

Earliest Exploration of Iowa Land

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EARLIEST EXPLORATIONS OF IOWA-LAND.

BY CHARLES R. KEYES, PH. D.

Père Jacques Marquette and Sieur Louis Joliet are commonly accredited with the discovery of the Upper Mississippi river, and with being the first Europeans to set foot upon territory which now is included within Iowa's domains. On the seventeenth of June, 1673, as the venerable Father's account records, these travelers entered the Mississippi river from the Wisconsin river. Floating down the great stream for several days in their frail canoes, they finally made a landing on the west bank. As indicated on their crude maps, this point was a short distance above the mouth of a large watercourse which was named the Rivière des Moingouenas. from the Indian tribe which they visited on its banks. This river was the present Des Moines river and the place was upon modern Iowa soil. But recent critical investigations disclose records of earlier visits to the region by Europeans.

Fifty years had not elapsed since the landing of Columbus on San Salvador before European adventurers had begun to turn their steps towards the interior of the North American continent. Singularly enough almost simultaneous expeditions from three widely different directions were headed for the region now known as the Upper Mississippi basin.

The French under Cartier, entering the St. Lawrence river, approached from the northeast. From the southeast the Spanish, led by De Soto, started from Florida and traversed the country to what is now Missouri and Kansas. From the far southwest Coronado, companion to Cortez, with a handful of conquistadores, having gone north from the City of Mexico to the Grand Canyon of the Colorado, in western Arizona, proceeded eastward to the Rio Grande. Seeking the fabulous City of Quivira, or the Gran Quivera, which was reputed to be two hundred leagues northeast of Tiguex (near Albuquerque)

he almost reached, before turning back, in the summer of 1541, the southwestern corner of our State.

It was, however, a full century later before white man's eyes actually rested on Iowa-land. After his first entry into the region of the Upper Mississippi the struggles for its possession became inseparably linked with the fortunes and misfortunes of the three great European nations. For more than one hundred and fifty years prior to the beginning of the nineteenth century the tragic events of the Old World were reflected on these outskirts of civilization.

The first European to visit the Upper Mississippi valley appears to have been Jean Nicolet,¹ as was first shown recently by Shea.² In 1634,³ at the request of Champlain, their governor of Canada, Nicolet left Quebec, passed up the St. Lawrence river, and finally reaching Lake Michigan, entered Green Bay, and ascended the Fox river to the portage point between it and the Wisconsin river. It is important to note that this first established route of Nicolet to the Mississippi river continued for more than two hundred years to be a main path of exploration, travel and commerce to the West and to Upper Louisiana.

Before leaving Quebec Nicolet had heard of a powerful people in the Far West, who were without beards, shaved their heads, and otherwise appeared to resemble Tatars or Chinese. At any rate, our early explorer was prepared to meet the Chinese, as is indicated by Father Vimont's account:

At a distance of two days' journey from this tribe (Winnebagoes) he sent one of his savages to carry them the news of peace which was well received, especially when they heard that it was a European who brought the message. They dispatched several young men to go to meet the manitou, that is, the wonderful man; they come, they escort him, they carry all his baggage. He was clothed in a large garment of China damask, strewn with flowers and birds of various colors. As soon as he came in sight all the women and children fled, seeing a man carry thunder in both hands. They called thus the two pistols he was holding. The news of his coming spread immediately to the surrounding places; four or five men as

¹Relation de ce qui s'est passè e nla Nouvelle France, en l'année 1642 and 1643, Par le R. P. Bartholemy Vimont, A Paris, MDCXLIV.

²Desc. and Explor. Mississippi Valley, p. 20, 1873.

³Suite: Mélanges d'Hist, et de Litt., p. 426, Ottawa, 1876.

sembled. Each of the chiefs gave him a banquet and at one of them at least one hundred and twenty beavers were served. Peace was concluded. * * *

According to Nicolet's own statement he would have reached the sea, or "Great Water," in three days longer sail upon a great river. Such being the case historians have speculated on the actual reason of his turning back. It is now clear that he misunderstood his early informants and mistook the meaning of the Algonquin words for great water to indicate the ocean² instead of a majestic river.

Nicolet had come fully prepared to enter Cathay in royal style. After dressing up in all his Oriental finery, expecting to meet some gorgeous mandarin to whom he fancied his arrival had been announced, his disappointment must have been keen in the extreme when his shaven-headed hosts turned out to be only ordinary Sioux redskins instead of Asiatic potentates. At the misconception one hardly wonders. It reflects the prevailing notions of the day. With the aid of a little imagination and with no lack of willingness—one is always inclined to believe what one desires—it was easy to discern in the great water the sea that separates America from Asia, the north Pacific; and in the voyagers the Chinese or Japanese. It was the opinion of Champlain, of the missionaries, and of the better informed colonists, that by pushing westward it would be comparatively easy to find a shorter road to China, by crossing America, than by that usually followed in rounding the Cape of Good Hope. Ever since the time of Jacques Cartier this idea had haunted the minds of men and they deceived themselves as to the real width of the American continent. They believed that it would be sufficient to penetrate two or three hundred leagues inland in order to find, if not the Pacific ocean, at least a bay or some great river leading there.³ In this illusion lay the chief incentive to every western exploration of this time.

