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Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

Here you will find information about interesting books on the immigration experience, genealogical manuals, books on Swedish customs, and much more. We welcome contacts with SAG readers, suggestions on books to review perhaps. If you want to review a book yourself, please contact the Book Review Editor, Dennis L. Johnson, at <1_viking@verizon.net> or Dennis Johnson, 174 Stauffer Road, Bucktown Crossing, Pottstown, PA 19465, so he knows what you are working on.

In Scandinavia

From Scandinavian Shores, Immigrant Culture and Stories from Our Nordic Family Histories, by J.B. Hove, Juel Publishing, Isanti, MN, 2007, softcover, illustrated, 255 pages, Amazon.com, \$15.00 plus shipping.

This recent history of the Scandinavian people is intended to present a picture of the historic roots of the many descendants of the immigrants who came to North America from Scandinavia mainly in the 19th century. The author has chosen a less traditional structure for his history than commonly used by historians. The book is more closely akin to Moberg's two volumes, *A History of the Swedish People* (Dorset Press, 1971 and 1973) than it is to the more common chronological history. The book jumps between periods in time to focus more on subject matter than chronology, and is an effort to deal more with the lives and customs of the common folk of Scandinavia than with the kings, the nobility, and the history of government affairs.

J.B. Hove is not an academic historian, but according to the book jacket has spent the past ten years in study of archaeology, ethnology, folk studies, genetics, and linguistics in order to develop his somewhat unique portrait of the history of Scandinavian culture. He has gathered together from various sources many anecdotes and historical writings to support the major premise of the

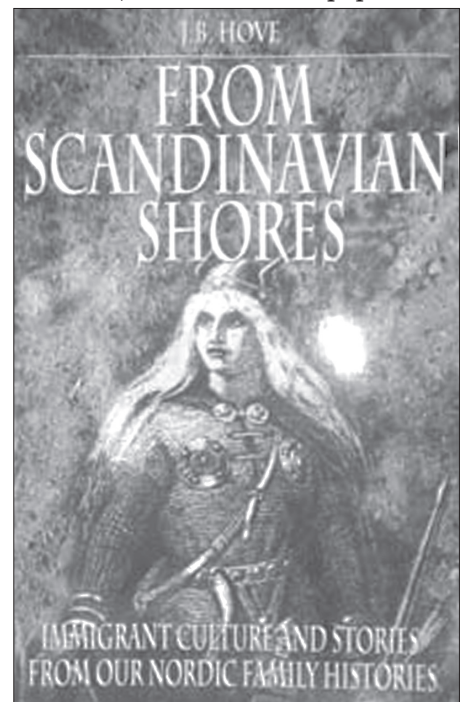
book. He describes the Scandinavian people as being uniquely self-sufficient, and ingenious at extracting a livelihood from the many harsh environments found in the north of Europe. These qualities were brought with those who migrated to North America, enabling them to adapt to and deal with the often equally harsh environments they encountered in the New World.

The author traces these qualities to the ancient sources of the peopling of Scandinavia, mainly from east in central and northern Eurasia, a land of steppes, which often resulted in a nomadic lifestyle for these peoples. Southern Europe, on the other hand, was peopled by cultures from the warm and more fertile river valleys of the Middle East, where agricultural surpluses enabled larger and more complex civilizations ruled over by the thousands by kings, emperors, and a large ruling class. This led to significant differences in the cultural history between northern and southern Europe.

With the conditions of short growing seasons, long winters, and limited resources survival required the adoption of habits of organization, cooperation, discipline, and resourcefulness. There was little surplus to support a nonproductive upper class, and a more egalitarian society resulted. Men often traveled to exploit remote resources, creating more independent women who were far beyond being only slaves to their men as in many other societies.

