Part 4 of 4

On July 24, Sibley and his column of nearly 2,000 men reached Big Mound, a point 9 miles north of present-day Tappen. It had been five days of hard marching, poor water, and meager meals since they had departed Camp Atchison (just south of present-day Binford). They were headed west by southwest in earnest pursuit of Dakota Indians who his scouts had told him were nearby.

At Big Mound, they caught up with the Dakota. Sibley immediately entrenched along the southern edge of present-day Lake Kunkel. He sent a small group of soldiers and Dr. Josiah S. Weiser, chief surgeon, 1st Regiment of the Minnesota Mounted Rangers, to a point a few hundred yards from Sibley’s entrenchment to communicate with the Dakota. Weiser was sent for his fluency in the Dakota language and his friendships with many of the present Sisseton. As the small group of Indians and Soldiers tried to establish when and where further talks should take place, hostilities escalated until Tall Crown, a Santee Dakota, suddenly shot and killed Weiser—the Battle of Big Mound began.

As Sibley drove south towards the Sioux encampment, the women and children struck the teepees, packed what supplies they could, and fled 15 miles towards Dead Buffalo Lake passing between the buttes and pothole lakes of the area—the Sioux men fought a rearguard action to protect their retreating families.

Like many battles of the Dakota War, the Battle of Big Mound saw few casualties (especially when compared to the Civil War battles being fought in the east). Of the US Army, three soldiers were killed (one of those men was struck by lightning from an electrical storm that raged during the battle)—and approximately 80 Sioux were killed.

In addition to the lives lost, the US Army destroyed considerable amounts of Sioux supplies and foodstuffs. While the battle was considered a clear US victory, Sibley’s men were exhausted by day’s end and forced Sibley to spend another day, July 25, in encampment (Camp Whitney) allowing the Sioux to consider their movement towards the Missouri river and safety.

After the Battle of Big Mound, many of the Sisseton led by Standing Buffalo separated from the more belligerent band of the warriors led by Inkpaduta fled north to the Mouse River. However, Inkpaduta remained at Dead Buffalo Lake and prepared for additional fighting. As the days passed, the Sioux were driven towards the Missouri while clashes erupted on July 26 at Dead Buffalo Lake, July 28 at Stony Lake, and July 29 at the Apple River. In the last days of July, the Sioux had reached and crossed the Missouri River and Sibley decided against further pursuit.

While Sibley had done his best to fulfill his role as the hammer that drove the Dakota towards the waiting anvil of Sully, delays and low river levels meant that Sully was not in position by the time Sibley and the Sioux reached the Missouri. On, August 1, 1863, Sibley assessed his remaining supplies, determined he had just enough to make it back to Camp Atchison, and turned his forces back towards present-day Griggs County. Unlike the trip to the Missouri, the return trip was rather uneventful.

Sibley’s force reached Camp Atchison on August 10, 1863. Prior to reaching the camp, Sibley halted his men and gave them time to polish their brass and tidy their uniforms. They continued the march and entered Camp Atchison with the pride of a military unit that had marched over 300 miles, fought a number of pitched battles, and suffered from numerous privations. After a couple of days, Sibley’s expedition continued the march back to Minnesota—the Sibley expedition of 1863 had come to an end.

The story of the Sibley Expedition that I’ve tried to tell over the past four weeks in this column is woefully incomplete. However, if I’ve sparked your interest, I encourage you to find a copy of “The Dakota War” by Micheal Clodfelter or visit the State Historical Society’s website: http://history.nd.gov/historicsites/sibleysully.

However, more than anything, I encourage you to visit the related historic sites. Standing atop Big Mound 150 years after the battle and envisioning the soldier and warrior movements and feeling the panic of the women and children as they attempted to flee is a powerful experience that one can only feel at a historic site.