RadioDoc Review

Volume 2 • Issue 1 • 2015

2015-05-29

Little War on the Prairie: an auto-critique

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Abstract

Using *RadioDoc Review's* suggested criteria for evaluating a radio documentary, John Biewen delivers an auto-critique of his own program, *Little War on the Prairie*. It tells the story of the U.S.-Dakota War, a bloody Plains Indian war that broke out in the summer of 1862 in southern Minnesota. That six-week conflict took the lives of hundreds of people, perhaps a thousand, a larger death toll than in the better-known bloodlettings at Little Big Horn or Wounded Knee. Most of the dead were white settlers, though the U.S. government's reprisals in the aftermath of the war killed up to several thousand Dakota Indians. A grim highlight of that payback was the simultaneous hanging of thirty-eight Dakota warriors, the largest mass execution in U.S. history, on the day after Christmas, 1862, in Mankato, Minnesota. Which happens to be Biewen's hometown. Yet the story was not well known there – and Biewen seeks to find out why. *Little War on the Prairie* aired on *This American Life* (2012), whose host, Ira Glass, was also its primary editor.

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Keywords

Dakota, Mankato, Minnesota, Indian wars, radio documentary

Recommended Citation

Biewen, J., (2015) "Little War on the Prairie: an auto-critique", *RadioDoc Review* 2(1). doi: https://doi.org/10.14453/rdr.v2i1.7

Little War on the Prairie: an auto-critique

by John Biewen

Little War on the Prairie

Broadcast, *This American Life* (2012). Producer:John Biewen. Editor: Ira Glass

Duration: 60mins

Audio HERE: http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/479/little-war-on-the-prairie

Editor's note: John Biewen wrote this at the request of RadioDoc Review, as an experimental application of the reviewer guidelines developed by RDR.

It's a curious exercise, reviewing one's own work. In listening to a documentary I made three years ago (with considerable input from others), should I heap praise on the producers at the moments that still please me and wince at the spots where I'd wish for a do-over? Sounds awkward if not unseemly. So, I'll go light on the up-or-down assessments and, instead, attempt to use the RDR's reviewer guidelines (enumerated below) as a frame simply for analyzing *Little War on the Prairie* and discussing what we were *trying* to do in crafting the documentary. Perhaps there's unusual value in this exercise in at least that one sense: As an auto-reviewer, I don't have to speculate as to the maker's intentions.

Little War was broadcast on *This American Life (TAL)* in November 2012, a Thanksgiving week "story of Indians and settlers," as Ira Glass put it. Glass is the host of *TAL*, of course, and was also the primary editor on this piece. The documentary took up the entire one-hour show. (The online and podcast version is a couple of minutes longer.) It tells the story of the U.S.-Dakota War, a bloody Plains Indian war that broke out in the summer of 1862 in southern Minnesota. That six-week conflict took the lives of hundreds of people, perhaps a thousand, a larger death toll than in the better-known bloodlettings at Little Big Horn or Wounded Knee. Most of the dead were white settlers, though the U.S. government's reprisals in the aftermath of the war killed up to several thousand Dakota Indians. A grim highlight of that payback was the simultaneous hanging of thirty-eight Dakota warriors, the largest mass execution in U.S. history, on the day after Christmas, 1862, in Mankato, Minnesota. Which happens to be my hometown.

President Abraham Lincoln signed off on the hangings – an act the average American knows nothing about – though in fairness Lincoln reduced what would have been a greater carnage; military and political leaders in Minnesota wanted to hang several hundred Dakota men.

Even in a nation expert at historical denial, this episode is strikingly under-told. The amnesia extends to the place where it happened. As Glass and I discuss in the introduction, I grew up in Mankato learning nothing in school about the events of 1862 – arguably the defining event in the *state's* history, never mind the town's – and could not recall the war or the hangings ever coming up in

conversation there. By adulthood I'd picked up mentions of the war in the media (it was long called the "Sioux Uprising" when it was discussed at all) but the story and its significance to the place that I still consider home did not sink in until years later. For many people in Minnesota, the U.S.-Dakota War remains at best a dusty factoid, akin to, say, Napoleon's troubles at Waterloo.

So, *Little War* is not simply a straightforward historical documentary. It's also an exploration of historical forgetting and, to a lesser extent, a personal journey. From the opening minutes:

> **Ira Glass:** And so on and off for the last year, John Biewen has been traveling around the state with two questions. First, what exactly happened 150 years ago? And second--
> **John Biewen:** Why don't we talk about it? Why haven't we kind of internalized this story, in Minnesota, into our understanding of the place?

