For thousands of years before the first American immigrants settled in North Dakota, Native Americans had called this land home. They farmed, hunted, raised their families, and even fought amongst themselves long before Euro-Americans even knew this land existed.

An article written by Dorcas Bolkan in 1928, based on an interview with her grandfather, C.P. Bolkan, tells the story of one conflict amongst the Native Americans in our area.

“As to battlegrounds the only one I know of was located on the Ben Johnson farm north of the Opheim schoolhouse, where our pioneer road meandered between the graves for some distance.” C.P. had heard the story from Omund Opheim, who had heard the story from Peter Grant when Peter and other mixed-race men and Indians had stopped to camp at Stump Lake in 1879 near where Omund was busily building his log cabin.

Omund told C.P. that Peter had told him that “24 years previous to that time, which would be 1855, [there] was a fight between two bands of Indians.” While relating part of the story, C.P. advised the interviewer that “may be if you could see Nels Opheim who lives just east of the Lutheran parsonage that he could tell you more. And if you see John Johnson who lived 2 blocks east of Opheims’ who helped break up the battlefield, perhaps he could tell you more.”

In a related historical article from that time, Mary Brosten related the stories of Ole Bolkan (C. P.’s brother). “Mr. Bolkan did not experience the thrill of seeing ‘wild’ Indians, but he did see some who traveled back and forth digging snake root, which they sold for medicinal purposes, also he saw some who canoed down the Sheyenne, whose waters were much larger than now. They traveled between Standing Rock, South Dakota, to Devils Lake, North Dakota.”

Mary ties Ole’s story together with Omund’s story. Mary tells us that Ole had heard that “two Indian tribes who were enemies had been out hunting. They met and immediately a battle followed.” Ole stated that “twenty-eight graves mark the place where this happened” and that these “graves were very evident” when he first arrived here. Ole stated that “he personally counted the mounds,” and that he was told the story of the battle “by a half breed who used to be a trapper, not taking active part in the battle but had been stationed in a ravine tending horses while the fight was on”—that man was the same Peter Grant from C.P.’s story.

Mary continued that, “it is Mr. Bolkan's belief that we can find Indian graves on top of the hills all along the Sheyenne River. He has seen parts of skeletons brought to Cooperstown found on Martin Ueland's farm, also on the Aaretad farm.”

It’s fascinating to think there is a nearby, completely unmarked ‘cemetery’ with 28 bodies buried within. It’s doubtful, but not impossible, that these burials could be located 157 years later. I believe it would be a worthy project to attempt to document the most probable corners of the burial ground. If the site could be located, it could then be marked and commemorated. Obviously, anybody attempting such a project should have prior consent with any private land owners before trespassing.

Half-breed