



Season 6, Episode 8: Mankato Spoon

Wes: Our next story asks why an unsettling image from America's violent frontier past was engraved onto this spoon. August 1862: the U.S. is at war with itself. As the nation is fighting to survive, so too are starving Native Americans who have been forced onto reservations in the woodlands and prairies of Minnesota's isolated frontier. Desperate and angry, large numbers of Dakota warriors attack white settlers. The month-long rampage leaves more than 500 dead and entire towns abandoned. The consequences will forever alter the Dakota bands, the repercussions rippling down through generations. Now, almost a century and a half later, Nancy Johnson of Portland, Oregon, has a disturbing object she believes is connected to this violent episode.

Nancy: I remember growing up with it thinking it was such an odd thing. I have always called it the spoon of atrocities.

Wes: I'm Wes Cowan, and I'm meeting Nancy to take a look at what she's found.

Nancy: It's an attractive silver spoon, it has scrolling and flowers but then across the top of it, it says "Hanging 38 Sioux in 1862 Mankato, Minnesota". Underneath it has a grisly scene.

Wes: Some sort of a gallows in the middle of the town with people lined up around it. Where did you get this spoon?

Nancy: I inherited it from my grandmother, Stella Currie.

Wes: And where was Stella from?

Nancy: From St. Paul, Minnesota.

Wes: Nancy what do you want me to find out about this spoon?

Nancy: I always wondered about it. What was going on in the country at that time that they'd make a spoon about such a tragic event?

Wes: One of my areas of expertise is western history and art, and I'm pretty sure I've seen a similar image. I want to just check one thing here. Yup, there it is. The image on Nancy's spoon looks remarkably close to a lithograph I once auctioned. The image portrays a December day in 1862, when 38 Dakota, known as Sioux to the white settlers, were hanged in the nation's largest mass execution. Documenting the event with a



lithograph is one thing, but why would someone have created such a delicate and ornate spoon featuring the hangings? I'm heading to southern Minnesota, and the nearby town of New Ulm. The Brown County Historical Society there has extensive archives about the Minnesota River Valley and its frontier past. Newspapers from the summer of 1862 are filled with reports from the nation's ongoing bloody civil war. I quickly discover local headlines that take the place of the national news. On August 17<sup>th</sup>, hundreds of Dakota warriors led by Chief Little Crow took the countryside by surprise, killing white settlers – including women and children. These are some letters eyewitness accounts of the war. "The Indians have made a desert of the country. Such a terrible excitement I never saw nor wish again to see. Women and children were raving around like maniacs crying for husbands and fathers. When we left home the report was that the Indians were burning New Ulm." Brutal battles in New Ulm, Fort Ridgely, and Woodlake followed. Ultimately, U.S. troops under Colonel Henry Sibley's command forced the Dakota to surrender – but not before five to eight hundred men, women and children had died. The "Sioux Uprising" – or "Dakota War" as it is also known – was unprecedented in its size and its bloody toll. A few months later, 38 Dakota were hanged at Mankato. I've seen souvenir spoons before – and I'm pretty sure this is what Nancy has – but I've never seen such a disquieting image on one before. I'm meeting with souvenir spoon expert Chris McGlothlin. He's brought a spoon selection for comparison. I just can't believe the variety.

Chris: There are tens of thousands.

Wes: The phrase "born with a silver spoon" even comes from the tradition of commemorating births with the gift of a silver spoon – a cherished, symbolic keepsake.

Chris: Spoons like these were souvenirs.

Wes: Have you ever seen that spoon before?

Chris: Oh yes, the Mankato spoon, yes I have.

Wes: So you know that spoon! Chris says Nancy has a rare souvenir spoon, and that such items were distributed for a mostly regional market. The unengraved generic spoon would have been ordered from a catalog by a local jeweler.

Chris: The spoon is shown right here, number 52. A jeweler in Mankato would have picked out the handle he wanted and decided what scene he wanted in the bowl and ordered it from the company. Tourists would take them home as souvenirs just like you buy a t-shirt nowadays.

Wes: But Chris says our spoon dates to several decades after the hangings in 1862.



Chris: This handle didn't show up until around 1900.

Wes: And he agrees the image of 38 Dakota executed at the gallows hardly seems a likely hometown souvenir.

Chris: The scene in the bowl you hardly ever see.

Wes: Why would this image appear on a souvenir spoon made so long after the event? And what sparked the Dakota uprising? I'm headed to Milford township to meet Dakota elder and historian, Dr. Elden Lawrence. He says the Minnesota rebellion was simmering long before the violence erupted.

Elden: Well it began with the 1851 treaty, in which the Dakota people ceded about 24 million acres of land that was their prime hunting and gathering area. That was kind of the beginning of the end.

Wes: Several thousand Native Americans were living on Minnesota's western frontier when it became the 32nd state in 1858. Elden explains that as European settlers encroached on their hunting grounds, the Dakota were compelled to sign a series of treaties that ceded millions of acres to the U.S. government. In exchange, the Dakota were promised cash annuities – but were forced to give up an ancient way of life.

Elden: They were expected to change almost overnight and a lot of them didn't even know anything about farming.

Wes: By 1862, some 7,000 Dakota were confined to tiny reservations along the Minnesota River Valley.

Elden: By that spring they were in starving condition and they were in great need of the annuities that the government was supposed to provide them and that was about in June.

Wes: Things came to a head in August, when the cash-strapped government, embroiled in the Civil War, was three months late on their annuity payments. Indian agent Thomas J. Galbraith refused to distribute food to the hungry Indians without payment. One trader was heard to say of the starving Dakota: "If they're hungry, let them eat grass."



