

## **The Many Worlds of District 1, Part V: Mergers and Acquisitions**

Imagine District 1 without billboards, without brick, asphalt or concrete, artificial light, utility poles, stop signs, paved streets, Kentucky blue-grass lawns, chain-link fences or whimsical garden decor. Imagine a world of sky-high trees and dense underbrush, unpolluted waters teeming with non-toxic fish, vast darkness on a cloudy night, on a clear night, thousands of shimmering stars invisible to the naked eye today. Imagine nine and a half square miles of wilderness surrounded by more of the same.

### **Kaposia**

Long before any white settler arrived in or near District 1, there existed a village on a Mississippi River island that is now part of South St. Paul. It stood between two jutting points of swampland, affording good protection from enemies and windstorms. In this village the Dakota made a summer home for several hundred people, possibly more. It was called Kaposia, which means “not encumbered with much baggage.” The Dakota of Kaposia were frequently on the move, as the name of the village suggests, yet they built permanent elm frame longhouses, covered by elm bark, and used the settlement as a resting place for hunters and a place of safety for those who did not venture out on various expeditions. There were other such encampments for other Dakota bands, including the villages of Chiefs Shakopee, Wabasha and Red Wing. There were also at least five sites at which the Dakota established temporary villages along the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers, including the one at Pig’s Eye and one on the site of the future downtown St. Paul .

*[drawing of bark longhouse]*

District 1 was Kaposia’s backyard, a close-by hunting ground. The Dakota sense of homeland stretched far beyond the current city of St. Paul, beyond Ramsey County and the greater metropolitan area. It reached north and east into central Minnesota and western Wisconsin, at times into northern Minnesota and Canada, and ran along a restive border with Ojibwa/Chippewa bands. Home also extended west to welcoming relatives on the plains of North and South Dakota and south into Iowa. Extensive land was necessary to the Dakota way of life. Wild rice was best cultivated in the marshes surrounding their winter home near Mille Lacs. Maple syrup was most abundant in the St. Croix Valley. Buffalo herds gathered on the distant plains. The Dakota could not imagine a postage stamp life in which people stayed put and claimed to own individually this or that little spot. Land was like air. It belonged to everyone. Food was shared. Strength and skill were prized. The Dakota warrior could not esteem anyone unable to hunt or to travel through forests without guidance. He fed himself by killing prey and fishing along the way. Horseless, he was of necessity superior in endurance to most of the Europeans who “discovered” him. His senses were finely tuned to the language of the landscape. If he knew District 1 like the lines in the palm of his hand, he also knew a thousand other places equally called home.

### **Les Voyageurs**

Since Columbus, Europeans were quite convinced that this land they called “The New World” was but a stop on the way to the riches of Japan and China. Always at the back of their minds was the search for

the elusive “Northwest Passage,” the river or combination of conjoined rivers that would take them to the other side of America and into fabulous wealth.

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“For example, we may be transported into the Pacific Sea, by rivers which are large and capable of carrying great vessels, and from thence it is very easy to go to China and Japan, without crossing the equinoctial line and, in all probability, Japan is on the same continent as America.” ---  
Father Louis Hennepin

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Even after generations of fruitless exploration, Europeans still hoped to find the Northwest Passage. But they were pragmatic enough to seek remuneration elsewhere, such as in the fur trade. Father Hennepin, the Recollect missionary traveling with scouts of the Frenchman La Salle, was part of an expedition aimed primarily at establishing trading relationships that could be lucrative for the French and attractive to the Dakota as well.

