

## A Proud Day in Reedsburg--Dec. 6, 1873

### *Tales of Farlier Days*

By Bob Dewel

You'd think that the day after Christmas would be a happy day in Reedsburg, even back in 1873 when holiday observance was pretty low key. Maybe it was a day off work in mid-winter for some—we do know it was a Saturday. We also know that it was an angry day, a very angry day, with anger growing as the day wore on.

The anger was with a nearby detachment of the United States Army, but our story really began some 500 years earlier with the sighting of land by Columbus. The ongoing settlement of the continent which followed was marked with continual disagreement. On one hand were the aspirations of the arriving Europeans. On the other were the claims of the Native Americans already present on the continent.

Often at issue was the ownership of the land, and treaty after treaty with the Indians moved their land claims further west. By an 1837 treaty, the land between the Wisconsin and Mississippi rivers was ceded to the government, the Indians agreeing to move to land reserved for them in what is now Iowa, Minnesota and areas further west. Some Indians were removed by force.

Many Indians had found the reserved lands alien to their way of life, and returned to the more attractive landscapes and natural resources of Wisconsin. As in many other places, the Indians in the Reedsburg area lived nearby in their own village under the rule of their chief, Ah-ho-cho-ka, or Blue Wing. Unlike elsewhere, relations between the Indians and settlers were good, the chief being respected by the folks in Reedsburg.

That was not the case in many other areas in Wisconsin, and in 1873 the government again directed the army to round up the Indians and ship them back west, using force when necessary to enforce the terms of the treaty. Such was the case when a detachment of soldiers and bounty hunters appeared in Reedsburg on Christmas Day. Their orders were to capture and deport the Indian Chief and the others living in the nearby village.

As reported in the 1948 booklet "Reedsburg Remembers", Ah-ho-cho-ka and his family and tribesmen were "rounded up on Dec. 26 and brought to Reedsburg. The citizens were much aroused when they heard what was taking place and implored the agents to permit the natives to remain." The Chief was a legal owner of land, and his son-in-law (Sunday Chief) was a veteran of military service. The citizens' requests went unheeded.

The book continued: "Horace J. Smith, who was a silent listener to the parley and was touched by the treatment of the Indian women, at once collected six or eight sturdy companions, and with them went to the depot where the Indian were gathered in charge of the officers, and waiting for the train.

Smith told the agents that he and his squad had come to see to it that the Indians were not put aboard the cars. Rolling up his shirt sleeves he further, stated that an outrage was being committed, and that if any further attempt was made to take the Indians there would be trouble galore in which he and the group would take an active part.”

The 1948 version continues: “While the matter was being discussed, the prisoners quietly slipped away, one by one, and by the time the train arrived no Indians were present and all had disappeared. No further attempt was made to deport them.”

Although this account gives much credit to Smith and his burly men, the Reedsburg Free Press credits the general citizenry more: “Our people were mad, and as the day progressed they got madder and madder.” Following a court order, the Sheriff “proceeded to the depot, accompanied by quite a large number of our usually quiet but now thoroughly aroused citizenry.” The army and the bounty hunters were forced to desist.

Such was the 1948 version of the story. There are other accounts, much longer than this column could reproduce, but it is possible that some citizens writing for the 1948 booklet could remember the accounts of the incident by their parents or grandparents.

It is said that in some cases men were paid a bounty for rounding up and delivering Indians to the authorities. The government’s forcible effort to deport the Indians was a sad period in the troubled relations between the Indians and the settlers. Reedsburg can look back with pride at its history of resistance to the unfortunate policy then in place.

Here is a photo of the Reedsburg train station at a different time. There is no photo of the 1873 incident. Photo courtesy Sauk County Historical Society