After an introductory chapter outlining the experience of Scandinavians in populating the New World, the author describes his views on the

early peopling of the Nordic lands after the last Ice Age beginning about 13,000 years ago. Peoples from the eastern steppes slowly moved into the area as nomadic hunters and fishers and eventually populated most of the area as the ice retreated. Beginning some 5,000 years ago, the first farming people began to leave their traces, migrating north and west across Europe. Later arrivals of Indo-Europeans, Sarmatians, Karelians, Sami, Finnish people, and others added to the blend, and in more recent times, Germans, Walloons, and a sprinkling of others from southern Europe and the British Isles was added to further mix the population. This aggregate culture retained its egalitarian nature, however, due primarily to the harsh environment, the origins of the peoples occupying the area, and a scattered population





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it is not a coincidence – Scandinavians (regardless of nationality) are technologically advanced, enjoy stable governments, and have egalitarian societies with high status for women. They are world leaders in honest government, human rights, equitable income distribution, industrial efficiency, and humanitarian aid. Today, Scandinavian immigrants' great legacy is their remarkable culture."

with limited resources. This portrait painted by the author is derived principally from historical sources, although it is not inconsistent with genetic and DNA information developed in the last several decades.

Succeeding chapters deal with arguments explaining the egalitarian nature of Scandinavians, the common Nordic roots consolidated over the past three millennia, the influence of the Viking Age, the Dark Ages, and the Bubonic Plague. There are chapters about wolves, the training and lives of soldiers, the influences of witchcraft, the Church, the role of women, courting customs, the rigid classes in society, and the self-sufficient nature of the common folk. Scattered among all these chapters are anecdotes and quotations from a variety of sources from Tacitus to Moberg, Selma Lagerlöf, Sigrid Undset, the Icelandic Sagas, *Beowulf*, the *Yngling's Saga*, *Heimskringla*, the *Kalevala*, and others are used to enrich this history for the reader. J. B. Hove also draws heavily from the writings of his own Norwegian-born grandmother, Mary Norlander. Mary was a regular contributor to the *Svenska Amerikanska Posten* in Minneapolis and thousands of her articles were published over the years. She wrote with insight about the habits of ordinary Scandinavians and their attitudes about honesty, affection, women, work, and household habits.

This book has been clearly shaped to support the author's view of the uniqueness of Scandinavian culture, and his closing paragraph best summarizes this view:

"Today, because of their culture –

Perhaps some readers from other cultures might find this author's approach a bit chauvinistic. His facts, however, appear to be thoroughly documented and consistent with most other histories of Scandinavia, although some may disagree with his opinions about the merits of the Scandinavian culture as he sees them. As a whole, this book provides an excellent, fairly compact, and engaging summary of the history of the Scandinavian people for readers of all ages.

Dennis L. Johnson

Viking stories

Axe of Iron, The Settlers, by J.A. Hunsinger, Vinland Publishing LLC, Lewes, DE, 2007, softcover, illustrated, 384 pages, Amazon.com, \$16.95 plus shipping.

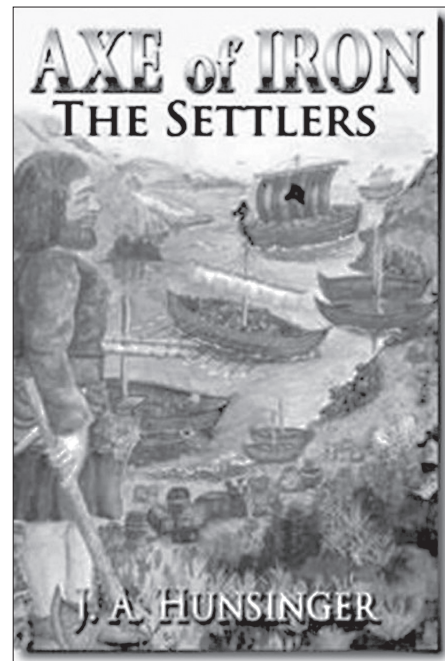
Writers have long been interested in the history of the Greenland settlement by Norse colonists beginning in the last decade of the tenth century. This interest was greatly sharpened by the discovery in the 1960's of the remains of Norse settlements and artifacts at L'Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland. Helge and Anne Stine Ingstad, Norwegian archaeologists, investigated and authenticated this evidence proving that Norse people from Greenland and Iceland had visited this area and built dwellings in about the year 1000.

