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“The Day of Realization”: A review essay of Abbie Gardner’s *The Spirit Lake Massacre and Captivity of Abbie Gardner*



by James Calvin Schaap

Without the horror, the blood, the grief, the lifelong sadness, there could not have been the triumph. That’s the story here.

Abbie Gardner was just thirteen when her family set down a perilous homestead out front of the wave of white newcomers to a region of the country few Euro-Americans had ever seen: Iowa’s northwest corner.

Years after the Inkpaduta and his Wahpakute

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(Waa-pa-koot’-ee) band wreaked travesty on the Gardner family and the thirty-some others they also murdered, Abbigail wrote a memoir about what she’d suffered at the hands of those who’d murdered her mother, her father, and her little brother, and then held her in frightful bondage for about four months.

Her memoir, *The Spirit Lake Massacre and the Captivity of Miss Abbigail Gardner* (1885), contributed to a genre that had already gathered fascinated readers here and abroad, ever since the publication of a 17th-century predecessor, *A Narrative of the Capture and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, (1682), a memoir subtitled *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*. Rowlandson’s *Capture and Restoration* was America’s first “best-seller,” a white woman kidnapped and mistreated by hideous warriors in bright red war-paint. It was also the progenitor of a genre scholars refer to as “captivity narratives,” stories that attract audiences by what is unthinkable repulsive and therefore undeniably fascinating.

Abbie Gardner Sharp (she married soon after her freedom was purchased) probably knew the popularity of captivity narratives. If she didn’t, someone in her acquaintance would have known. That she did, however, doesn’t mean the book she wrote—and later peddled at the scene of the crimes—was just dime novel material. *The Spirit Lake Massacre* is an honest, heartfelt, and fascinating read—of both

tale and teller.

That the Spirit Lake Massacre is common knowledge among those who live in the neighborhood is probably not a valid assumption. For descendants of Iowa pioneers like the Gardners, the dark tales that rose from Manifest Destiny are easier *not* to remember. Most Iowans know little about the Ioways, even less about how it is the Ioway tribe has lived in Oklahoma for almost 200 years.

The Massacre

Some background is relevant. Be warned: it's bloody.

In March of 1857, the Gardner family had just moved to land in a region unsettled by white folks. They were the cutting edge of a cultural wave that had begun in 1620 at the Plymouth Colony: white folks assuming the land to be free and open for settlement, even though their squatting threatened the indigenous people who lived there.

Winter never departed that particular March, the temperatures as low as temperatures can dip here, deep snow sharply crusted to make walking any distance almost impossible.

For the Gardners, a band of Indians coming to their door was not rare. Neither was talk. When the Wahpekutes came, Abigail's father picked up his rifle; but her mother, Abbie remembers, told him to put it down. "If we have to die," she told him, "let us now die innocent of shedding blood." Thus, the Gardners allowed Inkpaduta's men into their cabin and cooked up pancakes for breakfast.

Later, when their guests returned, they demanded flour. When Abbie's father turned to get what little they had, one of them shot him through the heart. Her mother attempted to push a rifle barrel away and was clubbed, then dragged outside and killed "in the most cruel and shocking manner," Abbie says. Abbie was little more than a child. In a few moments, both her parents lay dead.

That left her alone with three children. Two were her brothers; the other belonged to an older married sister who happened to be away. The Wahpakutes grabbed the children, dragged them outside, and clubbed all three to death:

After ransacking the house, and taking whatever they thought might be serviceable, such as provisions, bedding, arms and ammunition; and

after the bloody scalping knife had done its terrible work; I was dragged from the never-to-be-forgotten scene. No language can ever suggest, much less adequately portray, my feelings as I passed that door.¹

What happened at the Gardner cabin was the first act of a string of atrocities along the shore of the lake, a string that, a day later, extended into the town we know today as Jackson, Minnesota. The night before that attack, Abbie remembers seeing the same warriors, her family's killers, dress once again for battle. They might have killed all the residents had there not been a warning. Even so, Inkpaduta's men plundered what they could and killed seven more settlers, including another eight-year-old boy. To say those victims were murdered *unmercifully* seems redundant, but consider it understatement.

