

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

THAT NAME "ITASCA"

It may be of interest to readers of the articles on the legend and name of Lake Itasca that appeared in *MINNESOTA HISTORY* for September, 1931, to know that fifty-nine years earlier, in 1872, the problem of the name was discussed in a Minnesota newspaper and that in the same year an article on the subject was presented to the executive council of the Minnesota Historical Society. This article, dated February 27, 1872, was written by Charles H. Baker of Philadelphia. While prospecting for iron ore in Minnesota in 1870, he had interested himself in the etymology of "Itasca," and when, early in 1872, he completed a paper on this subject, he sent it to Alfred J. Hill, the chairman of the society's committee on archeology, who in turn submitted it to J. Fletcher Williams, the secretary of the society. On March 11, 1872, it was laid before the executive council by Hill.¹

At Baker's request, Hill, on April 19, addressed identic inquiries to Dr. Thomas S. Williamson, Gideon H. Pond, William T. Boutwell, Stephen R. Riggs, and Samuel W. Pond. Referring to the problem of "Itasca," Hill pointed out that Baker, a corresponding member of the Minnesota Historical Society, "throws doubt upon the derivations hitherto given, and suggests that, instead of a far-fetched amalgamation of Latin words on the one hand, or an ungrammatical and strained compound from the Ojibway on the other, both of which methods of interpretation are found in Schoolcraft's works, it may really have been a corruption from the Dakota." Hill asked for information

¹The manuscript of Baker's paper, which was never published, is preserved in the Minnesota Historical Society Archives. See also the executive council minutes for March 11, 1872.

that might throw light upon the derivation of the name, especially as to a possible Sioux origin.²

On May 26, 1872, the *St. Paul Pioneer* published under the heading of "Lake Itasca" a brief article by Baker summarizing the paper that he had written the preceding February, with the addition of an item subsequently received from Riggs. This communication follows:

LAKE ITASCA*

Nearly forty years have elapsed since Henry R. Schoolcraft ascended the "Great River" to a lake which he proclaimed its source; and during this time the latter has, with but little comment, retained the name "Itasca."

Of late years, however, and since the erection of the former Territory of Minnesota into a State, great and living interest has been taken in all its features, historical, physical and geographical, and much important matter developed and made public. In due course some of those men who are fond of asking "Why?" have had their attention drawn to this distant lake, possessing, as it does, a national interest, and have sought to learn the *origin* of its name, still in universal use.

The result has been that they have paused about where they have begun, and in this, experienced the confusion often attendant upon such inquiries; for a critical examination of all the writings of Schoolcraft relating to the lake, discloses the fact that he has at different dates given forth no less than *three* different derivations for the name "Itasca," which, since he himself must be regarded as their originator, under his own and the most authoritative testimony concerning the name, in no small degree unstable. Since his death in 1862 or 1863⁴ the possibility of a clearing up of the doubts is very faint.

Schoolcraft's derivations briefly noticed are as follows:

First, as it has been asserted, from two Latin words, *veritas, truth*,

²A draft of Hill's letter is in the Minnesota Historical Society Archives. On it is a notation that the inquiry has been sent to the individuals indicated.

³An editorial note prefaced to this newspaper article contains the following statement: "Whether this gentleman's theory be correct or not there is no denying its novelty and ingenuity, and it is to be regretted that researches of this kind, treating of obscure points in the aboriginal history of Minnesota, are comparatively rare."

⁴Schoolcraft died at Washington, D. C., on December 10, 1864.

and *caput*, a head, the last two syllables of the former word, prefixed to the first one of the latter, conveying the notion of *true head*.

Second: from the Ojibway words *Ia*, to be, to tosh, a woman's breast, implying origin and *Ka* terminal sub-inflection, the whole signifying a fount.⁵

The third origin given for the name is stated to be a figurative or romantic one, coming from an Indian myth alluded to, but not detailed by the explorer.⁶

Here the matter has for some time rested, but a paper has lately been read before the Minnesota Historical Society showing some reasonable affinity, in an entirely different direction. The writer, having some knowledge of the Ojibway language, so isolated and peculiar, criticises injuriously, while comparing Schoolcraft's two first derivations, as above; while some information obtained from a half-breed *voyageur* has led to the belief that the *true* origin may be found in the Dakota or Sioux language!

