

A Family Plot

There's no fort there anymore. Unlike Laramie or Robinson or Scott or Wingate, where you can still almost hear the history, Ft. Randall has only a busted-up chapel and a long, thin graveyard. If a state highway didn't run right by, no one would ever stop and only a few would remember.

Fort Randall's claim to fame is having held Sitting Bull and his people when they returned, entirely diminished, from Canada some few years after Little Big Horn. Once upon a time, the legendary Sitting Bull was incarcerated right here.

Unlike Fort Robinson, where Crazy Horse was murdered; and unlike Fort Laramie, where not one but two vapid treaties were signed--neither of them worth much; Ft. Randall has no storied history. Beauty?--yes, sir, nesting as it does in those wonderful hills just west of the Missouri. Once upon a time it bustled, the only spot west of Yankton where you'd find enough people for a parade.

There's a dam close by at Pickstown, one of several on Old Muddy. There's a sparkling lake and perch and walleye and bass galore, fishing tournaments just about every summer weekend. But if you have the time, stop by the graveyard just up the hill from the old chapel. Take a walk around--it's not all that big and the graves are all marked.

Three of them—a family—caught my attention. I googled the man's name, but came up with nothing. I suppose none of them really ever amounted to much--"DAVID DEZAIRE," the first in line says, "Indian Interpreter." He died May 8, 1875, a year before Little Big Horn. Doesn't say why or how. Ft. Randall is far enough east that it stayed out of danger during the Great Sioux Wars, so I'm guessing DEZAIRE died right there at the fort.

I'm assuming he was Native--or part Native. The name doesn't suggest a racial or ethnic flavor, although it might be French, which would not be strange. Like so many other "mixed bloods," his genetic code may have carried the DNA of some rough-hewn French-Canadian trapper.

And then there's his wife, Ashotia. Don't know how to pronounce that one exactly. Her stone says she was a "colored citizen." Is that simply what somebody charged with writing on the stone wrote in, or does the designation have meaning? And why *citizen*? And why no date of death?

Their daughter Sophie is buried here too. She died on December 22, 1876, a year and a half after her father, and three days before Christmas. If Mom was African-American, Dad was Indian--maybe mixed blood--in the 1890s, Sophie's possibilities would have had a low ceiling. Fifty years before, Washington D. C. had designated an entire [reservation](#) south on the Missouri, just for "mixed-bloods." That's true.

It's a family. Just being buried here beneath stones that still bear their names makes them privileged people. Translators weren't dime a dozen in Dakota Territory, especially if you were worth your salt, trustworthy, responsible.

The DEZAIRE family is long gone now, as is their story. In 1875, they had to have been an odd lot, must have raised eyebrows.

But here's the good news: they were respected, even appreciated. They got stones. They must have had a place here at Ft. Randall. Still do. Even if their stories are gone, their names remain--all three together. Someone even left descriptions. Read 'em for yourselves sometime. Stop by. Pay 'em a visit.

Tell you what--when you get out of the boat, clean the fish, put 'em on ice, drive across the dam to the west side. You'll see the chapel. The graveyard's harder to spot. But go ahead and find it, because even if that's all you'll see of

what little is left of Ft. Randall, those three stones in a bunch are well worth your time. Stop by and pay your respects to mom and dad and their little girl, Sophie.

You don't have to say much. Just promise to take off that cap.