In all, Inkpaduta's band killed as many as 40 settlers in the three-day rampage and took four women captives, including young Abbie Gardner.

Any telling of the story cannot deny that the Wahpekutes had cause, as their descendants will say; the existence of the tribe and their freedom were at stake. From an indigenous point of view, what Inkpaduta accomplished was what they had set out to do: clear the area of white settlers, the illegal immigrants. That, they did—for a time.

Inkpaduta

Even before the massacre, Inkpaduta, the "chief" of the Wahpekute band, was considered dark as sin itself by white settlers—and for good reason. He'd been committed to the area of the Little Sioux River, where he had managed to make few friends among the settlers. But the level of hideous carnage the band had reached that late winter day was new and beyond imagination.

Like several other Sioux headmen, Inkpaduta refused to buy into the treaty/reservation system, the white man's view of how "Indians" should live. He despised the enforced settlement created by treaties. The Minnesota State Historical Society describes the Treaty of 1851, signed just north of St. Peter, Minnesota, just six years previous, this way:

At Traverse des Sioux, the Sisseton and Wahpeton bands of the Dakota ceded 21 million acres.

At Mendota, the Mdewakanton and Wahpekute bands ceded about 14 million acres. The combined payment was about \$3,075,000. Most of this money was to be paid in the form of annuities. At Traverse des Sioux, Dakota leaders signed—some later said they were tricked into signing—the infamous “Traders’ Paper.” This agreement turned over most of the Dakotas’ cash payments to their mixed-blood relatives and to traders, who had allowed debts to mount over the years in expectation of tapping into the flow of the government’s “Indian money.”²

Signing the treaty meant being forced to live and stay within the boundaries of a territory twenty miles wide along the Minnesota River. Buffalo hunts west of the Missouri River kept people in food for some time; more than that, however, the hunt had become a ritual with significant cultural and religious significance. Not being able to leave the reservation meant the death of a way of life. Inkpaduta was unwilling to cede that way of life to the Great Father in Washington or the settlers swarming into a region they’d always considered free. Moreover, annuities were frequently late; some never came. Some were disgusting.

Inkpaduta had lost a friend and blood relative brutally murdered along with his wife and children, all of them killed by a white man, a much-hated liquor peddler. After the murders, that man had gone farther west to avoid prosecution. When, later, Inkpaduta attempted to get justice from white courts, he came away claiming he’d received nothing but indifference.

That the Wahpekutes had cause to fight the new settlers is understandable: white people had no right to take land that had always been theirs. But the Wahpakutes’ brutality left pioneer families throughout the region repulsed and fearful and therefore vigilant. For hundreds of miles in every

direction, new white settlers left their farms and circled up behind quickly constructed walls to escape the carnage they assumed was coming.³

The Captivity

For three long months, Abbie Gardner, captured by her family’s killers, became a slave to the Inkpaduta’s band until she was sold for horses and blankets and ammunition.⁴

During her captivity, her suffering was immense. However, if anxious readers of other “captivity narratives” expected to find multiple gruesome descriptions of the degradation she suffered, they may well have been disappointed. Her telling does not deliver the tabloid spectacle readers a century ago—or even today—

might have expected or still expect. Not only does her story not indulge in sensational details, it takes odd turns into unexpected lyrical descriptions of time and place, descriptions that seem created by someone unaffected by the suffering she was going through.

When Inkpaduta ran from the white men he knew would come after him, he went north and west to open country and arrived at the

eastern banks of the Big Sioux River, near what is Flandreau, South Dakota, today. The orphaned Abbie Gardner, clearly taken by the landscape around her, seems unperturbed by the fact that each day, each hour, takes her farther and farther west, away from safety and farther into the wilderness:

The natural scenery along the Big Sioux is grand and beautiful. From the summit of the bluffs, the eye can view thousands of acres of richest vale and undulating prairie; while through it, winding along like a monstrous serpent, is the river, its banks fringed with maple, oak, and elm.

