

A Broken Monument for Our Past

What's there today is more of a grave than a memorial. Once upon a time—well, for more than 100 years—an obelisk stood mightily atop that chunk of granite, rose twenty feet into the air above the Missouri River.

But the obelisk is gone. A naked steel bolt reminds you that something once stood there. But then, maybe that's okay. The issues aren't mine to determine.

The memorial is meant to celebrate the Treaty of 1858, the Yankton Treaty, not the first among the Sioux treaties, but right there among the earliest, and, like all of them a testimony to promises broken. I don't know how that obelisk tumbled off, but it probably wasn't winds, no matter how unruly.

The motivation for treaties was essentially the same: undocumented immigrant aliens with white faces and hard to pronounce European names wanted good land occupied by Native people, in this case the Yanktons, who roamed and ruled a massive land triangle that began right here at the mouth of the Big Sioux River.

Impossible as it may be to imagine, the white man's powers-that-be created a delegation of Yankton leaders and brought them to Washington, even though few of them had ever seen a town bigger than Ft. Randall.

What exactly those Yankton headmen did for four long months in the nation's capital can barely be imagined, but history suggests that what kept them there couldn't be classified as entertainment. Smutty Bear, one of the delegations was warned that if he didn't cooperate with the treaty talks, didn't sign, he'd have to walk back to the Missouri River, a sentence Smutty Bear didn't honestly consider punishment at all.

Russell Means says their white hosts rolled out the barrels with frequency, trying to soften up the men who weren't inclined to trade their land for wagons, blankets, and bib overalls. They were interested in buffalo, not farming.

Some say the Yankton delegation finally signed the treaty when they were promised that no white man would take control of the red pipestone quarry where generations of Native people from every tribe and nation had dug stone for pipes and amulets, a sacred place.

For that—and the promise of \$1.6 million over a fifty-year period--the Yanktons gave away (“ceded” is the historical term) 11 million Siouxland acres, some of it under your home or office.

Two names on that memorial are especially fascinating. Struck by the Ree, by legend, was born when Lewis and Clark came up the Missouri in 1803. The Yanktons brought him, a brand new baby, to the fire where the Corps of Discovery was camped. Lewis and Clark wrapped him in an American flag, then pledged that this child would be a leader of his people and a servant of peace.

Which he was. He supported the signing of the treaty in 1858, then kept his own people from joining the Santees during the 1862 Dakota War. He was a man of peace, but he hated the invasion coming through "the Yankton triangle." Just a few years later, Struck by the Ree regretted everything. "I am getting poorer every day," he said. "The white men are coming like maggots. It is useless to resist them. They are many more than we are. We could not hope to stop them. Many of our brave warriors would be killed, our women and children left in sorrow, and still we would not stop them. We must accept it, get the best terms we can get and try to adopt their ways."

Throughout his life, old Ree was half villain, half hero. Worship in the Catholic church where Struck by the Ree attended never began until he was seated, but the famous old chief's house was burned to the ground by those who hated him. His horses were stolen.

It's easy to miss that memorial stone up there on the hill above Greenwood, SD, especially now that the obelisk is gone. But what's left up there on the hill is probably a better image for the story of the Yanktons and the Treaty of 1858.

"Blessed are the peacemakers," the Bible says, but when they sell away the people's soul?

It will probably take a boom truck to reset it. Some guy will have to drive up to the top of that hill, pick up that obelisk, and somehow recap the monument. I'm wondering who's going to pay. Who should? Who can?

Some say the treatment of African and Native Americans throughout the history of this nation is and forever will be "America's Original Sin."

Me? I miss the obelisk towering up there. But then, for a century already, to many that monument has been a kind of grave for a century.