The Grave of Little Crow

When he was a kid, his father was killed when a rifle somehow discharged. A bloody fight for leadership ensued between him and his brother, and Little Crow was wounded in both wrists, scarring his arms so badly he kept them covered for his entire life. But he became the leader of the band of Dakota into which he was born.

Some would say he caved in 1851, when he signed the treaty at Traverse des Sioux, thereby consigning his people to a thin strip of reservation land along the Minnesota River. He took to wearing white men's clothes, joined a church, and started to farm. He visited Washington, a trip which shook the temerity out of a dozens of Native warriors. Pictures of Little Crow show him to be just another white pioneer.

But he wasn't. He was a leader of his Dakota people. When obligations weren't fulfilled and his people were starving, he chose war, even though he was against it. When he did, he went all in, as leaders do.

He is the only man buried in the cemetery at the River Bend church, Flandreau, South Dakota, who has a war named after him, Little Crow's War. Today, people call what happened 150 years ago “the Dakota War of 1862,” but "Little Crow's War" is also a fitting description, even though he knew himself it wouldn’t end well.

To avoid what was to come, he and others fled to Canada when the fighting ceased; therefore, he was not among those thirty-some hung at Mankato in December of 1862, the largest mass hanging in American history. But soon he returned home and was killed in gun fight when two white settlers stumbled on him and his son.

For a time, no one knew who lay there dead in the grass. No matter--he was, after all, an Indian, so his body was dragged up and down the streets, fire crackers set off in his eyes and ears before his head was cut off. Those who killed him got $75 for his scalp; one was cited by the legislature for honorable service.

Eventually, his scarred wrists identified him as Little Crow, chief of the Dakota, whose warriors had killed almost 500 settlers--men, women, and children, slaughtered them.

Years later, his remains were given to a grandson. Right there in the cemetery at River Bend Presbyterian Church, his remains are today, one hopes, at rest.
The inscription on his stone is part of the reason he's still regarded, by some, as a hero. In August of 1862, Little Crow knew what was going to happen once Dakota warriors raided the agency that wouldn't give them food that belonged to them. He knew a fight would not end well, but he led his warriors anyway--"Therefore I'll die with you." You can read that line on his stone--bottom line.

Stop by sometime. Chances are, his stone is the only one bearing a name you might have heard of.

Little Crow's story is staggering in every way. He led a rebellion that slaughtered what a white man like me can't help thinking of as innocent people, immigrant homesteaders, whole families, some of whom actually knew him. Some attended the same church.

But Little Crow was to some--to many--a great hero. Still is. You don't have to believe that to be true, but if you can’t believe it, you really should try to understand anyway.

River Bend Church is not so far from here, but you've got to hunt to find it. I don't know of a tour bus that would take you there. You're very much on your own.

But a story like Little Crow's, in this fair Siouxland of ours, is never all that far away, no matter where you are.

I find that thought humbling whether or not I’m walking in a cemetery.