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The assertion of “fake news” and the vilification of journalists are causes for concern (to say the least) in the contemporary moment, but as we reflect upon these concerns we might also remember that there is a reason why such accusations strike a chord with the public. Bias in media representation has impacts across the political spectrum. Activists in the Black Lives Matter movement have very effectively drawn attention to the subtle and not-so-subtle ways that people of color have been made to appear violent or dangerous, even when they are the victims of violence, let alone when they are accused of criminal activity. This is brought into relief when white perpetrators are portrayed as merely troubled, suffering from illness or disadvantage, and as isolated cases rather than representative of a group. These representations...
then circulate as widely as the media reaches, and have impacts. As wise consumers of news media, then, we constantly read through that bias, or at least attempt to discern its effects. Bias, after all, is simply the product of standpoint which we cannot avoid – we can only seek to understand our blind spots, and address them.

Historic newspaper reporting can be an excellent first-hand view on how public perception is shaped from specific standpoints, and how those perceptions flow across broad distances to connect and shape partisan discourse. I'll offer up an example from the Saint Paul Pioneer reporting on two criminal cases which played out at Fort Snelling, the military installation at the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers, in 1865.[1] I read these in the course of my research on how the constructed Fort Snelling and its place within the landscape have acted to enforce a carceral state on particular people. Though the cases are grounded in this place, I realized that the reporting carried their impacts far and wide. The cases are not fake news; the basic facts of the cases—charges, court rulings, appeals, and sentencing—may be easily corroborated. But the reporting demonstrates a striking parallel to some of the kinds of media bias we struggle with today: accusations of regional partisanship, and racialized representations of the accused.

Detail from “Saint Paul Pioneer” on September 26th of 1865. Their cases were detailed in side-by-side columns. Headlines foregrounded how they would be painted: “Pryor, the Murderer... Strenuously Denies His Guilt” while Shakopee and Medicine Bottle “Receive the News With Stoical Composure.” All three were condemned to be hanged.

Download the full page of the September 26, 1865, “Saint Paul Pioneer.”
In the fall of 1865, the military prison at Fort Snelling held three men awaiting their sentences. Two of them are still referred to today, whenever we recall the Dakota 38+2 executed after the US-Dakota War of 1862. The “+2” were Sakpe and Wakanozanzan, called Shakopee or Little Six and Medicine Bottle in the newspapers, who were captured in 1864 in Canada and returned to Fort Snelling to be tried for their war participation. The third man was John Pryor, an Irish immigrant who had enlisted in the army to serve in the Civil War and who was found guilty of fatally shooting a fellow soldier. On September 26th of 1865, their cases were detailed in side-by-side columns of the Saint Paul Pioneer (SPP). Headlines foregrounded how they would be painted: “Pryor, the Murderer... Strenuously Denies His Guilt” while Shakopee and Medicine Bottle “Receive the News With Stoical Composure.” All three were condemned to be hanged.

The side-by-side reporting foreshadowed—or possibly contributed to—how their cases unfolded. As detailed through reprinted correspondence, Pryor appealed his case through a writ of habeas corpus and an argument that as his crime was not committed as part of wartime activity he should not have been tried by a military court martial. On October 8, the SPP reported that Pryor’s appeal had been denied, and that the date of his execution was set for the following week. The unnamed reporter added that the scaffold was already under construction, and predicted that, when realizing his fate was sealed, Pryor’s
“mental condition will be pitiable indeed.” In contrast, the writer noted that Shakopee and Medicine Bottle, who were supposed to be executed on the same scaffold during the same week, “view their approaching fate with great indifference and stoicism, either real or apparent.” The representation of this indifference, coupled with earlier descriptions denigrating their appearance, intelligence, and even humanity, helps to construct the settler colonial ideal of an inevitable Native disappearance. It rings familiar with contemporary representations of people of color as irredeemable and ungrievable.

And then the unthinkable happened. On October 11, the SPP reported a telegram from the Secretary of War ordering that the executions of Shakopee and Medicine Bottle be suspended. This was followed by an editorial diatribe: “We have no knowledge of the reasons which induced the President to suspend the execution of the Indian murderers, but it is presumed that the order was issued through the representations of their Eastern sympathizers who learned by the newspapers of the sentence of the Court and of the day appointed to carry it into effect. ...If the morbid sympathy of the people at [sic] the East for the red murderers of our citizens, can influence the Government to shield them from adequate punishment, the people of this State will find a remedy and fearlessly apply it.”[2] The circulation of information caused a flare of regional partisanship, no longer simply a matter of local politics, and especially engendering resentment towards the faraway federal seat of government.[3] Perhaps this resentment contributed to the representation in the same day’s reporting of a petition to commute Pryor’s sentence. While earlier reporting had cast doubt on his expressions of remorse, he was now painted with more sympathy – especially when held in comparison to the other case at hand. “There is much sympathy for John Pryor, who is sentenced to be hung at the Fort on Friday next for shooting a comrade, and it has greatly increased since the news was received that the execution of the Indian murderers had been indefinitely postponed. Pryor killed one man, while he was under the influence of liquor and ungovernable passion, whilst each of the Indians were found guilty of murdering a score of frontier settlers.”

Download the full letter to the editor of the October 14, 1865, “Saint Paul Pioneer.”