Minnesota was rich in fur. For almost a century after arriving in District 1 in 1680, the French dominated the fur trade and attempted to establish a second empire, New France. Decades after the Frenchmen Pierre Radisson and Sieur de Groselliers returned to Montreal with tales of fur riches, independent traders, called “coureurs des bois” (woods runners), rushed to seek their fortunes. Using rivers as highways, they spent long winters trapping and trading with many tribes, including Dakota warriors in the area of District 1, who provided beaver pelts that sold at high prices in Paris. Many of the French traders married indigenous women (though often previously married to wives in France or Montreal) and fathered children who came to be known as “bois brûlé,” (burnt wood), a reference to their skin tone, or “métis,” from the French word meaning “person of mixed race.” The French established the Northwest Fur Trading Company for official purposes, with trading posts along water passages at Grand Portage and Mackinac and informal trade in many other places. The Dakota were eager for European wares including glass and metal trinkets, mirrors, knives, food staples such as lard, salt, vinegar and flour, as well as blankets, steel axes and guns. They traveled frequently to French rendezvous sites like Prairie du Chien. But the products of mixed marriages did not care much for French citizenship or French rule. Eventually a glut of fur made the trade less desirable financially, and Paris decreed the outposts illegal. After the collapse of New France in 1763, the British took over what remained of the fur trade.

## **Hail to the King**

Empire-building requires the cooperation of the natives. The British used the fur trade to create amicable relations with various tribes to help preserve dominion over lands won from the French. Furs--primarily beaver, but also mink, lynx, wolf, fox, and wolverine---were exchanged for English-made manufactured goods. The Dakota chief Wabasha declared in 1812, after more than 100 Dakota warriors had fought for the British against the Americans, “We live by our English Traders who have always assisted us, and never more so, than this last year, at the risk of their lives, and we are at all times ready to listen to them on account of the friendship they have always shewn us.” Loyalty was coin of the realm, at least Dakota loyalty to the British.

But the British had forgotten to mention that, at the Treaty of Versailles ending the American War of Independence in 1783, they had relinquished all North American lands east of the Mississippi, north of Florida, and south of the Great Lakes. Victorious colonists imagined their dominions stretching in a

straight line to the Mississippi. In that scenario, the rolling hills of District 1 might have become the western border of New York. Of course, most New Yorkers could not have known the specifics of their theoretical acquisition, since the shape of the American frontier was still largely unmapped and the number and size of future states yet to be determined.

Dakota warriors had thrown their lot with the British during the war for independence as well as in 1812, understanding that what General Washington called the American “rage” for land would not abate. In 1787, District 1, lying east of the Mississippi, became part of the “Northwest Territory,” defined by congressional ordinance as land that could eventually be included in the new United States--- after settlers established territorial governments, reached a population of 60,000, and petitioned the government for statehood. The United States promised to show “utmost good faith” in dealing with indigenous peoples. Later, District 1 was for a time part of Indiana, Michigan and Wisconsin territories successively. In 1805, Chief Little Crow---grandfather of the Little Crow who led the uprising and massacre in 1862---met with U.S. Army Lieutenant Zebulon Pike, who had come from St. Louis to find a good spot for the future Fort Snelling. Pike chose the mouth of the Minnesota River. Land downstream, including District 1, lay still untouched.

### **Bad omens**

As the nineteenth century dawned, displaced tribes from the east were pressing closer to the Dakota at Kaposia, and ancient enemies among the Ojibwa/Chippewa were a constant menace and target. The introduction of horses made it easier to hunt dwindling herds of buffalo on the western plains, but the ease of such travel led to neglect of crops and the abandonment of a more sedentary life. Fur traders sold guns and alcohol on credit, creating debts the white man considered more sacred than friendship and fostering Dakota addiction to “firewater.” Smallpox epidemics occurred every five to six years throughout the region---the winter of 1801-2 had been especially devastating. Yet in 1810, at the birth of the last Chief Little Crow, there were at least two thousand people in the larger tribe.

*[drawing of Little Crow]*

### **Promises, promises**

Agents of the U.S. government tried repeatedly in the 1820’s to end intertribal fighting so that eastern tribes could be moved into a peaceful west and their former lands opened to American settlers. A series of treaties were negotiated, and formal councils called at Prairie du Chien in 1825 and 1830. But the whiskey trade was a great impediment to peace. Eight miles south of Kaposia, a transfer point for liquor traffic siphoned residents to a new village called “Pine Turn.” By the late 1820’s, beaver and other desirable prey had almost disappeared. Traders began to repossess items sold on credit in the springtime when the pelts to pay for them did not appear in the fall. The Dakota did not understand such insistence on payment of old debt. It was contrary to sacred obligations of kinship and shared sacrifice in times of shortage. They began to yearn for the open spaces of the western prairie. American proposals came at a propitious time.

