

PITCH DECK

DAKOTA 1862: An Uncivil War

Based on true events

During the Dakota War of 1862, Sarah Wakefield forms a dangerous bond with Chaska, her Dakota protector—one later weaponized in a military tribunal that precedes the largest mass execution in U.S. history, helps drive hundreds of Dakota into exile in Canada, and compels her to risk everything to tell a truth powerful enough to make her a traitor to her own people.

Truth made her a traitor. Silence would have made her complicit.

When power silences truth, who survives?

Grounded. Intimate. Unsentimental.

Truth vs. Power

Witness vs. Complicity

Survival vs. Justice

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the summer of 1862, treaty-guaranteed annuity payments to the Dakota fail to arrive, while traders refused to extend credit even as storehouses remained full, pushing already-hungry communities toward starvation. Tensions mount as accusations of corruption and betrayal spread. In August 1862, the conflict was sparked by a killing near Acton, Minnesota, involving a small group of Dakota men caught stealing eggs after a failed hunt. As violence escalates, Dakota leaders—facing starvation and imminent retaliation—formally declare war, breaking existing treaties and launching widespread attacks across the Minnesota River Valley in an effort to reclaim their territory. Hundreds of settlers are killed before U.S. forces respond with a coordinated military campaign that crushes Dakota resistance within weeks.

In the war's aftermath, the U.S. military convenes a series of tribunals that rush hundreds of Dakota men—guilty and innocent alike—through trials lasting minutes, not days. The accused are given no legal representation, often no interpreters, and are frequently sentenced to death simply for participating in battles. Within a month, nearly four hundred men are tried, resulting in 303 death sentences. Because the executions require presidential

approval, President Abraham Lincoln reviews the trial transcripts and intervenes, limiting execution to those convicted of civilian murder or rape. Thirty-eight men were ultimately selected and hanged in Mankato on December 26, 1862—the largest mass execution in U.S. history.

All Dakota are subsequently banished from Minnesota. Women, children and elders are forced into internment then removed south, while hundreds of men are imprisoned. When scalp bounties are issued against any Dakota who remain in the state, those remaining flee north across the border into British territory, where survivors and their descendants establish the Sioux Valley Dakota Nation in Canada.

Lead Character - SARAH WAKEFIELD

Sarah Wakefield is not a hero by design. She is an educated frontier woman who comes west believing that marriage will grant her the freedom to become a writer. Instead, she finds herself constrained by domestic duty and social expectation—observant, articulate, and largely powerless within settler society.

Captured during the Dakota War of 1862 and spared under the protection of Chaska, Sarah survives by listening, adapting, and witnessing. Her captivity dismantles the simple moral framework she has been taught, forcing her to confront the humanity of the Dakota and the consequences of a system built on broken promises.

After her release, Sarah returns to a society determined to impose a single narrative of rebellion and guilt. When military tribunals rush hundreds of Dakota men toward execution, she becomes an unlikely and dangerous witness. By recording the trials and later publishing her account, Sarah chooses truth over safety—knowing that her words will cost her reputation, her marriage, and any claim to belonging.

Sarah's power is not physical or political. It is testimonial. Her story asks whether telling the truth—when it cannot save everyone—still matters.

Lead Character - CHASKA

Chaska is a Dakota man caught between worlds—rooted in his people's traditions while fluent in the language, customs, and expectations of white society. He understands both sides of the conflict, yet fully belongs to neither.

During the Dakota War of 1862, Chaska protects Sarah Wakefield and her children while violence erupts around them. His decision is not an act of submission or sentimentality, but of conscience. In choosing restraint over vengeance, Chaska places himself at risk within his own community and earns suspicion from both sides.

After the war, Chaska's proximity to Sarah becomes a liability. Rumors, fear, and settler resentment erase the distinction between protector and criminal. Arrested during the military tribunals, Chaska is condemned not for a proven crime, but for existing in the wrong place, at the wrong time, within a system determined to punish collectively.

Chaska's execution—carried out after he answers to another man's name—embodies the film's central tragedy: a justice system so indifferent to truth that identity itself becomes expendable. His death is not the result of passion or rage, but of bureaucracy, fear, and moral abdication.

Chaska survives the war, but not the peace that follows.

Lead Character - DR. JOHN WAKEFIELD

Dr. John Wakefield is a respected frontier physician, firmly invested in order, reputation, and his place within settler society. Where Sarah observes and questions, John seeks stability and control. He believes in institutions, in hierarchy, and in the necessity of maintaining appearances—especially during crises.

During the Dakota War and its aftermath, John's fear of social ruin outweighs his concern for justice. Rumors surrounding Sarah's captivity and her relationship with Chaska threaten not only his marriage, but his standing in the community. Rather than confront the truth his wife carries home, John attempts to contain it.

When the military tribunals begin, John's jealousy and terror of disgrace harden into action. He forbids Sarah from assisting Bishop Whipple and uses his influence to ensure Chaska is arrested with the other accused. His decisions are not driven by cruelty, but by self-preservation—making him an agent of the very system he claims to respect.

Dr. Wakefield represents the film's most unsettling truth: that injustice is often sustained not by hatred, but by ordinary people choosing reputation over responsibility. His silence—and his interference—prove as lethal as any act of violence.

John survives by aligning himself with power—and lives with what that alignment costs.

VISUAL LANGUAGE

The film looks at history the way Sarah does—closely, quietly, and without the comfort of distance.

Grounded realism over spectacle.

The camera remains close to bodies and faces, privileging human consequence over battlefield choreography. Violence is observed, not stylized—often felt in aftermath rather than action.

Landscape as pressure, not romance.