1. **STORYTELLING STRENGTH**

The opening story in the documentary takes place much more recently than 1862. Gwen Westerman, a Dakota Indian and my main guide and traveling companion, tells a story – one with ghostly or supernatural overtones – about the first time she visited the site of the 1862 hangings as a newly arrived college professor in Mankato in the 1990s. In part, the choice to open the hour this way was a matter of character development: establishing Gwen as not only an "expert" but as someone with a deeply visceral connection to the larger story we're about to tell. Secondly, I suppose, it was a tactic to grab the audience with a vivid personal vignette before wading into a complicated, 150-year-old history lesson.

The U.S.-Dakota War makes for a potent story at face value. A dramatic, bloody episode in American history, involving our greatest president, with the added advantage that very few Americans know about it. At the same time, the story presented real challenges. Above all, the fact that its events did not take place in living memory. (For years I produced documentaries for American RadioWorks, and ARW had a house rule for historical programs: We would not reach back more than fifty or sixty years. We felt we needed living eyewitnesses to make the most potent radio from history. *Little War* broke that rule, badly.) In place of eyewitness interviews, we used archival first-person accounts compiled in the 19th century and brought them to life through readings by actors.

More importantly, we worked to make it a character-driven yarn. The main contemporary presenters of the story – Gwen Westerman and myself, and even the main academic historian who appears several times throughout the piece, Mary Wingerd – are interested parties, Minnesotans with a personal stake in our state's story of itself.

In addition, we fleshed out key figures from 1862: Little Crow, the Dakota Chief who reluctantly led the uprising; and Henry Sibley, a Minnesota politician and military leader. An account survived of a speech by Little Crow to the angry young warriors who demanded a war against the white settlers. Little Crow – his name in Dakota was Ta Oyate Duta – tries to talk them out of it, evoking the white soldiers "as thick as tamaracks in the swamps of the Ojibways." A Native American actor read the Chief's words: "Braves, you are little children. You are fools. You will die like the rabbits when the hungry wolves hunt them in the Hard

Moon." In the end, though, he relents. "Ta Oyate Duta is not a coward. He will die with you."

Henry Sibley is the main villain in the story but we took pains to humanize him, not only by recognizing the racist attitudes that prevailed at the time but also by laying out the specific pressures on Sibley. He was desperately in debt as a fur trader and stood to get a windfall from the unbalanced and coercive treaty that he himself pushed through.

Along with character development, the piece uses a classic storytelling device once it gets to the main historical drama: starting in the middle with explosive action and then rewinding to fill in the back-story.

After Gwen and I have been introduced – and after Gwen's ghostly story – we've hit the road.

(In car) Gwen Westerman: Ah, the sign is faded. Historic site, to the right.

John Biewen, narrating: On a gravel farm road an hour and a half from Mankato there's an oddly placed historic marker.

Gwen Westerman: Here?

John Biewen: To find it you have to pull into somebody's driveway. The yard is sheltered by pine trees.

> **Gwen Westerman:** We've driven onto a farm site with a classic weathered red barn and outbuildings; a small house that looks newer, complete with an American flag and a satellite dish. And then right in the middle of their yard is a marble monument.

John Biewen: It's a short obelisk, etched with the names of five white settlers who were killed here by Dakota men in August of 1862. This was the incident that started the U.S.-Dakota war. Gwen reads a steel plaque that was put up in the 1960s.

> **Gwen Westerman:** "The Acton Incident. On a bright Sunday afternoon, August 17, 1862, four young Sioux hunters, on a spur-of-the-moment dare, decided to prove their bravery by shooting Robinson Jones. Stopping at his cabin, they requested liquor and were refused. Then Jones, followed by the seemingly friendly Indians, went to the neighboring Howard Baker cabin, which stood on this site."

John Biewen: It's hard for me to picture the story this plaque tells. It says the Dakotas and the white men went to a neighbor's cabin, right here where the monument is now. They got into a target shooting contest. Maybe that's what people did with passing strangers on the frontier in 1862. Then the plaque says the Indians suddenly turned on the whites and shot three men and two women dead.