The first white men actually to view the "Great Water," and to set foot upon what is now Iowan soil appear to have

¹Relation de ce qui s'est passé en la Nouvelle France, en l'année 1642 and 1643, Par. le R. P. Barthelemy Vimont, A Paris, MDCLXIV.

²Butterfield: Hist. Desc. of Northwest by John Nicolet, in 1634, p. 2, 1881.

³Jouan: Revue Manchoise, first quarter, 1886; Clarke's translation.

been Pierre Radisson and Médard Groseilliers.¹ In the spring of 1659 these travelers, having spent the previous year around the shores of Lake Huron, and having wintered with the Pottawattamies at the entrance to the Baye du Puans (Green Bay), determined to visit the Mascoutins, or Fire Nation, who dwelled to the southwest. Passing up to the head of the bay, they entered Fox river, crossed the short portage to the Wisconsin river, and sailed on down into a greater river. Here are Radisson's own words:

We weare four moneths on our voyage without doeing any thing but goe from river to river. We mett several sorts of people. We conversed wth them, being long time in alliance wth them. By the persuasion of som of them we went into ye great river that divides itselfe in 2, where the hurrons wth some Ottanake & the wild men that had warrs wth them had retired.* There is not great difference in their language, as we weare told. This nation have warrs There is not great difference in their language, as we weare told. against those of the forked river. It is so called because it has 2 branches, the one towards the west, the other toward the South, wch we believe runns towards Mexico, by the tokens they gave us. Being among these people, they told us the prisoners they take tells them that they [the prisoners] have warrs against men that build great cabbans & have great beards & had such knives as we have had. Moreover they shewed a Decad of beads & gilded pearles that they have had from that people wch made us believe they weare Europeans. They shewed one of that nation that was taken the year before. We understood him not; he was much more tawny than they wch whome we weare.*

There is no doubt that Radisson and his associate entered the Mississippi river and gazed out upon the high bluffs of Iowa-land at about where McGregor now stands. The travelers appear to have descended the river some distance and to have set foot on its west bank. They found the Indians in possession of mines of lead and zinc and the hills filled with alabaster (probably the translucent brittle stalagmites with which the Dubuque district is now known to abound).

¹Scull: Publications Prince Soc., No. 16, p. 147, Boston, 1885.

²Thwaites states that a large party of Hurons and Ottawas while being driven before the storm of Iroquois wrath, had, about five years before Radisson's visit, settled on an island in the Mississippi river above Lake Pepin, but had finally proceeded up the Chippewa river to its source.

³Pub. Prince Soc., No. 16, p. 167, 1885.

It is, however, the west branch of the "Forked River," as Radisson calls the Mississippi, which has long puzzled historians. Thwaites¹ is of the opinion that it may have been the Iowa river. Richman,² in his sketch of "Mascoutin, a Reminiscence of the Nation of Fire," considers it the Upper Iowa river. There appear to be good reasons for believing that this west fork was really the Missouri river.

Radisson's information on this point was manifestly hearsay. The notion derived by the French from the Indians before Radisson's visit was that there was a great river which flowed to the South sea. It was not until some years later that LaSalle proved that Marquette's great stream which was called the Rivière de la Conception and DeSoto's great river which he designated the Rio de la Espiritu Santo were only different parts of the same watercourse. On maps which appeared a decade or two later, la grande rivière is represented as forking about where the Missouri river enters; and the west branch ends abruptly somewhere in what is modern Texas, indicating that beyond that point its course was yet unknown. Franquelin's map of the Mississippi valley, published in 1684, shows this feature in a striking manner. On Hennepin's map of 1698, and others of that time, the present Missouri river is continued westward and mingled with what is now called the Arkansas river.

The "much more tawny" Indian prisoner from the Far West, which Radisson mentions, clearly indicates the Apache and the bearded men with which the latter carried on war corresponds to the Spaniard of the Southwest. Radisson's surmise that they were Europeans was thus doubtless correct. His further description of the characteristics of the Apaches as he was told leaves little question that his informant had acquired his knowledge at first hands. The episode is significant in demonstrating the wide intercourse existing among the native races of the continent.

A predecessor of Marquette who for a long time has been thought³ to have passed down the famous Indian route of

¹Coll. Wisconsin State Hist. Soc., Vol. XI, p. 70, 1888.

²John Brown among the Quakers and Other Sketches, p. 68, 1897.

³Winchell: Geol. Minnesota, Vol. I, p. 4, 1884; also, Neil: Minnesota Hist. Soc., Vol. II, p. 265, 1867.

travel, via Green bay, Fox river, and the Wisconsin river to the "Great Water," is Father Renè Mènard, a Jesuit missionary, who, in 1660, came out from Quebec to Chequamegon bay, on the south shore of Lake Superior, east of the present city of Duluth. Late investigations¹ appear to show that Mènard probably never actually reached the mouth of the Wisconsin river, but that he left the Lake Superior mission directly across country for the headwaters of this stream, down which he floated to the point of portage to the Black river, where he lost his life. This was in August, 1661. Mènard was on his way to visit the Huron nation, then sojourning on the Black river. This nation recently driven from their eastern home by the Iroquois had, a short time before, reached Green bay, passed up the Fox river and down the Wisconsin river to the Mississippi, which they ascended to the Black river.² The aged Father was not with the Hurons at the time of their flight.

