The Incident that Sparked Utah's Black Hawk War

One hundred forty six years ago this week, on April 9, 1865 — the same day Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee were negotiating an end to the American Civil War — a group of Mormons and Ute Indians were also meeting in the tiny Utah town of Manti to try and find a peaceful way to settle their differences.

According to historical reports, several bands of Utes who spent the winter months in Sanpete Valley had killed and eaten at least fifteen heads of cattle owned by local Mormon settlers. The winter of 1864-65 had been particularly harsh, and the Utes had taken the white settlers' livestock in order to stave off the very real threat of starvation. Some Utes also blamed the Mormons for the diseases that had ravaged them over the winter.

Opinions at the Manti meeting were torn as to how to handle the rising tensions. One of the Ute leaders present at the meeting, Tóqua, the son of the head Northern Ute chief Sowiette, strongly urged peace. But John Lowry, an employee of the United States Indian Office, would not be pacified. Lowry lunged at Juk Arapeen, one of the more outspoken Utes, and, grabbing him by his hair, hauled him from his horse. Enraged, Arapeen and his comrade Antonga (otherwise known as Black Hawk) rode out of town, while Lowry headed home to get a gun.

In the months after the Manti fight, Black Hawk led a mixed band of Utes, Paiutes, and Navajos in a series of raids across central Utah. Before long, the conflict began to take on the appearance of a civil war, with people on both sides committing unspeakable atrocities.

The conflict began to quiet down in 1867 when Black Hawk surrendered, although Indian raids continued until federal troops finally stepped in to enforce the peace in 1872.

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