Part 1 of 4.

It was the summer of 1863. As a drought pressed upon the land, the days were exceedingly hot and dry. Fine, dirty dust rose in thick clouds and choked and coated the soldiers and horses as they marched from Minnesota into the young Dakota Territory. Many of the rare sources of water were too alkaline and could only tantalize but not slake the thirst of the long Army columns. Hate, fear, anger, revenge, and sadness filled the minds of the men in the column and the minds of those who they pursued.

It was 150 years ago and the US Army had amassed and launched the 1863 Sibley and Sully Expedition—what would later be known as the Dakota War. As one of the largest offensive operations against Native Americans in history, two Army columns marched into Dakota Territory with the goal of acting in a pincer movement that could entrap and annihilate the Native Americans caught between the columns. Major General Henry Hastings Sibley with his 2,200 infantry soldiers and 800 cavalry troopers encamped in and passed through what is now the heart of Griggs County while Brigadier General Alfred Sully’s 1,200 soldiers moved up the Missouri River. The Army had come to Dakota for multiple reasons, but the primary motive was to seek revenge for the atrocious massacre of upwards of 600 white civilians who were killed by Santee Sioux during an 1862 “paroxysm of rage” in western Minnesota.

The Sibley and Sully Expeditions of 1863-1865 would prove to be some of the most important, but little known, historical events of our nation’s history. The expeditions established an extremely aggressive, and some would argue a genocidal, approach to relations with the Indian nations of the northern plains. Killing struggles would continue for decades and would forever alter the cultures of all involved and long poison relationships between the people.

Incredibly, very few people know about these expeditions or understand the ramifications they had for our nation and the numerous Indian nations of the northern Great Plains. I’ve always attributed the lack of knowledge to the Civil War competition that the Dakota War has always gone up against in the history books and the classrooms. With limited time, most teachers tend to focus on Gettysburg and Vicksburg rather than Whitestone Hill and Kildeer Mountain. Additionally, it’s one of those events in our history that comes under severe moral and ethical criticism. With leaders demanding genocidal elimination of the Native Americans, it’s not real easy to talk about.

Over the next few weeks, in remembrance of the 150th Anniversary of these events, Historical Highlights will focus on the Dakota War of 1862-1865. Next week will focus on the 1862 events in Minnesota that led to the conflict.