The Minnesota frontier is vast but unforgiving: open prairie, frozen rivers, and raw settlements that offer no refuge. The land reflects isolation, scarcity, and moral exposure rather than frontier myth.

Natural light and muted color.

A restrained palette of earth tones, winter whites, and weathered wood grounds the film in physical reality. Interiors are lit by fire, candle, and overcast daylight, emphasizing confinement and fragility.

Intimacy within scale.

Large historical events—war, trials, executions—are framed through individual experience. Crowds are present, but the emotional focus remains singular: a glance, a hand, a silence.

Stillness as tension.

Moments of quiet—waiting, listening, witnessing—carry as much weight as violence. The film allows space for moral reckoning, resisting the urge to rush or sensationalize.

COMPARABLE FILMS

Like its comparables, this film confronts history not to resolve it, but to refuse to forget.

12 Years a Slave

A historical reckoning centered on an individual witness whose testimony exposes systemic brutality. Like the Dakota *War of 1862*, the film refuses catharsis, allowing truth—and its cost—to drive the narrative.

The New World

A restrained, immersive approach to early American history that privileges interior

experience, moral ambiguity, and the collision of cultures over conventional historical spectacle.

The Last of the Mohicans

A frontier war drama that balances large-scale conflict with intimate character perspective, situating personal bonds within the collapse of a world.

WHY THIS STORY NOW

This story arrives at a moment when nations are reckoning with how history is recorded, who controls the narrative, and whose suffering is deemed legitimate. *Dakota 1862: An Uncivil War* examines not only an act of violence, but the machinery that followed—how institutions moved quickly to punish, silence, and erase complexity in the name of closure.

Sarah Wakefield's dilemma feels urgently contemporary. She is not asked to invent the truth, but to decide whether telling it is worth the personal cost. Her story speaks directly to a time when witnesses are discredited, truth is politicized, and moral courage often carries social punishment rather than reward.

The film also resonates across borders. The forced exile of the Dakota into what is now Canada connects American history to Canadian identity, reminding us that the consequences of injustice do not stop at national lines—and that displacement, migration, and survival remain living legacies.

This is not a film about correcting the past. It is about recognizing how easily truth can be buried—and how necessary it is to recover it, even when doing so offers no absolution.

WHY IT MATTERS

This film confronts a foundational American trauma that remains largely unexamined—not to assign simple blame, but to reveal how injustice is often carried out through ordinary procedures, respectable institutions, and people who believe they are preserving order.

The Dakota 1862: An Uncivil War matters because it refuses easy binaries. It acknowledges violence without erasing its causes, and centers a witness whose truth is inconvenient to every side. Sarah Wakefield does not restore justice; she preserves memory. In doing so, the film asks whether moral responsibility ends when the damage is already done.

The story also carries lasting cross-border significance. The forced displacement of the Dakota into Canada is not a footnote, but a living legacy—one that connects U.S. history to the formation of Indigenous communities that still exist today. The film makes visible how national violence reshapes identity far beyond its borders.

Ultimately, this is a story about what survives when justice fails: testimony, memory, and the imperfect courage to speak anyway. In an era when truth is contested and witnesses are punished, the film insists that bearing witness—however costly—remains an act of resistance.

WRITER'S STATEMENT

I am telling this story because the Dakota War of 1862 is most often remembered for its violence, while what followed—the trials, the executions, and the exile into Canada—remains largely unexamined. My connection to this material is both personal and professional. Growing up Métis, I experienced marginalization through poverty and discrimination, which shaped my understanding of how injustice is often carried out quietly, through institutions that appear orderly and legitimate. Years later, while producing work with the Sioux Valley Dakota Nation, I encountered the living legacy of that history and, through research, discovered Sarah Wakefield's *Six Weeks in the Sioux Teepees*. Her account gripped me not because of captivity, but because of what she chose to do afterward: record and publish a truth that contradicted the official narrative at great personal cost.

I believe I am the right person to tell this story because I am drawn to moral complexity rather than certainty. This film does not ask the audience to excuse violence or assign simple blame; it asks them to examine how fear, authority, and social pressure shape who is judged and who is heard. The mechanisms on display—collective punishment, denial of due process, and violence carried out without accountability—are not confined to the 19th century. They persist wherever power moves faster than justice. Ultimately, this film asks a question I believe remains urgent: when telling the truth cannot undo harm, does bearing witness still matter? I believe it does—and that refusing to forget is itself an act of resistance.

COVERAGE NOTES

There's a lot to like about this screenplay. This is a poignant, well-written story set amid pretty fascinating and affecting historical events, and it's not hard to imagine actors being interested in these complex, weighty lead roles. Those leads are perfectly castable too,

which is something buyers always consider, because securing big name talent can make it easier to market a film and draw viewers.

The subject matter for this screenplay is strong. There are many stories about the Indigenous Americans during the Civil War and their struggle to survive or fight. However, this screenplay focuses on a story that few people will be familiar with. The shift into a courtroom drama ensures the narrative isn't just a run-of-the-mill western. It also tells a tragic story about how many of the Indigenous Americans were ceremoniously murdered after a kangaroo court. It elevates the story and gives it much to say about racism and the white patriarchal themes, which are depressingly relevant today.

Powerful, character-driven, and utterly compelling, this period drama offers everything we want from a film like this. The premise is instantly intriguing, not just in the way it lifts the curtain on history, but in how it exposes corruption, prejudice, and hypocrisy while inspiring us and reaffirming our belief in the value of honor, decency, and courage. And though the story is epic in scope and scale, the writer never loses sight of the grounded character and relationship stories at its heart.