This evidence strongly reinforced

the stories by Snorri Sturlusson, written several hundred years after the actual events. Other evidence of Norsemen in North America has surfaced over the years, some authenticated and some highly controversial, and has added to this stimulation of interest in the subject.

This new first novel by J. A. Hunsinger is the most recent of a series of novels prompted by these discoveries in North America, by writers who have imagined a variety of adventures undertaken by Viking visitors to the New World. The novel is intended to be the first of a series under the title *Axe of Iron*. The second in the series, titled *Axe of Iron, Confrontation*, was scheduled for publication this year (2009), but as of this writing is not yet available.

The author is a retired commercial pilot and aviation writer. As an amateur historian, he is a Viking enthusiast and has studied extensively the research and archaeological evidence from sites in Greenland and the New World to assist in crafting this novel. It is a gripping story about the adventures of a large party of Norsemen who undertake to find a suitable place for settlement in North





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America shortly after the visits of Leif Ericsson and his relatives to the Newfoundland area. The period of the novel is about the year 1007, a time when the climate was generally relatively mild and hospitable to human occupancy in these northern lands. The book is dedicated to the some 4,000 Norse who disappeared entirely from Greenland by the middle of the fifteenth century. By that time, the “little ice age” had slowly descended on most of the northern hemisphere and continued until well into the 19th century. Views differ on whether the last Greenlanders slowly died out from starvation, intermarried with local native Inuit people, migrated elsewhere, or some combination of these factors.

The story line of this novel is about a large party of about 300 Norse men, women, and children from Greenland and Iceland who embark in five Viking ships for the new lands to the west that had recently been discovered by Leif Ericsson and others. The group takes with them sheep, cattle, and all the essentials to establish a new colony wherever suitable lands can be found. They are aware of the native population and come fully armed and prepared to protect their colony, but are determined to avoid confrontation if at all possible. They sail west in the wake of Leif Ericsson’s route, following the coast of Greenland north, crossing to Helluland (Baffin Island), Markland (Labrador), and head for Leif’s houses on present-day Newfoundland. A fierce storm blows them west into the straits leading into Hudson Bay, however, causing them to explore the eastern coast of that great bay before returning to their ori-

ginally intended destination. After reassembling their fleet after the storm, they pause to consider and then decide to sail further south along the coast to see what the possibilities are for a colony in the lands ahead. Various adventures occur along the way, with both peaceable and violent encounters with the native population. By novel’s end in late summer, the group has chosen a location near a river’s mouth in what apparently now is named James Bay at the southern end of Hudson Bay. Part of the colony begins the job of building shelters and a settlement, while a part embarks on four ships for a trading journey back to Greenland and Iceland. A final chapter gives a brief hint of the novel’s sequel, *Confrontation*, to whet the reader’s interest in continuing to read the series.

The location chosen by these colonists remains in the 21st century a remote part of North America. There are now several small villages in the area, the largest of which has a population of about 2,000 people, most of whom are Native Americans. There are also a few hundred non-native Canadians in the area, mostly involved in mining. The climate is harsh, resources are few, and access to the area is limited. The Native people no longer rely only on hunting and fishing, but are dependent on assistance from the Canadian government. Most now live in new, modern houses built by the government. Game and fish are abundant in the area, and camps and outfitters cater to recreational hunters and fishermen from more urban areas to the south.

In this novel, the story is told mainly through the words and actions of Gjudbjartur Einarsson, the principal aide to the leader of the expedition. The leader is Halfdan Ingolfsson, endowed with all the qualities of a strong leader, and Gjudbjartur is his loyal supporter

and defender. Along the way, through many incidents and adventures, numerous details of Viking Age life, culture, and practices are revealed. Most of this is plausible and generally fits with my own understandings and knowledge about this period in history. The author also displays some knowledge of the Native American tribes encountered by the Norsemen, with a balance between the violence and savagery of the times and a more modern sensitivity towards their conflicting cultures. Character development of the principal protagonists by the author is somewhat limited, perhaps a little more in the style of a technical writer than that of a skillful novelist, but this is not a serious flaw and the story still draws the reader along with great interest and curiosity about the outcome.