She understands that this bit of reverie is out of place, so she adds what needs to be said: “But alas, how could we! The helpless captives of these

What happened at the Gardner cabin was the first act of a string of atrocities along the shore of the lake, a string that, a day later, extended into the town we know today as Jackson, Minnesota.

inhuman savages could see no beauties in nature or pleasures in life.”⁵

While the band and its captives are at this very spot on the Big Sioux River, she describes the fate of four women taken captive during the Spirit Lake Massacre: two were “sold,” then released; the other two were murdered. One, 19-year-old Elizabeth Thatcher, who was pregnant, sensed real danger and whispered to Abbie to tell her husband, should she die, that she loved him. That day, Elizabeth was beaten to death while struggling to stay afloat in the Big Sioux. Abbie watched her being tortured, then murdered by killers who made a game of her dying. When Elizabeth swam against the current and made it back to shore, her tormentors did not let her get out of the water:

She was here met by some of the other Indians, who were just coming upon the scene; they commenced throwing clubs at her, and with long poles shoved her back into the angry stream. As if nerved by fear, or dread of such a death, she made another desperate effort for life, and doubtless would have gained the opposite shore; but here again she was met by her merciless tormentors and was beaten off as before. She was then carried down by the furious, boiling current of the Sioux; while the Indians on the other side of the stream were running along the banks, whooping and yelling, and throwing sticks and stones at her, until she reached another bridge. Here she was finally shot by one of the Indians in another division of the band, who was crossing with the other two captives, some distance below.⁶

An odd, disjointed style

Oddly enough, just a few pages before the description of that vicious murder, Gardner describes the famous pipestone quarries in a passage whose style could well be lifted from a travel brochure:

Our journey led through the famous pipe-stone quarry, in Pipestone county, Minnesota. It is situated on a small tributary of the Big Sioux, called Pipestone Creek. The surface of the country is broken and picturesque, abounding in bluffs and cliffs. But its principal attraction, of course, is a layer of peculiar and beautiful rock, highly prized by the Indians and no doubt valu-

able to the whites. The cliffs here are similar to those at Luverne, but smaller. Beneath these, on a level tract of land, is found the precious pipestone. The stratum is about fourteen inches thick and is overlaid by four feet of other rock, and about two feet of earth, which must be removed before the coveted rock is reached. It is softer than slate, entirely free from grit, and not liable to fracture. When first taken out, it is soft and easily cut with ordinary tools, hardly dulling them more than wood does. On exposure to the air, it becomes hard and is capable of receiving a high polish. It had already been used for mantels, table-tops, and the like, as well as for ornaments, and is doubtless destined to more extensive use. In color it varies from light pink to deep, dark red; while some of it is mottled with all these shades, giving great variety.⁷

These disjunctions in the narrative are a problem that at least one Amazon reviewer observed: “I felt like she very lightly touched on her childhood, the Massacre, her captivity. There was a lot of back and side history of the Sioux and other tribes, the US government, etc. I was hoping for more of what she actually endured personally.”

What Abbie did endure is there in the memoir, but details are sometimes hidden beneath and behind other official reports of the events and her own interest in both the region and its aboriginals.⁸ If Abbigail Gardner knew what “captivity narrative” readers were looking for, she didn’t deliver the details, even though the brutal truth of what happened is here.

Why? For what reason would Abbie Gardner Sharp hesitate to do what she might have done in her own book? It seems clear that her reluctance to overdo the violence did not originate in emotional reticence. She wrote the story first just a few years after her release, but a house fire destroyed that manuscript. This 1885 version clearly took her more years to write and publish, but she was not shy about touting it. Her life post-capture was not without difficulty; married at 14, she lost children, suffered a divorce, then moved back, oddly enough, to Spirit Lake. When, years later, she and her son could afford it, she bought the very log cabin from which she’d been taken captive and where her fam-

ily was murdered, then lived there for the rest of her life.

Once in residence there, she set up her own gift shop, where she sold her memoir and told her story to the vacationers who had begun to make Lake Okoboji a popular tourist destiny. She became Spirit Lake's own Buffalo Bill, a showman, a carnival barker right there where her sadness began, just beside Arnolds Park's famed wooden roller coaster.

