

Students search for missing monument as part of history class

As a case study about how history is presented and understood, a Minnesota State Mankato class has been investigating the mystery of a missing monument marking the 1862 hanging deaths of 38 Dakota American Indians.

By Dan Linehan, Free Press staff writer [published in The Free Press, Mankato, MN, 5/14/2006]

MANKATO — A Minnesota State University history class is tackling the mystery and meaning of the missing monument marking the hanging deaths of 38 Dakota American Indians — all while digging up dirt on the stone slab's fate.

The 8,500-pound granite monument was created in 1912 with the inscription, "Here were hanged 38 Sioux Indians," along with the date of the hangings: Dec. 26, 1862.

The class is using the monument as a case study of how history is presented to and understood by the public.



A Minnesota State University class is attempting to discover the whereabouts of a monument marking one of the darkest chapters in state history — the hanging deaths of 38 Dakota American Indians. Few seem to know for sure where the marker has gone, though speculation runs rampant.

Given that the slab marks a particularly ugly chapter of Minnesota history, the class has found that, in the words of professor Melodie Andrews, "everyone does not see the past in the same way."

Virtually no one knows what happened to the marker after it was seen in a city storage yard during the mid-'90s. The class has asked Mankato's City Council to start an investigation.

And at least one person who knows the marker's location is keeping silent.

The students have been enthralled in a search that's part urban legend and part history mystery.

The class has spent hours compiling scholarly work on the U.S.-Dakota Conflict of 1862, the subsequent hanging and the fate of the marker.

They've found that the marker, which doesn't have a name but is also called the Dakota hanging monument, was removed from its downtown spot in 1971 after it became unpopular with the public and stood in the way of a downtown development project.

It stayed in a city storage yard in Sibley Park until the mid-'90s, when it was moved to an undisclosed location and hasn't been seen publicly since.

Jay Busby, a junior, has been leading the class' search for the monument.

After speaking with about a dozen past and present city employees, Busby has been unable to penetrate the layers of rumor — and, students say, of deception — that surrounds the marker.

It's destroyed, he's heard, crushed up and buried beneath the buffalo statue near the hanging site. Others contend it's buried virtually across the street from the Sibley Park yard.

That's Busby's best guess, but he's still frustrated his work hasn't yielded anything more than estimates, that he "still never got under that veil of secrecy."

And the city has largely shrugged its shoulders until very recently, when a memo prepared in advance of the students' council visit said the statue was given to the Dakota and taken away. That memory apparently comes from Public Works Director George Rosati, who had last week off.

"I never ... wow ... that, that's news to me," said junior Kathryn Pase after hearing that tidbit. "It just seems to be cover-up after cover-up after cover-up. People won't talk, or are dead; no one will give us a straight answer," she said.

Pase referred to now-deceased former Public Works Director Paul Baker, who apparently gave the marker to the Dakota.

City Manager Pat Hentges says he'll talk to Rosati this week and issue a formal statement to the class.

"I can pretty much tell you that the city is not in possession of it," he said. And he's "almost certain" that it's not buried in Sibley Park, a common guess about the marker's location.

Bill Bassett, city manager at the time, says he can't confirm or deny Rosati's account.

One person says she knows where the marker is, but she's not telling.

Vernell Wabasha, 71, is now retired but says she was deep in the tribe's politics while serving on the State Indian Affairs Commission during the mid-'90s.

"I know for sure where it's at," she said, referring to the marker she calls "that derogatory rock."

"My personal feelings are that it would stay buried and that people should leave well enough alone," she said.

Wabasha says the marker represents history that no one ought to be proud of. She wouldn't reveal any other details of the marker, including whether or not it's buried in Mankato itself.

"I keep telling you, it's a mystery," she said. "Our lips are sealed."

Sheldon Wolfchild, tribal chairman of the Lower Sioux, says he doesn't know where the monument is.

But he says it embodies the traditionally one-sided portrayal of the conflict. "In order to justify the war, they had to make us look savage," he said.

Even so, it's not a period of history he's comfortable passing along to future generations.

"They should only know the positive things about their ancestors prior to the war," Wolfchild said.

Andrews and her students want the marker found, but they think it should be in the historical society, not at the site of the hangings. There are new plans for what would be done with that space.

Andrews says she'd like to have a commission formed that would include members of the Dakota, community members, city leaders, historical society representatives and scholars. Together, they'd write a new history that puts the hangings "in an appropriate historical context."

She admits there are different views of the monument, but says "we all want to understand the past."

"You certainly don't learn anything if you bury things and try to forget them."

Busby agrees, saying the class doesn't want to dig up the past "just so (they) can say (they) found it," but so it's preserved to see the attitudes of the time it was built.

Classmate Pase puts it this way: "We're ready. We can handle this. Bring back the monument."