

Captive Chronology—Mary Butler Renville

1859	Moved to Minnesota with her husband to teach at the Hazelwood mission
August 18	Heard of the outbreak and went to camp of friendly Indians
August 19	Williamson arrived in camp, they occupied the mission houses with the friendly Indians
August 21	First journal entry
August 22-Sept. 1	Lived with the friendly Indians in the mission houses
September 2	Letter from Paul to Governor Ramsey
September 3	Mrs. Decamp with her three children at the camp
September 4	Left houses and moved into tents, Mrs. Newman and her children also there
September 5	Camped near Rush Brook
September 7	Hostile Indians burned the church, now about 40 people in Lorenzo's camp
September 8	Mrs. DeCamp and her children hid in the swamp all day, her husband returned
September 10	Major B's tent
September 11	Moved to Pettijohn's house and had to do her own work despite frail health
September 15	Another letter from Paul
September 16	Moved to Red Iron Village
September 21	Friendly Indian camp, sees Carrothers, White and Adams
September 22	Another letter from Paul negotiating with Sibley about the captives
September 23	Letter from Riggs to Renville captives
September 24	Rebels fled from Sibley
September 25	Learned Sibley was five miles away at Red Iron Village
September 26	Delivered to Camp Release at 2 p.m.

The dates referring to movements of Sweet noted here do not correspond with Sweet's own chronology.

The first word they received about the outbreak at the Redwood agency came at 6:00 p.m. on August 18 when two men warned them:

We had just arisen from the table when two men came in, and with the most intense feelings expressed in their countenances, begged us to hasten for our lives, in the meantime given a brief account of the massacre. People became so accustomed to Indian stories that they are not willing to believe any reports, no matter how they come; so it was with us; we did not even go to our nearest neighbors to tell what we had heard, but remained quiet; we were soon aroused by our friends calling again, and with authoritative tones told us to hasten away or we would certainly be massacred.”²⁷⁸

Only with this second warning did Renville and her husband take action by fleeing to the camp of the Christian Indians for protection. Renville was spared the initial horrors of attack and capture faced by the other captive women because she and her family immediately joined the friendly Indians. Renville still considered herself a captive, though, because she and her family did not have freedom of movement and would have been killed or taken captive by hostile Indians without protection.

After the first few days of captivity, the friendly Dakota decided to occupy the mission buildings at Hazelwood to accommodate more people, be better protected, and gain access to gardens for food. Renville was devastated by what she saw there, “It was impossible to describe the desolation, confusion and destruction that had been made at these houses, and the feelings that took possession of us when we thought of the many families that had thus been driven from their homes.”²⁷⁹ Renville struggled with the destruction of the houses and the violation this symbolized. By going to war, the Indians were not only attacking people but the symbols of white culture as well. Renville recognized this violation through the destruction of homes and scattering of families, and it moved her to tears:

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 6.

When the supper hour came we seated ourselves at the long table, which we had to often seen filled with happy children and loving teachers. We could hardly refrain from weeping while the blessing was being asked, and as soon as we could be excused we went to our rooms, where for the first time, we permitted our tears to flow, somewhat to the relief of our aching heart.²⁸⁰

Renville did not cry until she saw the violation of the missionaries' homes. Suddenly the war and her captivity seemed much more real because those symbols of white culture were destroyed.

On September 4, the friendly Indians and their captives left the buildings at the mission and moved to tents. Renville bemoaned this:

We are now living for the first time in a tent. This P. M. we went with Mr. R. to take a last look at the Mission buildings. He went with the intention of getting some boards, for making a shed over our cooking stove near the tent, determined to keep this vestige of civilization as long as possible. We really enjoy the large rocking chair, and could have good times if we were with a company of chosen friends, on a pleasure excursion, instead of being afraid of ones life every moment.²⁸¹

After being forced to leave first her home and then the mission buildings, Renville struggled to hang onto her stove and chair—both very powerful signifiers of the white female culture and civilization that were being destroyed around her. Shortly after they moved to the tents, hostile Indians began firing the mission buildings and homes.²⁸² The most trying day for Renville came on September 7, when the hostile Indians disrupted their makeshift Sunday service and burned the church. “The day has been truly a sad one; rebels, as if to show as much disregard as possible to all sacred rights of Christians, burned the church in the forenoon.”²⁸³ The last bastion of Christian civilization was now gone. After this, the friendly Indians were forced to join the larger camp of hostile

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 12.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 13.

²⁸¹ Ibid., 22.

²⁸² Ibid., 22.

Dakota. Renville related her sense of loss and her final alienation from civilization as a result of this removal:

Mr. R. driving the cattle, while we drove the team, and carrying our darling Ella in our arms, clinging closer to her fearing she might be torn from us in any new freak of the enemy. To realize in the least what our feelings were, place yourselves in imagination in the same condition, leaving the last vestige of civilization, not even daring to wear a bonnet or hat to protect your eyes from the blazing sun as you rode across the broad prairie.²⁸⁴

With this final remove, Renville's tethers to civilization were destroyed.

On September 26, Renville and her family were surrendered with the other captives to General Sibley at Camp Release. "At two o'clock P. M., Gen. Sibley, accompanied by his staff, came to our camp. Paul and some others made brief speeches, and the captives were formally delivered up by those who had protected them."²⁸⁵ After the detailed description in the rest of her narrative, Renville's description of her release seems anticlimactic. Renville and her family were free but she noted it only briefly in one small paragraph. Also, she never said what happened to family once they left Camp Release.

