

A Town Named Victory

There's a town there, a small one that likely grows a bit during summer vacation. It's right on the river, Wisconsin side, just across the mighty Mississippi, which is not channeled right there at all and therefore, even today, streaked with cottonwood islands.

At a De Soto tourist lookout down river, a sign claims that, years ago, on a good day, a dry season a man could walk across to Iowa. Imagining a river a person could cross on his or her own two feet helps if you're trying to see what happened at that tiny river town 190 years ago. All those folks at river's edge were trying to do is get to the other side, to a land not yet called Iowa, where they thought they'd be safe.

The renegade Sac chief Black Hawk simply wouldn't stay put where white men told him and his people to live. All he ever wanted, he said, was to live in peace at home on the Rock River a ways south in Illinois, the place where his fathers and mothers were buried. When white people took that land, he fought back in a series of skirmishes historians call The Black Hawk War. It was 1832.

That tiny Mississippi River town nests beneath a river bluff so tall that if it weren't for the others it would seem a foreigner on prairie lands all around. But long ago a glacier left a string huge shoulders on both sides of the river, that must have been a trial to conquer, on horseback or tired feet, warriors and women and children and some old folks so tired and worn some simply resigned themselves to death.

As Gen. Henry Atkinson's pursuit of "the hostiles" pushed west towards the river, they found an old man who'd given up. He could speak English. He told the militia where Black Hawk's people were headed, then directed them towards water for their horses and asked to be taken prisoner. Right there on

some sloping bluff, barely able to stand, the old man was shot. He would have been an encumbrance.

As were all of Black Hawk's people in the 1830s, an encumbrance to a nation stretching itself east to west, shore to shore, taming wilderness land full of nothing but freedom—or so they thought.

When, earlier, Black Hawk and a thousand of his people had returned from hunting, he found his homeland drawn and quartered--no more theirs.

Just a few years later, what happened in the neighborhood of that little town beneath the bluff became a massacre that required two bloody days to finish. Black Hawk's starving people were outnumbered and outgunned. While a steamboat outfitted with canons and cavalry picked off men and women and the children on their backs, folks who tried to swim or cross the river on makeshift rafts, their Sioux enemies, in the employ of the government, waited on the other side of the river, where people who made it across were mercilessly dispatched.

As many as 500 were slaughtered at a place where today there's a little town you can't miss beneath a mammoth bluff.

Here is President Andrew Jackson in 1830--"On Indian Removal."

What good man would prefer a country covered with forests and ranged by a few thousand savages to our extensive Republic, studded with cities, towns, and prosperous farms embellished with all the improvements which art can devise or industry execute, occupied by more than 12,000,000 happy people, and filled with all the blessings of liberty, civilization and religion?

It all happened right there at a town that still carries the name locals gave it 180 years ago after the massacre--Victory. Look for Victory.