The only implausible aspect of this interesting story that struck this reviewer was the improbability of the makeup of the expedition. The author portrays the group and its leaders as the young adventure-seeking segment of established Greenlanders and Icelanders, who have little chance of inherited lands or fortunes at home, who must seek their fortunes in new lands. Somehow, these sparsely endowed people managed to acquire five substantial Viking ships capable of carrying them on the open seas to North America. A seagoing ship at that time was roughly equivalent in cost and rarity to a modern jetliner today, and only the wealthiest leaders could hope to afford to build or acquire a ship such as this. For the sake of the story, I am willing to set this unlikely circumstance aside and go on to enjoy the novel for all its other good qualities.

For the sake of the sequels, I believe the author is setting the scene for events leading to intermarriage of the Norse colonists with Native Americans, a theory held by more than a few historians about the fate



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The Dakota Conflict

of the Greenland settlements. Rumors continue to emerge about certain “tall, blond, and blue-eyed” people found among various tribes in North America, among them the Mandan tribe now in the Dakotas but earlier found in the Northeast. This was reported in the Lewis and Clark exploration journals from the early 19th century. No certain evidence, DNA or otherwise, has yet turned up to confirm these rumors, however, and later intermarriages in the 19th and 20th century make this a difficult quest.

J.A. Hunsinger has created a story of interest to not only Viking enthusiasts but to readers at large about a possible but fictional adventure of Norse colonists in North America. An adventure which preceded by six centuries the later colonization of the Delaware Valley in 1638 by a similar-sized group of Norse (Swedes and Finns) who landed in the wilds of the Delaware Valley. This was a location peopled by Native American tribes (in a more moderate climate) with, initially at least, a peaceful relation with the native people.

It will be interesting to follow the fictional destiny of these earlier Hudson Bay settlers through the novels that follow in the Hunsinger’s *Axe of Iron* series.

Dennis L. Johnson

The Dakota War of 1862: Minnesota’s Other Civil War, by Kenneth Carley, Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2nd Ed, 1976, 101 pages, softcover, Illustrated, Amazon.com, \$11.53 plus shipping.

Driving along in the comfort of a modern automobile through southwestern Minnesota a century and a half later, it challenges the imagination to visualize what this land was

like at the time of the great Dakota war of 1862. We now see large, orderly farms laid out on a gridiron pattern, farms of a thousand acres or more planted mostly in corn. Modern ranch houses mark the farms, usually close to the road, with many large grain bins near by. Cattle and livestock are seldom seen, but pickup trucks are commonplace.

A closer look reveals some traces of the past. Frequent woodlots of an acre or two in size remain, farther from the roads. These sometimes contain the remains of long abandoned farmhouses, sheds, and barns marking the original homestead

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farms of the mid-19th century, usually a few hundred acres in size. Spaced some 20 to 30 miles apart are small towns servicing these farm communities, providing rail connections and needed supplies.

Low-lying sloughs and bogs have been drained for crops, a few larger lakes remain. Some towns have light industry and food processing plants, others have died out or house mainly retired folks. The small towns are characterized by their many shade trees, private homes, church steeples, and soaring grain elevators. All seems peaceful and serene.

In 1862, settlement of this area was increasing rapidly. This territory was a small part of the large Louisiana territory purchased from France in 1803, later becoming part of the Minnesota territory in 1849. From this territory was defined the final borders of Minnesota, and a rapidly growing population resulted in statehood for Minnesota, the 32nd state, in May of 1858. The establishment of Fort Snelling on high bluffs at the junction of the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers, completed in 1825, had established a military presence and administrative control over the area. By 1851, treaties between the Native American tribes and the U.S. government had opened much of the territory to settlement. The cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul grew up nearby, ultimately to become the largest metropolitan area in the state.

