



## Planning for the Worst-Case Scenario

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This is the fourth in a series of articles on the 1862 Dakota War which is being published by the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Steering Committee of the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862 in area newspapers for the 150th Anniversary in 2012.

There were a group of women who experienced the Dakota War of 1862 from its beginning, who are remembered not for an actual action they completed but for an action they were willing to carry out.

Many of them had survived attacks at their homes or as they fled across the prairies with their families. Some had seen their husbands or children murdered, unable to protect or even safely bury those most dear to them.

Refuge was sought and found in New Ulm.

During the siege of and battles of New Ulm, from Monday, August 18th through Monday, August 25th, when the town was evacuated, the women were sheltered in the cellars of the Dacotah Hotel and the Erd Building.

The story of the women, along with many children, and wounded confined in the cellar of the Erd Building, revolved around a decision of self - determination. In the face of what they had already survived, these women understood a worst-case-scenario was more than a possibility.

Everything depended on the fighting of the Defenders and the resolve of the Dakota soldiers. If the Defenders failed, the city would fall. If the Dakota were victorious, every building would be searched. Once discovered, these women expected that their fate, the fate of the children, and the injured, would be the same as the Defenders.

On the afternoon of August 19th, the first battle began. Under the leadership of Jacob Nix the defenders of New Ulm survived the first attack. Assistance arrived from St. Peter under the leadership of Charles Flandrau and other militia companies arrived from LeSueur, South Bend, Mankato and Nicollet County. Then on August 22, massive smoke was seen in the vicinity of Fort Ridgely. All feared that Fort Ridgely had fallen. All expected that the concentrated force of Dakota fighting power would be turned on them.

With no other militias or troops coming to their aid, with supplies dwindling, the women devised their ultimate plan of last-resort. If they survived the siege and battles, their lives would go on. If the Defenders were all killed, they were determined that the children in their care would not suffer a violent end at the hands of the Dakota soldiers.

Their plan was simple. The women would ignite a barrel of gunpowder, stored in the cellar, ending their terror in moments. One of the women prepared the fuse. A few women, including Mrs. Oswald, one of the few survivors from Milford Township, served as human

barricades, blocking the door. Their final responsibility, at the cost of their lives, was to place themselves between the Dakota and twenty-six year old, Mary Schmitz Ryan, providing her with just enough time to carefully ignite the fuse. But their plan was not needed.

Although the Dakota attacked New Ulm again on August on 23rd, and 24th of 1862, surrounding the town with superior numbers, they withdrew, stopping their opportunity of victory. During that respite, the town was evacuated to Mankato, and the supporting militias returned to protect their own homes and communities.

For more information about the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the US-Dakota War and the commemoration events being planned please visit the website at [www.browncountydakotawarcommemoration.com](http://www.browncountydakotawarcommemoration.com).