> **Gwen Westerman, reading:** "The Indians fled south to their village 40 miles away on the Minnesota River. There they reported what they had done, and the Sioux chiefs decided to wage an all-out war against the white man. Thus the unplanned shooting of five settlers here at Acton triggered the bloody Sioux Uprising of 1862." [Pauses. Repeats.] “They decided to wage an all-out war against the white man.”
>
> **John Biewen, in the scene with Gwen:** You shook your head at that part.
>
> **Gwen Westerman:** I did. It's as if it were – that there was nothing that led up to this. It leaves out so much. [Pause.] But it's a small monument. You can't get everything on there. [Sardonic laughter]

From there, we take our road trip further into the past, to fill in the much more complicated story that the plaque does not tell.

2. ORIGINALITY AND INNOVATION

Little War departs from the most traditional documentary approaches in several ways. First, the position of the narrator: Neither omniscient nor detached, I’m a guy from the place in question who has decided to go home and dig into an under-told piece of history. The piece is not a polemic, but my point of view

emerges in brief moments.

The writing and the interview “tape” are relatively conversational, and the music is from our time; it’s not period music evoking the 1860s but rather scoring designed to give pace and momentum to the storytelling.

While untraditional, though, these approaches are not new to listeners of *This American Life (TAL)* or *Radiolab* or a number of other public radio shows and podcasts. For this very reason, I decided to approach *TAL* with the project: I knew the show would be comfortable with the more subjective, personal, and informal approach that I wanted to bring to this story.

3**. RESEARCH AND REPORTING**

This American Life made its mark by NOT doing traditional journalism and instead doing slice-of-life storytelling. In recent years, though, the show has done more robust, long-form *reporting* than anyone else on American radio – tackling things like the financial meltdown in wonkish detail and undertaking lengthy “embedded” research on topics such as high school shootings. Much of my own background is in relatively hard journalism and deeply researched documentary work. Still, if anything, I was pleasantly surprised by the encouragement from Ira Glass to go deeper, to bring out *more* detail and complexity.

We spent considerable time, for example, researching and then recounting the 1851 treaties that pried half of (what would become) the state of Minnesota from Dakota hands, using deceptive means and the threat of force. As unbalanced as the treaties were, the United States government broke them

anyway, leaving the Dakota people desperate and angry a decade later, setting the stage for the bloodshed.

TAL had a professional fact-checker go through every line of the piece, in the fashion of, say,*The New Yorker* – a level of fact checking rare in public radio. The show instituted this practice after its scandalous experience with the storyteller Mike Daisey less than a year before *Little War* was finished.[1]

4. COMPLEXITY OF INFORMATION AND PORTRAYALS

As I said above, we were absolutely pro-complexity in telling this story. Throughout the hour, we move back and forth between 1862 and the present day, telling two stories: What happened then, and how did we come to such profound denial about it.

The complexity extends to the answers to those questions. For many decades after the war of 1862, the story that was told in Minnesota, when it was told, was one of "savage" Indians rising up and killing settlers and needing to be subdued by the more civilized white man. In one jaw-dropping scene in *Little War,* we find that that version of the story is not dead. A third grade teacher in Mankato, standing in front of her class in 2012, says, on tape: "The Indians didn't know how to solve conflicts … they only knew how to fight. We use our words.

[1] In 2012, Mike Daisey, an American actor and "monologist", reported for *This American Life* on the conditions under which Chinese workers made Apple products. It transpired that he had fabricated some sections, and lied to TAL fact-checkers. TAL published a one-hour *Retraction,* admitting it had been misled, and that American public radio standards had been undermined.
See http://www.thisamericanlife.org/blog/2012/03/retracting-mr-daisey-and-the-apple-factory

But they … fought."

Little War was meant as a corrective, but we didn't want to swing to the other extreme and simply say Indians Good, Whites Bad. We spelled out the treaty violations and starvation that led some Dakota people to rise up in violence, but were also unflinching in describing the slaughter, by Dakota warriors, of hundreds of unarmed settlers who were essentially innocent bystanders in the dispute.

5. EMOTIVENESS AND EMPATHY

Every documentary maker wants to move his or her audience. Yes, you've got some information you want to pass along, but you work hard at the craft in an attempt to take listeners inside the story, to prompt them to feel something. I suspect that even some in the audience who found *Little War* historically instructive – who learned for the first time, for example, that Thomas Jefferson wrote bluntly about getting land out of Indian hands by first getting Indian tribes in debt – may not necessarily have felt a lot of *emotion* about events that happened to people long dead. But some did. One listener wrote: "I stood in my kitchen for an hour listening, fascinated, furious, and gut-punched."