In 1669 Father Allouez, who for four years had had charge of the mission of the Holy Ghost at La Pointe, on Chequamegon bay, returned to Sault Ste. Marie, and Father Marquette took his place. Allouez longed to visit the Sioux country and see the great water which the Indians called the Missi Sepe. He says: "Ce sont peuples qui habitent au Couchant d'icy, vers la grande rivière, nommé Messipi."³ This appears to be the first mention in literature of the word "Mississippi."

Preceding by a full century Marquette in the Upper Mississippi basin was a Nicolas Perrot, one of the most capable of all the French emissaries among the western Indians and one who rendered France great services in attaching them to her cause in the New World. Until recently little was known of this *coureur de bois*. In 1864 his manuscript notes were found in Paris covered with the accumulated dusts of more than two centuries, and published⁴ by Father J. Tailhan, with copious explanations.

¹Campbell: Parkman Club Pub., No. 11, Milwaukee, 1897.

²Relations de Nouvelle France, en l'année 1663, p. 21, Quebec ed.

³Relations de Nouvelle France, en l'année, 1667, chap. xii. p. 23, Quebec ed.

⁴Memoire sur les Moeurs, Coustumes et Religion des Sauvages de l'Amerique Septentrionale, par Nicolas Perrot, Publié la première fois par le R. P. J. Tailhan, de la Compagne de Jésus, Leipzig et Paris, Librairie A. Franck, Albert L. Herold, 1864.

Perrot left the east sometime in 1665, and spent several months with the Pottawattamies around Green bay. In the spring of the following year he passed up the bay, entered Fox river, and visited the Outagamies, or Foxes, who dwelled above Lake Winnebago. Later he made a journey to the Mascoutins and Miamis who occupied the country around the headwaters of the Fox river and to the south. By Tailhan great importance is attached to this visit, as it brought the French into friendly communication with the kindred of the Illinois, and gave them their first footing in the great valley of the Mississippi. Having obtained this footing, the further discovery and opening up of the country were only questions of time.¹

Between the years 1665 and 1670 Perrot seems to have visited most of the western tribes, besides trading extensively with them. In the last mentioned year he made a trip to Montreal; but soon returned with St. Luson's expedition to Sault Ste. Marie, he himself pushing on to Green bay. In May of 1671 he returned to the Sault in company with many chiefs to complete the alliance with the French. From there Perrot returned to Quebec where he lived for ten years before again venturing back to the Mississippi river country.

The lure of Iowa-land long remained with Perrot. He again returned; and for nearly twenty years took an active part in the development of commerce. In 1681 we find him still in the fur-trading business. Two years later he was sent into the western country to get the support of the tribes with which he was so well acquainted for an attack on the Iroquois. It seems probable that at this time² he established Fort St. Nicolas on the Mississippi river, just above the mouth of the Wisconsin and a short distance below the present city of Prairie du Chien.

After reaching Green Bay as commandant in 1685, Perrot passed on to the Mississippi, establishing a trading-post at Fort Antoine on Lake Pepin. He immediately inaugurated extensive trading transactions with the Aionez Indians (Ioways). Four years later he formally took possession of

¹Stickney: Parkman Club Pub., No. 1, p. 4. Milwaukee, 1895.

²Stickney: Parkman Club Pub., No. 1, p. 12. Milwaukee, 1895.

the country for France. The same year he established another post nearly opposite the present city of Dubuque, and began the mining and smelting of the lead ores in addition to fur-trading. Perrot was active in the region until 1699, when he returned to the St. Lawrence, where he died about twenty years afterwards.

Still another Jesuit missionary may have visited the Mississippi river before Marquette. Father Dablon, who was stationed in the Green Bay region for a time, was considerable of a traveler. He writes in 1670 of a great stream to the westward, more than a league in width, which flowed to the south more than two hundred leagues. His information on this point may have been derived from the Indians.

At this time Father Marquette was in charge of the mission of the Holy Ghost at La Pointe, on Lake Superior. He writes that

When the Illinois [tribes then living on the west side of the Mississippi river at the mouth of the Des Moines river] come to La Pointe they cross a great river which is a league in width, flows from north to south and to such a distance that the Illinois, who do not know what a canoe is, have not yet heard any mention of its mouth. Thus Marquette also had definitely heard of the great stream three years before he was destined actually to behold it.

Marquette reached the Mississippi river in the summer of 1673. Soon after he had returned from his trip there was published a map of the new discoveries made by the Jesuit fathers in 1672. This map is especially noted by Parkman. On it is marked the route of travel of some missionary who has gone down the Wisconsin river to the Mississippi, down the latter to the mouth of the Des Moines, and thence directly eastward to the Illinois river and the site of Chicago. This route now appears to be intended for that of Marquette, the return path being incorrectly located.

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