The rivers provided access to the lands and resources of the Minnesota territory, with logging and lumbering moving north to the great forests, and lands for farming to the southwest, west, and northwest. Lands to the

southwest were accessible by way of the broad Minnesota River valley, and Minneapolis and St. Paul were the usual supply and departure points for settlers seeking land. Roads did not exist, only a few trails marked by Native American travelers; railroads were to come later. Barges on the Minnesota River brought settlers by the hundreds and then thousands into the prairie lands of southwest Minnesota, and towns sprung up at intervals along the river. Belle Plaine, LeSueur, and then St. Peter led to Mankato, where the river turned abruptly from its southwest course toward the northwest, leading in turn to New Ulm, Fort Ridgeley, and then into the upper and lower Indian reservations along the river. The earliest settlers claimed lands on either side of the river around these towns. The open prairie was next to be settled.

These earliest towns lay on the slopes of the broad Minnesota River valley, a valley much too large for the present size of the river. This valley once drained the enormous post-glacial Lake Agassiz, which once covered much of present northwest Minnesota, the eastern Dakotas, and Manitoba. This former lake of ten thousand years ago has now become the rich agricultural Red River valley, whose Red River now flows north to Lake Winnipeg and Hudson Bay. The Minnesota River then became much smaller, but served in the 1840-1860's as the main route for migrants to southwest Minnesota. The 18th century saw a few white explorers and trappers in the area, but settlement did not begin until about 1850.

At that time, the area was home to many tribal groups of Native Americans, mainly the Sioux, or Dakota people. They roamed the plains to hunt and moved their tepee villages frequently to follow game. They had long before acquired horses and by 1860 were also equipped with guns, mainly muzzle-loading

rifles in addition to their traditional weapons. The Sioux quarreled often with the forest tribes in the big woods of northern Minnesota, who had a more settled, agricultural lifestyle. These woodland tribes were mainly Chippewa and Ojibwa. The Ojibwa had arrived fairly recently from the East Coast, and had some familiarity with white people. Relations with the Ojibwa and Chippewa remained peaceful during this period, although Vilhelm Moberg in the fictional 'The Emigrants' series did include a frightful incident when several Natives visited Kristina seeking food, but left without incident. Their homestead was in the eastern woods near Taylors Falls, far from the prairies of the Dakota Sioux.

The author, in *The Dakota War of 1862*, describes the events leading up to the war, the five weeks of actual hostilities, and the aftermath of the war. This account is based on much of what was known at the time of writing this 2nd edition; all of Carley's sources were accounts by white people collected in the century after the event. Some new information has surfaced since 1976 but mostly adds details which do not fundamentally change the chronology or descriptions of the events. The book includes many photos of major participants and also numerous historic drawings and etchings, including a complete map of all the affected locations. In 2002, Gary Anderson and Alan Woolworth wrote a book based on the Indian side of the 1862 war, *Through Dakota Eyes*, that was based on a number of narrative accounts and oral histories collected from Native Americans and their descendants. For serious scholars of this event in Minnesota history, this book is also must reading, adding greatly to an overall perspective of the Dakota War. It is available also at Amazon.com, \$13.46 plus shipping.

The root causes of this war were many, chief among them being the

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compression of the Minnesota Sioux into two reservations along the upper Minnesota River as a result of a treaty with the U.S. government, that was signed at Traverse de Sioux near St. Peter in 1851. Some seven thousand Dakota Sioux exchanged some 24 million acres of land for two reservations, each 20 miles wide and about 70 miles long along the upper Minnesota, plus some \$1,410,000 in cash and annuities to be paid over a period of 50 years. Food and supplies were also included in this agreement. Resentment built up over some aspects of these treaties over the years and the locations of the reservations. By 1857, settlers had begun to crowd close to these reservations and sought to have them reduced further. Late delivery of payments and food supplies in 1862 raised resentment to a flash point and threatened starvation on the reservations. Conflict became almost inevitable and by August 1862, all that was needed was a spark to ignite hostilities.

