

Lawrence Protects Riggs' Party of Refugees

Day One

It was the saddest day of Reverend Riggs' life. Not only would his mission be destroyed, but those who claimed that the Indians could not be Christianized would feel vindicated by his failure. He felt like a coward abandoning the people and the home that he loved.

Lorenzo Lawrence, however, did not see the reverend as a failure. He was determined that Riggs and his people would reach safety unharmed so that one day they might return to the mission. After all, the Hazelwood Republic was as much his life's work as it was anyone's. To that end he had devised a plan to protect the missionaries whether Reverend Riggs liked it or not, and that morning he had recruited 23 volunteers to help him. One group of the men would travel ahead of the missionary party, out of sight, while another group would trail secretly behind. Additional men on horseback would act as flankers and enable communication between the lead and trailing parties. Lawrence had his men dress for battle in the traditional way, with breechcloths and eagle feathers, to show that they meant business, and hopefully to avoid an ambush by other Dakota if they were discovered.

"If you meet any Dakota braves," he told his men, "tell them that those who follow are under the protection of the Wahpeton. If they ask, say that you are from Red Iron's village. Mdewakanton probably will not know you. Show no fear, but do not challenge them directly. Just say that you are protecting these whites for Red Iron. If they try to pass and do not outnumber you, fight them. If you are outnumbered, let them pass by, but then fight them from cover. We in the back will hear the shots and come forward."

When the missionaries started down the road to Fort Ridgley, Lawrence sent his lead party downriver to cross ahead of them unseen. The flankers were sent out on horseback to the north and east, and the trailing party followed discreetly behind.

Only one member of the Riggs' party was armed. Williamson Moore had come from Ohio with his new bride for their honeymoon to see real Indians, and they had been staying at the mission when the war broke out. Riggs would not let any of his own people carry guns, but he could not control Moore. And of course, he had no idea that Lawrence and his

men were following them in the shadows.

The Riggs party spent their first night on the trail near Hawk Creek. They had not covered more than half a dozen miles on that day. Lorenzo Lawrence was glad to see that they at least had sense enough not to build any fires. A little after dark, two of the men assigned as flankers came into Lawrence's camp a quarter of a mile behind the Riggs party. They reported no sightings of Mdewakantons. Lawrence assigned two new men to be flankers the following morning, and then left to spend the night with the lead element of his little army.

Lawrence circled the Riggs' camp to the north, and after a little over an hour located the camp of the lead element, announcing his presence with a prearranged birdcall.

"Who is it?" called a voice in the dark.

"Lawrence!" Lorenzo replied.

"Come in then," said the voice, which belonged to Lorenzo's cousin, Jacob Hawk Wing. The two shook hands and walked to where the others were camped. Lawrence was offered some dried meat, which he gladly accepted, then squatted on his blanket to eat.

"What have you seen?" asked Lawrence as he chewed a stringy mouthful.

"Nothing on the road, but scouts found many dead up near Sacred Heart," replied Jacob.

"Who saw this?" asked Lawrence.

"I did," answered a young man sitting nearby. "There were many burned houses, and many bodies. A large group of whites were killed, many women and children. Even the oxen were shot dead."

"Hmmm," grunted Lawrence, pausing to think for a moment. "We must have scouts out before daybreak. I think we will meet Mdewakanton tomorrow. I will stay with you tonight."

Day Two

Lorenzo Lawrence heard his name being called and turned just in time to see Jacob Hawk Wing riding through the brush from the north. Gray clouds scudded across the sky and a light rain was beginning to fall. The rider slowed his mount to a walk as he approached and raised his right hand in greeting.

"Ho, Brother Lawrence," he said, as he pulled his horse to a halt.

“What have you seen, Brother?” asked Lawrence, taking the horse’s rope.

“No Dakota, but plenty of dead whites - many women and children. It was not a good thing to see,” said the rider.

Lawrence nodded. He was not surprised, considering the number of corpses they had found on the main trail.

“Joshua Many Hail sends a message from the rear,” continued Jacob. “Four white men with horses and guns have joined the party. They came down the trail from the west.”

“Were our men seen?” asked Lawrence.

“They say no. The whites made much noise as they came. When our men saw that they were white, they let them pass.”

“They are staying with Reverend Riggs then?”

“Yes.”

“Uhhmm, we will watch for them. You did well to let us know, Brother.” The rider nodded and turned his mount back toward the north. Lawrence already had one man keeping an eye on the progress of the whites, but he sent another back about eighty yards in case the four newcomers decided to ride ahead of the group. He did not want his men to be taken for hostiles and get into a gun battle with the strangers. As long as the four men stayed with the Riggs’ party, things would be all right.

