the severely wounded Mary Anderson, but the brave who claimed Mary would not hear of it. Janette later learned that the girl died less than an hour after their separation. She would not see Mary Schwandt or Mattie Williams again for several weeks.

Author’s note: Joseph Godfrey, who does not appear in the final draft of the novel, was a real person, and I hated to drop him from the book

because he illustrates how the Dakota's concept of race differed from the whites. Skin color did not seem to mean much to them. If they said you were a Dakota, then you were. Likewise, if you were one of their non-Dakota enemies, your common skin color did not grant you any mercy. Godfrey's testimony at the Camp Release trials implicated Mazabombdoo and Tazoo in the murder of Francis Patoile, but it should be noted that this was not a crime in the eyes of the Dakota because the concept of non-combatants did not exist in their culture of war.