Abbigail Gardner admits she suffered from something akin to PTSD: "Never have I recovered from the injuries inflicted upon me while a captive among the Indians," she tells her reader late in the memoir. "Instead of outgrowing them, as I hoped to, they have grown upon me as the years went by, and utterly undermined my health."⁹

She does not seem to have been emotionally silenced by the brutality she suffered; she spent years retelling it. If that's true, then why does the tone of the narrative so frequently seem reluctant and scattered? How can we explain the oddly disjointed memoir of a woman who returned to the scene of her horror only to replay the story a thousand times and turn the cabin itself into an Okoboji tourist sideshow?

Abbie's hawking her book requires psychological analysis I won't attempt, but the book's mottled character and reputation may have suffered from its being misunderstood—by both reader and writer.

"The Epoch of Advancement"

Without a doubt, I read her book with an agenda, but I would like to believe that the style and the character of *The Spirit Lake Massacre and the Captivity of Miss Abbigail Gardner* can be best understood by the author's own testimony late in the book. In the chapter titled "The Epoch of Advancement," she explains that she wrote her

memoir twice, then edited again when she gained blessed relief from what she described as her own lifelong pain.

How exactly did that lifelong pain disappear? The agent, she testifies, was Jesus Christ, whose spiritual, healing powers she found by way of Mary Baker Eddy and Christian Science:

... after long meditation I resolved to give this new yet old religion a trial, with little faith or hope that I could be relieved by its ministry. However, to the great surprise of all who knew me, I was healed by this demonstrable truth.¹⁰

The passage is "testimony": a newfound faith brought her to the Throne and "the living Christ," she says, "who forgives our sins, and heals all our diseases."

In *Massacre and Captivity*, Abbie Gardner Sharp is herself conflicted by two stories of her life as a captive of the band that slaughtered her family. One of those stories is something of a "captivity narrative," replete with bloody evidence to describe her suffering and explain her hatred for the murderers. But I am arguing here that a different Abbigail created a subsequent and different edition. That Abbigail claimed to have been healed and

blessed, even forgiven by that same "living Christ."

The captivity narrative includes descriptions one might expect from victims of such crimes. Abbie Gardner includes lengthy reports, one of them written by a man who led a search team looking for others "who alike fell victims to the merciless savages' inordinate thirst for human blood."¹¹

She too had cause to speak the way that man did. But in her "captivity narrative," she at times goes out of way to lend sympathy, not to the killers but to the plight of "the Indian." She takes the opportunity to offer admonition to her own people as well. At one point, she describes the culture of

One can't help but wonder whether, after her conversion, she didn't herself determine that the story of her suffering could have a more blessed effect if she included less bloody spectacle and more reconciliation, more healing and forgiveness.

Dakota men who, as boys, are given eagle feathers when they kill their first enemy warrior. At that point, she stops and gives this warning:

It seems to me that Christian statesmen, and all those who have a duty to perform toward the rising generation in civilized nations, might find a lesson in this. Is there not altogether too much glorification of deeds of blood? Too much talk about gunpowder and glory? Patriotism is a noble emotion; but love of country is one thing; love of war is quite another.¹²

One can't help but wonder whether, after her conversion, she didn't herself determine that the story of her suffering could have a more blessed effect if she included less bloody spectacle and more reconciliation, more healing and forgiveness.

Evidence for the reality of her conversion, not just in soul but in body and strength, seems to me to be evident. What I'm suggesting is that her "conversion" lends the narrative a softness readers would not have expected in a "captivity narrative," a softness that makes the story feel broken or disjointed. She could well have made the book a greater financial and even artistic success; but, as she herself maintains, finding God changed Abbie Gardner, made her story less sensational and therefore less marketable.

Read instead as a traditional Christian testimony, the book feels different. After her conversion to "the living Christ," Ms. Gardner's attempt at a dramatic climax for the memoir begins with her rescue by three Dakotas, three "farmer Christians,"¹³ but it doesn't conclude there or with her return to "civilization."