The Riggs party went into camp having covered only ten miles. The children cried and complained because of the cold and wet, but the adults knew it was too dangerous to build a fire. Reverend Riggs was not happy about the arrival of the four strangers. They were not overtly threatening and kept to themselves, but something about them did not seem right to the reverend. That they were all well-armed was more of a liability than a benefit in Riggs’ eyes. It also made him more suspicious, since they did not appear to be farmers or traders. He would have asked them to leave, but it did not seem like the Christian thing to do.

“Why do the white people make so much noise?” whispered Jacob Hawk Wing. “Even when they think they are being quiet, they make more noise than ten times the number of Dakota would.”

“Perhaps they believe that the Lord will protect them,” replied Lorenzo Lawrence with a smile. “So far, he has.”

Both men were lying on their bellies on the wet ground, peering through the bushes at Riggs' camp. Lawrence wanted to get a good look at the four newcomers, and they were easy to pick out. They made him uneasy as well, not only because each man had a rifle and a sidearm tucked in his belt, but because they carried themselves in an odd manner, and their clothes did not seem to fit. They looked self-conscious, as if they hoped the missionaries would not notice their oddities.

Lawrence slid backwards, tapping Jacob on the shoulder to indicate that he should follow. The two men stayed low as they moved out of sight, then rose to their feet and started back towards their own camp.

"What do you think of the four strangers?" Lawrence asked Jacob once they were well out of hearing range.

"Something is not right about them, Brother Lawrence," Jacob replied. "Something about the way they look at the others."

"Like foxes looking at a flock of chickens?"

"Yes, exactly, but pretending not to be foxes."

Day Three

In some respects, Riggs' party had benefited from their late start and slow pace. The Dakota out raiding settlements and farms were now operating to the north and west while those who intended to attack the fort were mostly in their villages. The heavy rains helped the travelers as well in keeping most of the Indians in their lodges. That night the party made camp almost directly opposite the village of Rice Creek. Forty-eight hours ago, it would have been suicide, but now they occupied a sort of no man's land. Because of their general discomfort and hunger, the party decided to risk building a fire for the purpose of broiling meat and baking bread. The warmth of the fire lifted everyone's spirits, which were at a very low ebb.

The refugees' unseen guardians fretted over their decision to build a fire but did not interfere. As the sky turned dark, a scout on horseback rode in with a messenger from Yellow Medicine. It was Solomon Two Stars, son of Cloud Man and nephew of Little Paul.

"I have important words for Lorenzo Lawrence," he said to the leader of the trailing party.

"Lawrence is out ahead," he was told.

"Take me to him, then," replied Solomon.

After a forty-minute trip around Riggs' camp, Solomon found

Lawrence near the river looking toward the village of Rice Creek. After greeting his long-time friend and inquiring about their journey, Solomon related the messages that he had been sent to deliver.

“The Reverend Williamson will be joining up with your group some time tomorrow,” said Solomon. “Some young fool killed the teacher at Lac Qui Parle, and that changed his mind about staying.”

“Amos Huggins was killed?” asked Lawrence.

“Yes. Red Iron was furious, but the man got away.”

Lawrence shook his head sadly. Huggins had lived among the Wahpeton most of his life and was much loved and respected.

“There is one more thing. Four white men have been seen robbing the bodies of dead whites and the homes of settlers that have been abandoned. Several of our young men have witnessed this being done. Be careful if you see them because they are well armed. We think that they are soldiers that have run away from their fort.”

“I may have already seen them,” replied Lawrence looking up sharply. “I think they may be with the Riggs party right now.”

“They are bad men, Lawrence. Watch them well.”

“I will, Solomon.”

“The Lord be with you, Brother. I must return now.”

The Riggs party felt greatly refreshed after their hot meal the previous evening and the warmth of a fire. When the sun broke through the clouds everyone felt even better. They stopped for lunch at a stream called Birch Coulee and lingered there for over an hour, much to the frustration of their protectors. They were now thirteen miles from the fort, and almost directly north of the agency and Little Crow’s village. On any other day this would have been a very dangerous location, but today, of course, every hostile brave was now at Fort Ridgley preparing to attack.

Located with the lead party of the missionary’s unseen protectors, Lorenzo Lawrence spotted an old Dakota man walking up the road and stepped out in plain view to wave a greeting. The old man waved back and continued on slowly. Lawrence offered his hand as he approached, and the old man’s weathered face broke into a grin as he accepted it.

“What brings you out today, Uncle?” asked Lawrence, returning his smile.

“Ho, this one is going fishing,” he replied. “I am too old for war. Besides it was a foolish idea to begin with.” Then scrutinizing

Lawrence's face, he added, "I do not know you, young man."

"I am Wahpeton, from Yellow Medicine. I am called Towanetaton."

"Ah, yes, I have not been there for many years. All my friends there are probably dead. I am called He Who Shoots with His Left Hand. Hmmm, tell me, if you are dressed for war, why are you not at the Soldier's House?"