In 1837, by the Treaty of Washington, the Dakota ceded “to the United States all their land, east of the Mississippi river, and all their islands in the said river,” thus consenting to American sovereignty

already claimed at Versailles in 1783. In return for approximately five million acres of land, U.S. Secretary of War Joel R. Poinsett promised the Dakota one million dollars, including an annuity of \$300,000, invested in “safe and profitable State stocks,” payable “to the chiefs and braves...annually, forever,” as an “income of not less than five per cent thereon; a portion of said interest, not exceeding one third, to be applied in such manner as the President may direct, and the residue to be paid in specie, or in such other manner, and for such objects, as the proper authorities of the tribe may designate.” Also included in the million dollars were promised payments to relatives who had at least one quarter Dakota blood; payments for medicines, agricultural implements and animal stock and for the support of physicians and blacksmiths; and payment of debts accrued by the Dakota to traders and others.

The treaty was signed by twenty one elders of the larger Dakota tribe, including Big Thunder, father of the Little Crow who led the 1862 uprising. In compliance with the treaty, the Dakota moved the village at Kaposia and any tepees they had on the east bank of the Mississippi to the west bank. But they still crisscrossed the landscape, including District 1, as necessity required. After four Chippewa killed a Dakota warrior at Lake Harriet in 1839, the Dakota in revenge ambushed a group of 23 Chippewa near Stillwater, mostly women and children, and scattered their bodies “in all directions,” according to a missionary who happened on the scene. In revenge, Chippewa braves ambushed and killed two sons of Little Crow in the forest between the Snake River and St. Croix Falls. Seeking revenge for the killing of Little Crow’s sons, the Dakota raided the Chippewa village at Lake Pokegama in 1841, shot two young girls, cut the heads off their bodies and scalped them.

### **The Battle of Kaposia**

The cycle of revenge came to District 1 at the Battle of Pine Coulie, also called the Battle of Kaposia, on a June morning in 1842. Remembering Lake Pokegama, about 100 Chippewa warriors came down the St. Croix valley to the head of Lake St. Croix at Hudson. There they met a group of “métis” traders and enquired whether there might be any stray Dakota in the area, hoping for some early “easy scalps.” The traders went on to the Mission House at Red Rock and informed two Dakota warriors who happened to be there. The warriors rushed to Kaposia. Back from a successful hunt, the men of Kaposia were celebrating with a large quantity of whiskey. The women had hidden their weapons, as was their custom.

Meanwhile, the Chippewa had advanced by land from Hudson to the river and hid in the rolling hills of Battle Creek. Their plan was to cross the river and then move down in stealth, attacking Kaposia when its warriors were fully inebriated. But from the underbrush at Battle Creek, the Chippewa observed, across the marsh, women and children tending crops. They could not resist. Using rifles, whose report could be heard in Kaposia, they killed two women and a small boy. One was the wife of a Dakota warrior named Kha-dayah, or Rattler. The other woman was the Dakota wife of a French voyageur, Francois Gamelle. The child was Gamelle’s son David. All three were scalped. The cries of the women, in the wake of the rifle shots, combined with the tale of the warriors who had come from the Mission House, aroused the revelers at Kaposia.

Their weapons quickly unearthed, the Dakota paddled canoes to the east side of the river, then came ashore at Pig’s Eye and pushed the Chippewa back from the riverbank, up into the hills and ravines and over the bluffs. The battle raged for several hours. Much of the combat was hand to hand. The Dakota suffered heavy losses. One estimate put their casualties at 20 dead or mortally wounded and many more wounded but not dying. The Chippewa lost fewer men. But the Dakota were repeatedly reinforced

from Kaposia and ultimately chased the Chippewa most of the way to Stillwater. The bodies of dead or dying Chippewa were scalped and some mutilated.

Nothing much changed because of the battle. Kaposia survived. It might have been destroyed had the Chippewa waited quietly. But the cycle of revenge continued in other places, and District 1 remained, for the moment, a wilderness.