This flash point occurred on August 17, when four young braves seeking food visited a white homestead, the Baker farm, near Grove City in Meeker County. Their visit resulted in three settler's deaths and the escape of others by hiding or running. News of the attack spread rapidly on both sides. Tribal elders tried to cool the ardor of the young braves, ready to attack all whites, but they could not do so. The next day saw attacks on both the upper and lower Indian Agencies and an ambush of whites at Redwood Ferry, resulting in many more white deaths. The book then goes on to recount larger attacks on Fort Ridgley, on New Ulm, and various other battles

and major incidents culminating in the Battle of Wood Lake, turning the tide of the war by September 23. Reinforcements of soldiers and volunteers from Mankato, St. Peter, and Fort Snelling arrived and put down the Native forces. This resulted in the capture and surrender of several hundred warriors and the release of many white captives.

By December of that year the Natives that took part in the uprising were tried and sentenced initially to death. President Lincoln reviewed all the records and reduced the number to be hanged to the thirty-eight who were executed at Mankato. The remaining Dakota Sioux were relocated westward to reservations in the Dakota Territory, where smaller battles and skirmishes continued for decades. This finally ended in 1890 with the Battle of Wounded Knee. The Dakota War in Minnesota had continued for just over five weeks, and resulted in the deaths of about 500 whites (estimates vary from 400 to 800); the number of Native deaths has never been accurately tabulated but is probably in the hundreds. In addition to the major battles recounted in detail, many outlying settlers, mostly without weapons, were taken by surprise and killed. Many others escaped to the east and the shelter of cities and towns, some never returned. In 1862, many young men had been recruited to fight with northern forces in the Civil War, and were absent from their farms, a fact well-known to the Native Americans.

Most of the settlers in the area by 1862 were German immigrants, or resettlers from the East, but considerable numbers of Norwegians, Swedes, and others had by this time found their way to the Minnesota prairie. All were seeking land, encouraged by the Homestead Act of 1862 which made land available at very low cost. The book mentions fourteen settlers killed in the Scan-

dinavian settlement of West Lake, including the families of Anders and Daniel Broberg, and Andreas Lundborg. A state monument nearby marks these deaths. Another reference is to the Scandinavian Guards of Nicollet County, a militia raised to protect the St. Peter area when the local army garrison left to defend Fort Ridgley. Only about 16 miles northeast of New Ulm lay the small settlement of Swedes at Bernadotte, where my great-grandfather and his family joined a number of other Dalslanders there in 1866, only four years after hostilities had ended. There is no record of any attack there, but the founders of this community were no doubt alarmed and some no doubt took part in the events.

Much of Minnesota was alarmed and frightened by the uprising, even far to the east and north. Defensive measures were taken, forts and barricades were built, and settlers armed themselves against surprise attacks. The Civil War and the need for troops slowed the arrival of reinforcements to the area and contributed to the unease of the whites. An interesting sidelight of the book was the inclusion of the role of the substantial number of mixed breed families in the area of the War, some dating to earlier days. These families were not fully accepted by either whites or Natives, but tried to maintain relations with both. They frequently tried to arbitrate disputes and maintain the peace or at least remain neutral. Many had taken up farming rather than tribal life, and were called "cut-hairs" or "blanket Indians" by the Native tribes, and "half-breeds" by whites. There were a number of incidents where these mixed families sheltered whites or protected those taken prisoner. A few fought in the battles mostly on the settler's side, but at least one was hanged with the 38 at Mankato.

