

February Presentation

By Mark Silbersack



□Our guest speaker for February was Dr. Don Heinrich Tolzmann, who spoke on the Sioux Uprising (known more recently as the Dakota Uprising, as it involved the Dakota branch of the Sioux). It began in August 1862, almost a year and a half after the Civil War broke out, and so was a “war within a war.” □At the time, the Civil War was the burning issue of the day and the Uprising a distant conflict on the northwestern frontier. But for Minnesotans the opposite was true: the Civil War was a distant conflict in the East, while the Uprising meant war on the home front.

The speaker explained the background, origins and outcome of the Uprising, as well as his interest in the topic. The speaker’s great-grandparents moved to a farm in Renville County, Minnesota in 1870 that had been at the epicenter of the Uprising in 1862. It had belonged to a German immigrant family, the Schwandts, who arrived in the area in the spring of 1862. Except for two family members, all of the Schwandts were killed in August. Estimates as to the total number who died that year ranged from more than six hundred to more than a thousand, but President Lincoln estimated eight hundred.

In the immediate area of the Schwandt/Tolzmann farm, a total of 39 people were killed. They are memorialized by the Settler’s Monument on the roadway in front of the farm. It carries this

inscription: “In memory of the brave settlers who fell at this point in the massacre of 1862.” To the south of the farm is the Schwandt Monument, honoring that family.

Mary Schwandt, one of the two family survivors, wrote an account of her kidnapping during the Uprising. Another survivor from a neighboring family, Wilhelmina Busse, also wrote an account of her experiences. The speaker edited these accounts for a book called German Pioneer Accounts of the Great Sioux Uprising of 1862 (Milford, Ohio: Little Miami Pub. Co., 2002).

Additionally, the speaker has edited and translated a number of books on the Uprising, several of which focus on New Ulm, Minnesota, which was largely settled by Germans from Cincinnati’s Turnverein. In addition to discussing the history of the war, Dr. Tolzmann focused on the experiences of the pioneers, citing their personal narratives, while placing the events of 1862 within the historical context of the Civil War.

For the speaker’s description of the Uprising’s impact on Brown County, Minnesota where New Ulm is located, go to the website of the Family and Friends of the Dakota Uprising Victims:

http://www.dakotavictims1862.com/Family_and_Friends_of_Dakota_Uprising/Brown_County_Pioneers.html