The real climax of the story, what she herself might call the *eternal* climax of the story, occurs when she travels to Flandreau, South Dakota. From a decidedly Christian interpretation of her story, the seemingly impossible reconciliation that happened there was an event that would not have happened without war, but neither would it have happened without both sides—Ms. Gardner and the Santees—wanting to reconcile, or at least, in Christian language, wanting peace in their hearts

Flandreau

Flandreau, South Dakota, is a small town somewhat less than an hour west of the greatly revered Catlinite quarries at Pipestone, Minnesota. A few white settlers were in the region when, in 1868, 35 years after the massacre, many Santee Sioux families moved north and east from their reservation in Nebraska to claim farmland there, around a bend in the Big Sioux River.

Abigail Gardner begins her narration of the Flandreau story this way:

On Sunday, September 26, accompanied by C. H. Bennett and wife, and H. L. Moore and wife, a drive of some fifteen miles was made to Flandrau [sic], visiting on this occasion the Indian Episcopal and Presbyterian churches. It seemed as though a miracle had been wrought in this region and the day of realization was at hand. Here at Flandreau the red man and the white man are brought face to face in daily contact, living, as it were, next door neighbors, the Indians commanding the utmost respect of the white residents.¹⁴

What she says she witnessed in Flandreau is a degree of shalom she had never seen before on the frontier. Something that clearly thrilled her was going on in this small South Dakota town. Understanding her incredulity at the "utmost respect" she witnessed, once again, requires some historical background.

The Santee Story

Historians have claimed—as Ms. Gardner does in her memoir—that the Dakota of the Minnesota River reservation were emboldened by Inkpaduta's crimes and his having escaped punishment. That he and his band roamed free after the slayings meant depredations against settlers showed the white man's disregard for what the Wahpakutes had done: Inkpaduta's freedom made more attacks easier. After all, well-defined links existed between the blood shed on the shores of Spirit Lake in 1857, and Lake Chetek and New Ulm in 1862, in the Dakota War. The Wahpakutes and the Santees spoke a similar language; they were all Dakota Sioux people.

What Abbie Gardner doesn't say in her descrip-

tion of the Flandreau visit is that there may have been a handful of Santees at Flandreau—who, years earlier, were part of Inkpaduta's bloody band. In that town, in two churches, she had to know that.

But on Sunday, September 26, 1892, Abbie Gardner Sharp wasn't the only soul in those churches who had suffered horrors; so had the Santees who were that day sitting in hand-cut pews. She doesn't mention their suffering, but, again, it's impossible to believe she didn't know. It was the Santees, led by their headman Little Crow, who had raided the Lower Sioux Agency at Redwood Falls on August 18, 1862, the frontier town of New Ulm a day later, and Fort Ridgely on the 20th and the 21st. During the Dakota War, the total number of settlers murdered in a one solitary month of raids will never be known; historians estimate between 450 and 800, all of them murdered after the bloody fashion of Abbie's own family and their neighbors.

During the Dakota War, hate boiled over into death throughout the Minnesota River valley. When it was over, mass trials, some no more than five minutes long, determined the fate of the more than 400 Dakota warriors accused of atrocities. When tallied, the military tribunal found 303 men guilty of rape and murder, and thereby sentenced to be hanged.

In December 1862, the nation was preoccupied with the Civil War. The list of convicted warriors was sent to Washington, where President Lincoln surveyed names and stories' charges, then narrowed the list of guilty to 39, one of whom was later exonerated.

Thus, on December 26, 1862, 38 Dakota men were hanged when a man whose wife and family had been killed at Lake Shetek massacre pulled a rope on the gallows erected in Mankato, Minnesota, for the public to witness

A thousand more Santees, mostly women and children, were interned on Pike Island, near Ft.

Snelling, where hundreds died of infectious diseases that winter. The 275 convicted men who'd not been hanged were, early the next spring, shipped down the Mississippi to a fort near Davenport, Iowa, where they spent the next two years as prisoners.

The rest of the Dakotas interned on Pike Island were also sent down river, then up the Missouri to Crow Creek, South Dakota, where they suffered through drought and heat and long hard winters, before begging the government to let them go south to Missouri River land and a reservation in northeast Nebraska.

