Sibley Trail. Part 3 of 4. “The Devil’s Abode”

After the summer of 1862, it was clear that even with the hanging of 38 Santee Dakota and the imprisonment of over 2,000 others, the hostilities were not over—if anything, they were escalating. The Santee continued to raid settlements, and the US military continued to pursue the Santee.

While punishing the Santee for their 1862 massacred continued to be a priority for the US, other motives, including the protection of the advancing American settlement across the continent and keeping open the Missouri River transportation route to the gold fields in Montana, were certainly as important as the punishment of the Santee.

To fulfill their numerous, expansionist goals, in the summer of 1863, the US sent an expedition of two large military columns into Dakota Territory. One column of 1,200 soldiers led by General Alfred E. Sully would begin from Sioux City, Iowa and move up the Missouri River to northern Dakota Territory. The other column, led by General Henry Hastings Sibley, with over 3,000 men was to make a 600 mile trek from Fort Ridgeley, MN to Devil’s Lake—it was to move west to the Sheyenne River and then north along the river.

The leaders of the expedition believed the hostile Santee had congregated at Devil’s Lake after fleeing Minnesota. If Sibley discovered the Santee at the lake he was either to fight them there or hammer them to Sully who was waiting like an anvil on the Missouri.

What Sibley or Sully did not know was that the hostile native forces had actually departed Devil’s Lake months prior and had also rallied the Yanktonai and Teton to their cause. In the spring and summer of 1863, the Dakota force was moving west from Devil’s Lake and probably numbered approximately 6,000 warriors.

The best laid schemes of mice and men often go awry—and that certainly held true for Sully. Due to low snowmelt amounts and a summer drought, the water in the Missouri was too low to permit easy passage of Sully’s supply steamboats. So, although his forces were mobile, they moved very slowly up the river.

Although Sully was crawling along, Sibley made good progress. With 2,200 infantry, 800 cavalry, 150 artillerymen, 100 pioneers, 70 scouts (friendly Sissetons and Wahpeton Santees), and 325 six-mule-team wagons, Sibley’s force was the largest single force to ever take the field in the Indian Wars of the west—it must have been quite the sight.

The trip north, following the Sheyenne, was extremely arduous in that hot and dry summer. Sibley had harsh words for this country, “If the devil were permanently to select residence upon the earth, he would probably choose this particular district for an abode.” Apparently, Sibley didn’t find the same beauty in this area that many of us have found.

On July 17, after awaking at Camp Corning (6 miles east of present-day Dazey) Sibley was informed that a large band of Sioux, up to 600 lodges, had been discovered and were headed west towards the Missouri. Making a small gamble, Sibley moved another 15 miles northwest and established Camp Atchison on the edge of Lake Sibley (approximately 5 miles south and 1 mile east of Binford) and left approximately 1,000 ill or injured men (a population larger than modern day Cooperstown) and a good deal of supplies at the defensible camp.

With his remaining 2,000 soldiers, Sibley left Camp Atchison and changed his northern route to west by southwest. Moving swiftly, two nights later he and his men encamped at Camp Kimball along the Pipestem Creek (5 miles west and 4 miles south of present-day Carrington). The next day the soldiers awoke and continued their march. Moving onto the Missouri Coteau, they marched through the rugged hills and around the numerous pothole lakes to a point 3 miles north and 2.5 miles east of present-day Woodworth, ND where they established Camp Grant.

They awoke the next day to continue the pursuit. When they reached a point approximately 10 miles north of modern-day Tappen, Sibley and his men discovered a large band of Sioux. They quickly encamped, entrenched and while hoping for the best, they expected the worst at Big Mound. . . .

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| ND State Historic Sites - Sibley **Advance** into Dakota Territory | Date of Action |
| Camp Buell | July 3, 1863 |
| Camp Weiser | July 13, 1863 |
| Camp Sheardown | July 14, 1863 |
| Camp Corning | July 16, 1863 |
| Camp Atchison | July 18, 1863 (Arrived) |
| Camp Kimball | July 22,1863 |
| Camp Grant | July 23, 1863 |
| Battle of Big Mound | July 24, 1863 |
| Weiser Confrontation | July 24, 1863 |
| McPhail’s Butte | July 24, 1863 |
| Camp Whitney | July 24, 1863 |