There's a moment at the end of *Little War* that can still choke *me* up. It touches on people very much alive – the Dakota people in general and Gwen Westerman in particular – and on the importance that history, and the honest recounting of history, has in the present. On the 150th anniversary of the outbreak

of the war, in August of 2012, the current governor of Minnesota, Mark Dayton, declared a “Day of Remembrance and Reconciliation” and repudiated genocidal remarks made by his predecessor during the war of 1862. Dayton’s declaration included frank statements that the U.S. Government, through its agents in Minnesota, used deception and force to take away Dakota land and broke its promises.

The next day, in *Little War’s* final scene, Gwen is standing with me next to a cornfield in southwestern Minnesota. Her voice cracks as she describes her reaction to the governor’s statements. “What we want is acknowledgment that this happened. … And here it is.”

6. CRAFT AND ARTISTRY

The piece is skillfully written and assembled, I believe. It’s not complicated; there’s a lot of narration and interview tape, with some scene-setting, natural sound, and music.

The music is probably not for everybody. I wasn’t sure how I would feel about this documentary getting the *This American Life* sound design treatment. The use of pulsing, modern, often electronic music is idiosyncratic in an historical documentary. As it turns out, I like it. I think it works.

7. ETHICAL PRACTICE

Many ethical questions that arise in the context of documentary work are the familiar questions of journalistic ethics. Were the makers scrupulous with facts

and with attribution? Were they honest about their intentions with their interviewees? Did they seek, given limited airtime, to preserve the complexity of the story and its characters? I would like to think that for those of us involved in this project, those are matters of professional habit.

At the same time, a piece like *Little War* is deeply subjective – and transparently so. In consultation with *This American Life*, I made countless decisions about where to point my microphone, and where not to.

The skewed, long-held "Sioux Uprising" story was a classic case of history written by the winners. So, from the beginning of this project, I resolved to put the Dakota perspective front and center. I did so by seeking out Gwen Westerman and presenting her as a key guide to the story – always checking her accounts against "independent" historical sources – and also through the use of 19th century narratives by Native American witnesses.

In one instance, audible in the documentary, respecting the Dakota viewpoint meant putting down the microphone. A climactic scene in the documentary – at which Gwen Westerman made the above comment about "acknowledgment" – was a symbolic "walk home" by Dakota people. Several dozen Dakota gathered to symbolically return to their ancient homeland of Minnesota 150 years after they were banished from the state on the order of President Lincoln. As part of the walk from South Dakota to Minnesota, a small group of Dakota elders held a religious ceremony at the border. The radio audience hears a young Dakota woman asking reporters to turn off their equipment as the ceremony is about to begin, then the click of me doing so. I

describe the ceremony, which I was allowed to witness but not record: the use of sage smoke, the passing of eagle feathers, prayers, tears.

We radio producers always want the sound, needless to say. But there was no hesitation in respecting the request. It didn't feel like a "decision" at all.

8. PUBLIC BENEFIT and IMPACT

As I've said, the story that *Little War* tells has long been overlooked and little known. The version of events that *was* historically told needed correction. I hope the documentary made a dent in that regard and will continue to do so as people interested in the story continue to find it online. More broadly, the project is not just about this one little war in the upper Midwest but about a truer reckoning with all of American history.

The piece drew hundreds of comments on *TAL*'s Facebook page and I've heard from several college professors and high school teachers now playing it in their history or journalism classes. Radio documentaries don't "change the world," as we who make them know too well. But making them is what we know how to do, so we do it. We send out our ripples and have faith that they make some sort of difference.

JOHN BIEWEN:

During a career spanning nearly thirty years, John Biewen has produced for all of the NPR shows, the BBC World Service, *This American Life*, *Studio 360*, and *State of the Re:Union*, among other programs. He now directs the audio program at the Center for Documentary Studies (CDS) at Duke University. He's preparing to launch a new podcast from CDS, *Scene On Radio*, in the fall of 2015. Among other honors, Biewen's work has won two Robert F. Kennedy Awards, the Scripps Howard National Journalism Award, and Third Coast's Radio Impact Award. With co-editor Alexa Dilworth, Biewen edited the book, *Reality Radio: Telling True Stories in Sound*, which was published in 2010 and is in its sixth printing. A second edition is anticipated in 2016.