"I guard some white missionaries who are a little way to the west, but I am afraid for their safety. Perhaps when you pass them, you could warn them to make haste. I would do it, but I do not want them to know I am here."

"I will tell them they should move swiftly. All the young men are about to attack the Soldier's House!"

"Thank you, Uncle," said Lawrence as he watched the old man shuffle on his way.

Two minutes before Left Hand reached the Riggs party, the Reverend Williamson caught up to the group just as Solomon Two Stars had predicted. They were greeting each other when the old Dakota came into view. The four outsiders cocked their rifles when they saw him, but Reverend Riggs stepped quickly out onto the road and greeted the old man in Dakota. Several others immediately gathered around him to see what he had to say. As promised, he told them about the attack on the fort and urged them to move quickly, since all the whites in the area were either at the fort, captives, or dead. Just at that moment the report of a cannon could be heard in the distance. Everyone packed up quickly, and they were on the move again in ten minutes.

Left Hand watched the party moved off. Then as he turned to continue on to the west, he saw the Wahpeton in the rear party move out onto the road. "More protectors?" he asked as they came by. They looked at him quizzically, but said nothing, leaving him wondering whether they were there to attack or defend the whites. Defend, he decided, or the whites would be under attack already.

Day Four

It was their first encounter with a war party, and Lorenzo Lawrence was hoping that they would not have to fight. But his small group was ready, even though they were outnumbered three to one. According to plan, they identified themselves as members of Red Iron's band, which the Mdewakanton accepted without question. But when he told them that

they were protecting a group of white missionaries, there was some angry grumbling among the braves. Fortunately, the war party was made up mostly of men who had fought under Mankato and Big Eagle. They had not taken part in the raids against white settlers, nor were most inclined to do so now. They had been heading toward New Ulm when the two groups ran into each other.

“Who are these white people?” asked the war party’s leader, Good Thunder. He sounded more curious than hostile.

“Missionaries from Yellow Medicine,” replied Lawrence. “The Reverend Riggs and the Reverend Williamson are their leaders. They are holy people, not traders. The rest are mostly women and children.”

“Uhhh, I have heard of these men. They are known as friends of the Dakota,” said Good Thunder thoughtfully. “We are going to the place where the cottonwood grows by the river. There will be a big fight there today. They must not come that way. I cannot speak for others, but we do not fight women and children.”

Lawrence breathed a sigh of relief as Good Thunder led his party down the New Ulm road. He decided that they could not allow the missionaries to go to New Ulm, even if that meant revealing themselves.

Just at that moment, a flanker approached them with the news that the missionaries were turning away from the fort. “They are taking the old road that goes north of the fort, Brother Lawrence,” he said without dismounting. “There is much argument among them. Some wanted to go to the fort, others to New Ulm, and others to Henderson.”

“What did they decide?” asked Lawrence.

“They will not go to the fort, but have not decided on the other two places.”

“They must not go to New Ulm! If they turn that way, make noises, animal calls. They will recognize them as signals, and may turn aside. But if they ignore them, come and find me.”

As the sun was setting in the west, Riggs’ party regained the main road leading east. By now they were well beyond the fort and soon came to a fork. One path led southeast to New Ulm and the other northeast toward Henderson. There they stopped to discuss their next move. The flanker watched as a group of men argued for a moment. As instructed, he made the call of the owl loud enough so that they could hear. He saw the men stop arguing and turn their attention toward the path to New

Ulm, where the brave was hidden fifty yards away. He also let his horse eat some grass, which caused the animal to snort with pleasure. It was just enough noise, he hoped, to get their attention.

He could see some of the men ready their firearms, but after a few moments their conversation began again. Soon four of the men, all armed, mounted their horses and started riding toward the brave.

“What is happening, brother?” whispered Lawrence, who appeared beside the flanker without warning.

“They are coming this way, I think. Should I show myself?”

“No, wait!” Lawrence placed a hand on the man’s shoulder to stay him. Only the four riders had left the group, the others were turning in the direction of Henderson. “Let these men pass,” whispered Lawrence. “They are not our concern.”

Twenty minutes later, the only armed man left in the Riggs’ party, the honeymooner, Wilson Morris, who was at the tail end of the procession, thought he heard the crackle of gunfire. He pulled the revolver from his belt and listened carefully but heard nothing more. He stood for several minutes, straining his ears, but only the rustling sounds of the night could be heard. He put away his pistol and hurried after the column.

Author’s note: The safe flight of Riggs’ party seemed little short of miraculous, leading some to speculate that the Dakota must have protected them somehow, which I elaborated into this sub-plot. However, there is no evidence that the Dakota helped them, and certainly Lorenzo Lawrence would not have been involved or he would have mentioned it in his memoirs. The old man, Left Hand, who appeared in this scene shows up later in the novel directing Running Walker to Brown Wing’s Teepee.