Hundreds of women, children, and old men were moved once more to the place where some of their descendants live yet today, a small Santee reservation where the tribal museum includes photographs of some of those hanged warriors, freedom fighters, hanged at Mankato. The museum's prize possession is mounted in a window box on the south wall—the rifle of Little Crow himself, killer to some, hero to others.

During that deathly winter on Pike Island, something fierce happened to the Dakota people amid their suffering. It is not easy to talk about the phenomenon because historians do not

propose eternal answers to spiritual questions. But what happened just before those who were hanged sang their death songs was what one might call a mass "conversion." An immense spiritual about-face was somehow passed along from death row and into the internment camp, where their families were shivering and too often dying in a Minnesota winter. While fevers and disease raged, so did a full-blown religious awakening. Missionaries who stayed with the Santee people before and after incarceration, and were angrily reviled for visiting the savages, claimed the Holy Spirit came upon the people and created a mass conversion.

The Rev. Stephen R. Riggs, who spent his life as a missionary to the Dakota, explained what happened this way:

Missionaries who stayed with the Santee people before and after incarceration, and were angrily reviled for visiting the savages, claimed the Holy Spirit came upon the people and created a mass conversion.

The circumstances were peculiar, the whole movement was marvelous, it was like a “nation born in a day.” The brethren desired to be divinely guided; and after many years of testing have elapsed, we all say that was a genuine work of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁵

While this reader may be less sure of what happened than was Rev. Riggs, my judgement of what happened spiritually in Mankato, and then on Pike Island, or even to Abbie Gardner, what forces ignited the fire or sustained it, is not my concern. Such “conversions” happen in a thousand ways. What interests me is the effects of a degree of spiritual enlightenment that changes hearts and minds of people who believe they have come into the presence of a living God. What is of importance to me is what happened in the lives of those people as a result of their “conversions.”

In 1869, some of the Santees from that small Nebraska reservation determined to take up farming on their own land in the neighborhood of Flandreau. What Abbie Gardner doesn't tell her readers is that many of the Dakota Abbie met on that visit to Flandreau would never forget their own tribulation, the great sadness of the Dakota War, just seven years—and so much suffering—in the past.

The Day of Realization

Abbie Gardner doesn't tell the reader that Santee story, a story she had to know.

When she met the Flandreau Dakota, she stood before men and women who knew very well what had happened to her 35 years before. Clearly more important to her was that she also stood before people she believed were, as she had been, washed in the blood of the lamb. “It seemed as though a miracle had been wrought in this region,” she says, “and the day of realization was at hand.”

I would like to suggest that the climax of Abbie Gardner's story is not her release from captivity, which occurs two-thirds of the way through the memoir, but her visit to Flandreau, where a woman who had witnessed horrible death and was held captive by those who'd harmed those she loved, met and spoke with Native men and women who'd experienced, in outline, a similar story, people who all, by their own testimony, had experienced immense depths of sadness, but also the great relief

of forgiveness. Everyone in those two churches had suffered greatly but felt themselves redeemed. Without the horror, the blood, the grief, the life-long sadness, and without Jesus Christ, there could not have been the triumph of that particular moment in the company of those particular people. That's the story I think Abbie Gardner is telling in this odd, old blessing of a memoir.

That grand moment of peace, not war, what Abbigail Gardner calls her very own “day of realization,” is the climax of the story because it was, for her, the most amazing event of all, an occasion for reconciliation, not degradation, of joy in the blood of the lamb.

And all of that, she says so emphatically, happened within sight of the very place on the Big Sioux River where she could never forget the death of her companion in captivity—19-year-old, pregnant Elizabeth Thatcher:

On an elevation about one mile north of town . . . a charming view can be obtained of the picturesque valley of the Big Sioux. From this point I beheld a promising young city (named in honor of the man who conceived the plan of my rescue¹⁶), two Indian churches, and the river where I stood on the bridge of driftwood and witnessed the death of Mrs. Thatcher some thirty years ago.¹⁷

She was so close to that riverbank, she claimed she could see the place where Mrs. Thatcher was beaten to death in the swirling rush of water:

The past and present scenes rose up and passed before me like a living, moving panorama, and the change that had come to pass on the stage of life seemed truly marvelous. We attended the services in these churches, listening to impressive sermons, delivered in the Sioux tongue, to large, well dressed, and attentive congregations. What had once seemed an impossibility, had become a living reality—a body of Sioux Indians, with religious thought, congregated together to praise Him whose name is Love!¹⁸

Some readers may have anticipated the publication of her memoir as yet another “captivity narrative.” Those readers couldn't help but be disappointed because Abbie Gardner could not tell her story accurately without the stunning moments at

Flandreau. She wanted badly to claim she'd been healed of those maladies that kept her an invalid, freed by her belief in Jesus. For that woman, standing in the circle of men and women who could have murdered her family, men and women she knew to be mutual sufferers, then professing the name of Jesus together, was a "truly marvelous" event unlike any she says she could ever have imagined. It is a stunning moment.

Does all of that make Ms. Gardner's book a better memoir? I don't believe so. *Massacre and Captivity* still feels uneven, strangely disjointed, an awkward mix of horror and beatitude amid a file drawer full of historical reports, and a memoir that may well be withholding some of its own secrets.

But this reader, so many years later, finds it much easier to understand the memoir as a Christian "testimony" than a captivity narrative; and so may others, especially those who, like me, share Abbie Gardner's faith in "a living Christ."

River Bend Church, Flandreau

I'd like to believe that Abbie Gardner's memoir describes a place in Flandreau just up the hill from town where, today, stands "the oldest continuously used church in the state of South Dakota," or so the sign out front says—River Bend Church. The building was constructed in 1873; the original structure is on the grounds of the Murray County Museum, in Flandreau.

River Bend Church is on a piece of ground away from things, a quiet and beautiful place. A cemetery stands just west of the building and tells its own incredible stories, gravestones etched with Bible verses in English and the Dakota language.

It just seems fitting that even the much-hated and much-loved Little Crow, in peace, is here too, far corner.

If you stop there sometime, you'll almost certainly be alone. But I'm guessing that's where Abbie Gardner stood one day in September, 1892, and saw before her death and life in a vision something akin to a new heavens and new earth, on a day she calls her "Day of Realization."

Endnotes

1. Abbie Gardner-Sharp, *The Spirit Lake Massacre and the Captivity of Abbie Gardner*, Expanded, Annotated (BIG BYTE BOOKS, Kindle Edition), 37.
2. <http://www.usdakotawar.org/history/treaties/minnesota-treaty-interactive>
3. Just a half hour from Sioux County, pioneer families built Fort Brule to ward off what they believed to be a similar massacre. Today, a historical marker marks the spot.
4. Gardner introduces John Other Day (Anpetutokeca), a "farmer Indian," as one of three Dakota warriors who negotiated her release from captivity. Gardner tells a bit of his story, and claims that the trajectory of his life was changed when he became a Christian.
5. Abbie Gardner-Sharp, *The Spirit Lake Massacre and the Captivity of Abbie Gardner*, Expanded, Annotated (BIG BYTE BOOKS, Kindle Edition), 97.
6. *Massacre and the Captivity*, 97.
7. *Massacre and the Captivity*, 94.
8. Her description of the Yanktons proposes that the Yanktons who lived on the west side of the Big Sioux River had never seen a white woman before. She may well be right.
9. *Massacre and Captivity*, 157.
10. *Massacre and the Captivity*, 173.
11. *Ibid.*, 76.
12. *Massacre and Captivity*, 119.
13. One of those rescuers, a devoted Christian Dakota man named John Other Day, played a significant role in ending the captivity of hundreds of homesteaders—mostly women and children—whom Dakota warriors similarly captured in the 1862 rampage they created throughout their reservation, the Dakota War. Gardner describes him in the story and tells a significant part of his story, even explaining how he was mistreated by his own people after undertaking her release from Inkpaduta.
14. 174-175.
15. Stephen Riggs, Mary and I: *Forty Years with the Sioux* (Chicago: W. G. Holmes, 1880), 189.
16. *Massacre and the Captivity*, 174.
17. *Ibid.*, 176.
18. *Massacre and the Captivity*, 175.