

The Courage of Silas Soule

By Dennis Payton Knight

Atrocities are the mark of the human race's inability to cope with itself, a sign of cowardice on the highest scale, reflected in the acts of genocide which so very often stain history. The Holocaust and the killing fields of the Khmer Rouge are mere examples of man's inhumanity to man.

But sometimes one brave person will stand up to the cowardice of genocide. So also, were Captain Silas Soule, and his Lieutenant, Joseph Cramer, who both, and together, courageously refused to obey the orders of Colonel John Chivington at Sand Creek on the plains of Colorado on November 29, 1864.

Soule was raised an abolitionist fighting slavery, part of a family determined to bring Kansas into the Union as a free state. His father established their household near Lawrence as a stop on the Underground Railroad and, at seventeen, Silas was escorting slaves escaping from Missouri north to freedom.

John Brown frequented the Soule home, and Silas became a close friend who would accompany him on forays. In 1859, but not with Brown, Silas helped in the escape of Dr. John Day, incarcerated in Missouri for his aid to runaway slaves, and later he got himself, posing as a drunken Irishman, tossed into another jail to contact two of John Brown's associates. He was a resourceful and clever young rebel with a cause.

Soule came to Colorado and soon enlisted in the Colorado Volunteers, serving in the New Mexico Campaign of 1862, including the decisive Battle of Glorieta Pass. Soule rose to the rank of Captain, and his company was part of Chivington's regiment at Sand Creek when the Colonel ordered the attack on Black Kettle's encampment of Cheyenne and Arapahoe families.

Soule and Cramer observed the Cheyenne flying the Union flag, a sign of peace, and, when commanded to attack, ordered their men to hold fire and remain in place. Other units in the Chivington regiment then stormed the camp of mostly women and children, in what became known as the Sand Creek Massacre.

In a letter to his friend, Major Edward Wynkoop, who had been trying to arrange a peace treaty with Black Kettle but was thwarted by Chivington, Silas wrote, "I refused to fire, and swore that none but a coward would, for by this time hundreds of women and children were coming toward us, and getting on their knees for mercy." The letter described scalplings and the most perverse mutilation of bodies. "You would think it impossible for white men to butcher and mutilate human beings as they did there," he wrote.

Soule's accounting sparked outrage and shock around the country. In a court of inquiry in 1865. Soule's testimony against Chivington led, in part, to Congress refusing the Army's request for thousands of men for war against the Plains Indians. First hailed as a hero after the massacre, Chivington, after Soule testified, left the Army in disgrace.

Silas was appointed Provost Marshall in Denver, but was assassinated by a Chivington ally in

1865, only 22 days after his marriage. His friend and former colleague, Joseph Cramer, captured the perpetrator, but he, too, then met assassination.

Captain Silas Soule and his Lieutenant Joseph Cramer are buried in Denver's Riverside Cemetery, to be forever remembered and honored by American Indians and good people everywhere as men of the highest moral conviction, brave in the face of unspeakable cowardice.