Elden: The only alternative they had was to go to war. They knew of course that they weren't going to be able win but they figured this is where we're going to die anyway.

Wes: But Elden says the uprising wasn't universal – many Dakota risked their own lives to protect white neighbors from the attacks. He says the monument here to 50 white settlers commemorates a tragedy for the Dakota also.

Wes: What role did your family play?

Elden: My grandfather took it on himself to try to do what he could to help the innocent people.

Wes: When the war ended, many Dakota were expelled from Minnesota, even the so-called "friendly Indians."

Elden: They were removed along with everybody else.

Wes: Exiled from their homelands, they were relocated to Nebraska and South Dakota, where they faced starvation and misery.

Wes: You know Elden, my investigation involves a souvenir spoon with this image. How do you think the Dakota people would view a spoon like this?

Elden: It would hurt them deeply to see something like this, because this is etched in a lot of the minds and hearts of people. I can't imagine why anyone would want to have this on a spoon especially if you are going to be using it, and you got to see this. Because this is the largest execution in American history.

Wes: I'm heading to Mankato. The site along Main Street where the hangings took place has long been paved over, but a park is named for the Colonel credited with quelling the Dakota War, Henry Sibley. Historian Gary Anderson says the public hangings were big news throughout the region. The day of the execution, set the stage for me, what happens?

Gary: Large numbers of white civilians were coming in from all over the countryside, some coming... from as far away as Iowa to see this event. They marched the Indians out and it's an incredible scene. Some of them held hands... some of them sang their death song. There were 1600 troops, infantry around the gallows, cavalry around them moving and then three to four thousand people.



Wes: Gary explains that hundreds of Dakota had surrendered to Sibley's troops. Why were these 38 condemned to death?

Gary: Immediately there after they surrendered, Sibley put together a military commission and they tried 392 Indians in two to three weeks.

Wes: He says the proceedings were driven by a desire for vengeance among the settlers. Many of the trials made a mockery of justice.

Gary: There was a question like did you fire your gun. If it was translated correctly – and the Indians didn't understand English - he might have said yes. If he said yes – guilty. The cry was "remove or exterminate".

Wes: When the State of Minnesota condemned 303 Dakota to death, Gary says President Lincoln himself got involved.

Gary: The people of Minnesota are screaming for the execution of all of the condemned men. There were ministers in Minnesota writing letters to the President saying you must execute them all, congressmen are writing letters.

Wes: Lincoln faced a difficult decision.

Gary: He knew that there was corruption in the Indian Bureau; he knew that there were major problems on the reservations.

Wes: While the president was appalled at the violence of the uprising, he was also horrified at the scale of the proposed executions. Gary says he made a largely political decision.

Gary: Lincoln thinks about it and he compromises. He says pick out what appeared to be the worst offenders.

Wes: I tell Gary about my investigation.

Gary: Amazing. Let me show you this.



Wes: Gary has a copy of the same lithograph I have – but his was published in a widely circulated national newspaper of the era. There is so much detail here....there has got to be a photograph of this that the guy did it from.

Gary: There were no photographs done at the time. The military officer in command created a marshal law situation and I don't think he wanted any photographs floating around of this massive execution.

Wes: This image is the most widely distributed pictorial record of the Mankato hangings... but why does it reappear in such a celebratory fashion around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, decades after the event? I'm off to Minneapolis, where I've located an expert who specializes in Minnesota artifacts – appraiser Jim Marrinan.

Wes: I have been running all over the place trying to find out about this spoon, have you ever seen anything like that before?

Jim: Wes I have seen this image and it brings back memories. My grandfather told me stories of his family and how they were involved in the Sioux uprising of 1862.

Wes: So you have a personal history?

Jim: Yes indeed. Let me show you something Wes. When I was twelve years old my grandfather showed me this Belgium cavalry pistol. He recounted how my great great grandfather had this pistol and went outside to confront Indians.

Wes: They must have been terrified.

Jim: To put it into perspective, they didn't have any particular animus against the Native American population. They were simply trying to eke out an existence as farmers at a very difficult period.

Wes: And when the uprising occurred I guess they were probably totally in shock.

Jim: Absolutely.

Wes: This perspective gives Jim an understanding of why our spoon was made, decades after the Indian uprising.

Jim: I have a theory. It appears to me that this was made about 1902.



Wes: Why do you say 1902?

Jim: Wes I have something I think will put a little perspective on this.

Wes: Wow. What Jim tells me gives me an answer for Nancy. I want to show you something. This is an image that I know very well because I have sold it at auction at least twice. And so you can know see what is on your spoon is basically copied from this image.

Nancy: Yes that's it.

Wes: I tell Nancy her grandmother's spoon was, in fact, a souvenir. But why such a disturbing image had been celebrated in such a manner wasn't clear until I finally met someone whose grandparents had lived through the uprising and its aftermath.

Jim: Wes this is a beer tray produced for the Standard Brewing Company of Mankato, Minnesota in 1902, depicting the execution of the Sioux Indians. 1902 would have been the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the event. I suspect that the spoon dates from the same period.

Wes: So now that you've got all this information, how does it make you feel about your spoon?

Nancy: That is quite a story. The background is horrible.

Wes: It's a story that I think probably 99.9 percent of Americans don't know about.

Nancy: Thank you.

Wes: Many of the Dakota convicted in the uprising remained in prison for years. One in three died there. While whites marked the 40th anniversary of the hangings with commemorative souvenirs, the Dakota honored the executed 38 with a ceremony in Mankato, and still do every December on the anniversary of the executions. Today, a buffalo statue in downtown Mankato's Reconciliation Park symbolizes the ongoing effort to foster understanding within these communities.