



The Charge that Saved New Ulm—Maybe

By John Isch

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

As many people in Brown County know, New Ulm was attacked twice in the Dakota War. In that 1862 war, a group of Dakota from two of the four tribes in Minnesota attacked the settlers in August. The first attack on New Ulm was on Tuesday, August 19.

The Dakota returned to New Ulm on Saturday morning, the 23rd for the second battle. Some 650 Dakota attacked from the west, quickly circling the town and, using the remaining buildings as cover, they moved toward the center of town where the residents had built a barricade. The battle raged back and forth with the settlers firing from the barricades and some of the remaining buildings outside the barricade. Sometime, probably in early afternoon, Captain William Dodd, Flandrau's second-in-command from St. Peter, led a charge down Minnesota Street. He apparently was under the mistaken belief that the persons he saw further down the street were soldiers who had come to support the men in New Ulm. Dodd was mistaken and he was shot off his horse and died shortly after. This may have encouraged the Dakota to renew their attacks on this, the south part of the barricade, and things became desperate. Flandrau described the situation that the defenders of New Ulm found themselves in:

By two P.M. neither party had gained any marked advantage, except that the Indians were gradually nearing the defenses, burning their way along the street. They were within about two blocks of us, and it looked very threatening.

Flandrau then asked for suggestions as to what should be done. Someone suggested that everyone--men, women, and children--make a dash for the Cottonwood River and escape the town to the south. But that was dismissed as far too dangerous. A second suggestion was that Flandrau should lead a charge of some "forty to fifty picked men" which would "drive the enemy out of the lower town or die trying."

At around 3:00 pm, Flandrau, followed by some 50 men, charged down (south) Minnesota Street, "cheering and yelling in a manner that would have done credit to the wildest Comanche's." Flandrau expected the Dakota to be moving up from the river on Third South and he intended to charge down Minnesota Street to Third South and there attack the approaching Dakota. He was partially right, but dangerously wrong. The Dakota had come up Third South, but they left Third South and went through the grass between Minnesota and German Streets. Flandrau and his men came out from behind a house (the August Kiesling house and blacksmith shop) and they encountered the Dakota who were on their left flank. The Dakota fired but Flandrau's men who were in full charge (which probably kept them from retreating) fired back and ducked behind the house. At this point, a man ran out of the house just ahead of them, perhaps the Dietrich house, and was shot by a Dakota. Flandrau sent four men to the man's rescue but with the intent of tricking the Dakota into believing that Flandrau's men were flanking them and would attack them from the second house. The Dakota turned and fired at the men near the second house and Flandrau charged from behind the first house and attacked the Dakota from the rear and their right flank. The ruse worked and the Dakota were driven from their concealed position in the grass and retreated to the south and east down Third South.

Four or five of Flandrau's men were killed, but "the battle was near won" as he concluded. The Dakota withdrew that evening and by mid-day the following day, Sunday, the siege of New Ulm was lifted and the townspeople and refugees were able to make their way to Mankato and St. Peter.

Apart from a debate whether Flandrau's charge was a "turning point," there continue to be questions just when the charge occurred, how far down Minnesota Street this charge went, and just how some 60 New Ulm defenders beat off perhaps a hundred Dakota warriors who were waiting in ambush. But it was certainly colorful, dramatic, and a story Flandrau and other defenders could tell for years over a glass of brandy or beer to eager listeners.

There is also a great painting on the third floor of the Museum by Alexander Schwendinger showing this dramatic moment in the defense of New Ulm.

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