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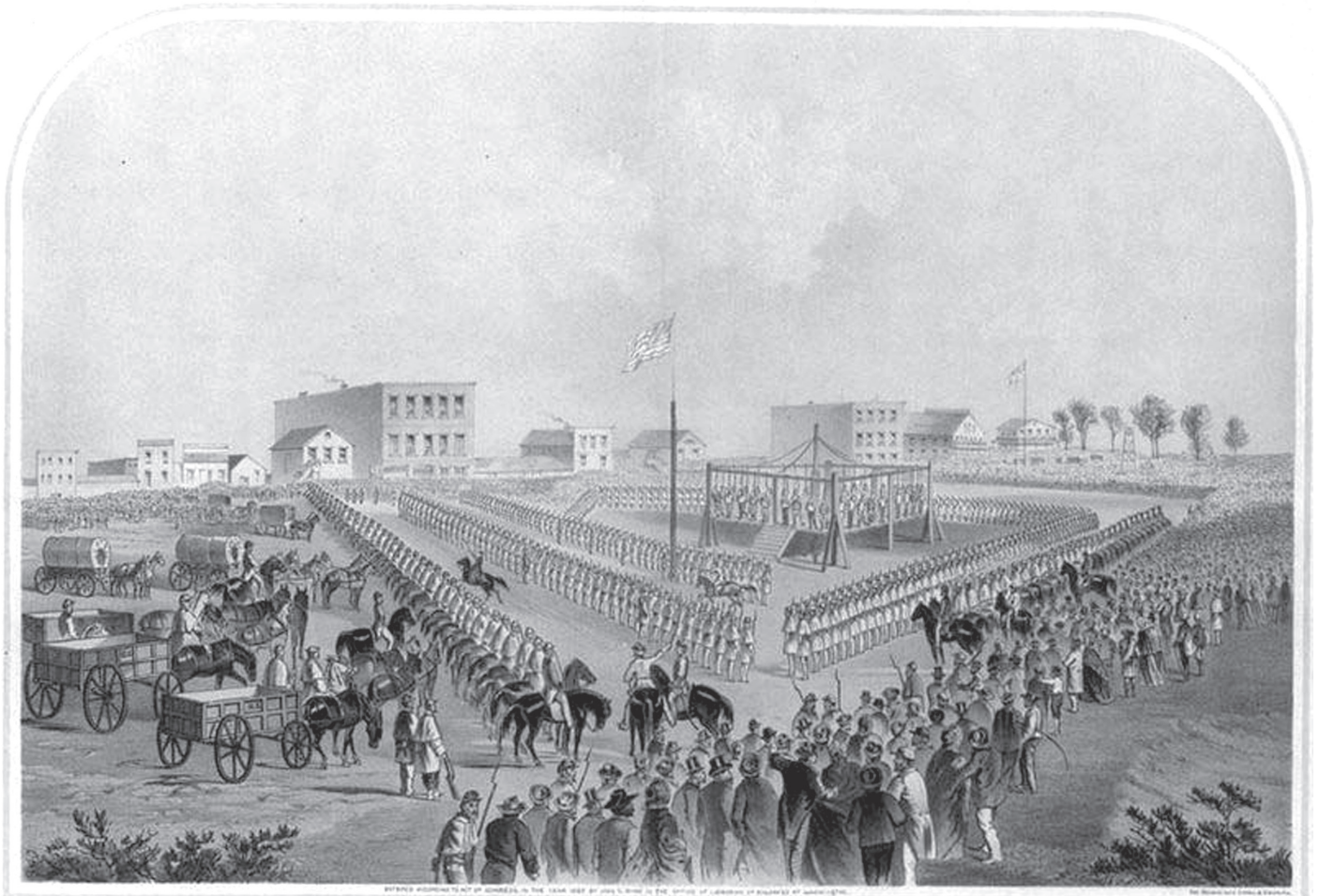
This book presents this war as completely as current facts permitted, and is important to the history of Minnesota and of the United States. Persons with roots in the area of the battles will find it of special interest, perhaps their own families were involved in some way in this War. Some refer to the Dakota Wars as a “Civil war within a Civil war,” and others have claimed that this

war resulted in the deaths of more civilians in any war in American history up to the events of September 11, 2001. It is also a story of many innocents on both sides engulfed in a conflict caused by the incompetence and inaction of the U.S. government, which forced ill-considered treaties on the Native Americans and then did not live up to these agreements.

Dennis L. Johnson

Editor’s note: If you are interested in this conflict, do not forget the articles in SAG 2/07, 3/07, and 4/07, by *Helene Leaf*, that describes many of the difficult experiences of the Swedes in the area.

Another interesting book is *The Dakota Uprising: A Pictorial History* | by Curtis Dahlin with photographer biographies by Alan Woolworth. Available from Park Genealogical Books. See link page!



EXECUTION OF THE THIRTY-EIGHT SIOUX INDIANS

AT MANICATO, MINNESOTA, DECEMBER, 26, 1862.

Source: Library of Congress. From: Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, January 24, 1863, page 285