This anti-Indian racism was not representative of all settlers; at least one citizen submitted a letter to the editor, printed on October 14th, which called attention to a number of “palliating” factors to the case against Shakopee and Medicine Bottle. The writer noted in their defense that evidence against them was weak, that Civil War rebels were being pardoned for their actions in war, that the Dakota people had been systematically disenfranchised for years, and that many reports of the two men were far more sympathetic than those appearing in the Saint Paul Pioneer. The editors responded with self-congratulations—for printing the letter—and a very back-handed acknowledgement of other perspectives: “Without endorsing the views of the writer... we are not unwilling to vary the monotony of abuse which has been poured upon these Indians, by ventilating whatever may be said in their favor, which is not much, although the Devil is not always as black as he is painted.” Despite the airing of dissenting opinion, the settler colonial order was shortly restored, as Pryor’s sentence was commuted while the execution of Shakopee and Medicine Bottle was rescheduled for November 11. Their hanging was public, and the Saint Paul Pioneer marked the occasion with a long write-up.

Was this all fake news, in the glaringly biased representations of the prisoners and their military interlocutors? “Fake news” is used, in the contemporary moment, either to accuse of bias or of outright misinformation. In the former sense, yes—and we can only hope that at least a reader today would easily identify those mischaracterizations. But the reporting gives great insight both
The Evidence upon which they were Condemned—Palliating Circumstances.

To the Editor of the Pioneer:

What were the influences that produced a suspension of the execution of Shakopee and Medicine Bottle? We do not know. Perhaps it was that it was thought their death would operate injuriously upon the consummation of the treaty, which now is being attempted to be effected with the hostile tribes. Perhaps it was that the testimony was not entirely conclusive.

There is no witness who saw either Shakopee or Medicine Bottle kill a single person or fire a shot at the whites in battle or otherwise. There is no evidence that Shakopee ever went to battle, or carried away any plunder. Four witnesses swear that Shakopee stated he had killed white people on the first day of the outbreak on the west side of the Minnesota, opposite the Agency. On such admissions, unsupported by other testimony, a conviction cannot be based. The evidence did not make the noblest in man—ability to meet death without bravado and with a smile.

The Pacific Railroad.

Economic Difference in Favor of the Northern Route 715 Miles.

From the Chicago Republican.

The New York Times, today, on the authority of the English capitalists who have been making a tour through the West, that these gentlemen are prepared to report the line to be economically and without reservation on the immense resources of that portion of the country which they have visited.

It is now generally understood that the transmission of these valuable lines is to immediately extend the Erie and other lines of eastern railroad communication to the Pacific coast. The proposition that tribe, are we to have two roads; if not, whether the northern, central or southern is the best.

During the past few weeks the connection along the northern lines has been rapidly extending. The Express at present is in Boston, embarking to call at the Grand and New England Central stations. When we read of the motives that caused only three persons and had no counsel present to protect them; the witnesses for although they testified one they had such to... and strange to say the government does not furnish counsel when a prisoner is unable to supply one. As to Shakopee, there is nothing to excite interest. He was always raised by Indians and whites as a child, and a crow列入 to his case. As much as what has been stated as to his saving the life of a white man and family, and the weakness of the testimony against him—all these are very much in his favor. For instance, when the first engine passed to the Fort, Shakopee broke from his guards and rushed to Colonel McClellan and said, "Look, there—see that—

This is an excerpt from the October 14, 1865, issue of the "Saint Paul Pioneer." It details a letter to the editor discussing the trial and execution of Shakopee and Medicine Bottle, the two Native American leaders of the Dakota People, who were convicted of murdering whites during the Dakota War of 1862. The letter argues that the trials were unjust and that the evidence against them was not conclusive. It also suggests that the government's actions were motivated by economic interests rather than justice.

The letter is written to the editor of the "Saint Paul Pioneer," a newspaper published in Saint Paul, Minnesota. The editor is asked to consider the economic and political implications of the actions taken against Shakopee and Medicine Bottle, and to consider the impacts of these actions on the Dakota People and their relations with the government.
into the nature of public opinion and racialization working against Dakota people, and that such sentiment was not universally shared. Those opinions were (and are) also shaped by larger political debates, taking individual prisoners and making them the face of a much larger cause. Amidst the racialized and political rhetoric, however, the basic events and places are evident, and from a social justice perspective it is important that we revisit the cases. Perhaps the stories of these three men should be told to visitors to Fort Snelling, the place which served as the source. Because, unfortunately, these stereotypes and prejudices are still with us today.[4]

Footnotes

[1] For those interested in reading the reporting first-hand, I have found references to the cases in the Saint Paul Pioneer on September 26, October 1, 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 14, and 26, and November 2, 10, 11, and 12. Issues were accessed on microfilm at the University of Minnesota (also available on microfilm at MNHS).

[2] The editorial comment also referred approvingly to a recent case in which a mixed-ancestry man was subjected to mob justice by townspeople; it is thus disturbing to consider how this editorial both condoned the act and encouraged further racial violence. This too has parallels to today.

[3] In fact, it had been a letter from Bishop Grace of St. Paul to the President which had prompted the

Detail of a plan view of Fort Snelling, 1873.
temporary suspension of Shakopee’s and Medicine Bottle’s executions. Saint Paul Pioneer, November 2, 1865.


Recommended Citation


About the Author

Katherine Hayes is trained as an American historical archaeologist with a focus on contexts of US settler colonialism, both in the past and in present heritage representations. She has worked in and written about sites in New York, Massachusetts, and Minnesota most extensively. She is a faculty member at the University of Minnesota (Twin Cities) and teaches in Anthropology, American Indian Studies, and the Heritage Studies and Public History program.