Renville published her narrative a year after the war in 1863. Besides Sarah Wakefield, Renville was the only other female captive to publish quickly. Renville wrote her narrative for very specific reasons that were informed by her strong religious beliefs and moral convictions. Renville's narrative was written in the format of a journal, some of which she kept during her captivity with portions added as she learned more about the war and fates of the other captives.²⁸⁶ One of the reasons she wrote was to provide a captive's account of the war, "So much as been said about the Indian War that it may not

²⁸³ Ibid., 24.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 25.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 43.

be uninteresting to glean a few leaves from the Journal of one who was a captive during the late trouble."²⁸⁷ In the first paragraph of the text, Renville gave herself authority to write based on her experience as a captive. A second reason she wrote was to show how the work of the missionaries prevented the war from being much worse:

We might speak at length of their abundant labors, in connection with their co-workers, the fruits of which we have witnessed during our captivity. Had it not been for the gospel which had been planted by these true worthies, the massacre would have been more terrible and awful than it was, and the suffering captives have found no relief from their hated capture, as some of them did during the last few days of their captivity. Dear reader, please bear this in mind when you are contributing to the Mission cause, for you know not what the fruits of your labor may be.²⁸⁸

Renville reminded her readers that the missionary work was so important that it needed financial support because one never knew what good effect such important work might have. Finally, Renville wrote her narrative to defend the friendly Indians who protected the captives but were wrongfully punished along with the hostile Indians:

The friends even that protected the suffering ones, are doomed to an exile almost as cruel as that which the captives suffered, for they had long had the opportunity of hearing the gospel before they were taken captives; and if they were Christians the rebels could only destroy the body but could not harm the soul.²⁸⁹

Punishment of the friendly Indians was unfair and cruel as these Dakota had no part in the war. It was unfair to deprive them of Christ's teachings.

Renville criticized the government for mistreating the friendly Indians after the war by exiling them with the hostile Indians. She went on by further stating that war could happen again if the government did not handle its Indian affairs more carefully:

May God guide the people of Minnesota, who have suffered deeply, to act wisely in the present instance, and not drive even the friendly Indians to homeless

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 9.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 5.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 11.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 43.

desperation by driving or sending them among the warlike tribes, to dwell upon their wrongs and talk over the injuries inflicted upon them by those they supposed their friends, until the warriors will not heed the course of the older ones, and rise in one mass, with all the tribes, and commence a war more terrible than has yet been recorded in history.²⁹⁰

If the government failed to be fair and just in dealing with the friendly Indians, the discord caused could spark another, much larger conflagration than the last.

Renville's narrative was unique because of its strong religious overtones.

Throughout her narrative, she used religious rhetoric as a paradigm for interpreting her experiences in captivity. Her main concern during the early days of the war was the whereabouts and well being of the Williamsons, who had been missionaries to the Dakota for thirty years. "But let us return to our Missionaries again, for too many pleasing associations of the past and anxiety for their present safety, will not permit us to be silent."²⁹¹ She worried further when Dr. Williamson refused to leave mission ground, "For this the spirit of the world may censure him, but those who have the spirit of Him who said, 'go preach the gospel to every creature,' certainly must admire the self-sacrificing man, willing rather to die if needs be."²⁹² Renville also emphasized gatherings to pray, sing hymns, and hear sermons which bolstered her faith during her captivity: "A chapter was read, a hymn sung and a word of exhortation given to the early faithful few. It reminded us of early times, when it was not safe to go to the house of God without weapons of defense."²⁹³ She compared her trials and captivity to that of the early, biblical Christians who were persecuted for their beliefs. In this way, her narrative harkens back to that of Rowlandson. Like Rowlandson, Renville understood her

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 44.

²⁹¹ Ibid., 8.

²⁹² Ibid., 11.

²⁹³ Ibid., 13.

captivity in biblical terms. In this way, her narrative is closely linked to the early captivity narrative tradition, which began with Mary Rowlandson. Like Rowlandson, Renville's narrative was religiously motivated outlining both her sufferings and the larger lessons to be learned from Indian captivity. Throughout her narrative, Renville turned to God for comfort when the ministrations of friends and family failed to comfort her. Renville also believed that it was the Christianization of Indians that ultimately led to them protect captives, "The praise is all due that gospel which makes the savage heart become humane and man respect the rights of his fellow man."²⁹⁴ Renville ascribed goodness on the part of the friendly Indians to their learning the gospel. Renville's religious beliefs buoyed her spirit during the trials of her captivity and provided her with a firm ground from which to make sense of her experiences.

Sarah Wakefield

Sarah Brown was born on September 29, 1829 at Kingston, Rhode Island and married John Wakefield in Jordan, Minnesota on September 27, 1856. She had two children, James age five and Nellie age twenty months at the time of the war.²⁹⁵ Wakefield and her family initially lived in Shakopee where Dr. Wakefield treated Dakota wounded in a battle with Ojibwa.²⁹⁶ In 1861, Dr. Wakefield was appointed as the physician for the Yellow Medicine agency. Shortly after that, the Wakefields moved to

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 23.

²⁹⁵ Sarah Wakefield, *Six Weeks in the Sioux Tepees: A Narrative of Indian Captivity* Edited and Annotated by June Namias (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997): 43-44. In *White Captives*, June Namias also extensively discussed Wakefield and her narrative. I make many similar assessments to Namias based on Wakefield's narrative and instead of footnoting every one, which would be exhausting, I want to acknowledge her contribution to my work and give her credit for a much better analysis than what I have conducted. Her work has been a guiding influence for my own and I appreciate and acknowledge her contribution.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 44.