The *voyageur*, who was familiar with the country and routes of travel westward to Montana, and had been with Dr. Rae's Arctic exploration parties, distinctly stated to the writer of the paper referred to, that the Dakotas called the lake "*Ta-Sko*," and that it was a translation of the Ojibway "*Omushkoze*," meaning "Elk" Lake. Subsequent inquiry has shown that there is at least a close resemblance, for while *ska* does not appear as a Dakota termination, the word *ta-ska*, which is still nearer in orthography, means *sheep*, a ruminating animal, *as is the elk*; as *ta* means moose and *ska* white, the name given by the writer's informant may also be rendered "White Moose." This would seem to show a similarity since the *I* might be added, though a corrupt usage. And again, the Rev. S. R. Riggs, one of the highest authorities on the Dakota has, in a private letter, traced in "Itaska" a likeness to *ite-ska*, meaning a *white face*; although he does not state that to be the name actually

⁵ This explanation is given by Schoolcraft in his *Information Respecting the History, Condition and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States*, 5:624 (Philadelphia, 1855). It is discussed by Irving H. Hart, *ante*, 12:228 (September, 1931). It may be noted that in the 1882 edition of *Webster's Dictionary*, p. 1678, the following explanation appears: "Itasca, a name formed by Schoolcraft for a lake at the supposed source of the Mississippi, from *ia*, to be, and *totosh*, the female breast, with a locative inflection."

⁶ Schoolcraft gives this origin in his *Summary Narrative of an Exploratory Expedition to the Sources of the Mississippi*, 243, 244 (Philadelphia, 1855). He also includes a poem written by himself in which reference is made to tears "by fair Itasca shed." As Mr. Hart points out, *ante*, 12:226, Schoolcraft in his first published account of the dis-

bestowed on the lake by the Dakotas.⁷ Could this be determined, the theory last advanced would be set at rest.

It is earnestly hoped that the actual Dakota name may be made known, and that all possessing information on this topic will give the Historical Society the benefit of their criticisms. Any observations are interesting, since by their aid we might be able to solve the riddle reaching down through the obscurity of so "many moons." May 3, 1872. C. H. B.

It is interesting to observe that Baker, writing before Boutwell's explanation of the alleged Latin derivation had been made public,⁸ was familiar with that suggested derivation of "Itasca," and it is even more interesting to learn that he was under the impression that he had drawn it from Schoolcraft's own writings. His later correspondence with Hill discloses the fact that he was unable to supply a reference to the volume and page in Schoolcraft in which the Latin words are mentioned.⁹ Later investigations have failed to bring to light any such mention, and it seems doubtful that Schoolcraft ever referred to the matter in print. The question arises, therefore, whether or not the Latin explanation had appeared anywhere in print before 1872. Where did Baker find it? A possible answer is that he had used Dr. Edward D. Neill's *History of Minnesota*, published at Philadelphia in 1858. In a footnote on page 407, referring to "Itasca," Neill writes, "It is asserted that this is a name made up by Mr. Schoolcraft from two Latin words, *veritas caput*. It is true, that by dropping the first syllable of the first and the final syllable of the last word, *Itasca* is obtained; but Mrs. Eastman's discovery of Lake Itasca, that brought out at New York in 1834, gave no explanation of the name.

⁷ See *post*, p. 171, for an abstract of a letter from Riggs to Hill in which this point is elaborated.

⁸ The well-known explanation by Boutwell was dated May 13, 1872; Baker's paper was dated, as had been noted, February 27, 1872; and his newspaper summary bears the date May 3, 1872.

⁹ Baker to Hill, May 16, 1872, Hill Papers, in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

says, that it is the name of an Indian maiden."¹⁰ Unfortunately Neill does not cite the source of the *veritas caput* explanation, which presumably had come to his attention sometime between 1849, the date of his arrival in Minnesota, and 1858.

Baker knew about Schoolcraft's identification, made public in 1855, of "Itasca" with a combination of Indian sounds signifying "a fount"; and he was familiar with the somewhat vague suggestion by Schoolcraft that the name was entangled with a native myth. To these three possible origins of the name he added a fourth when he suggested a Sioux derivation.

Meanwhile replies had been received by Hill to his inquiry, and on June 16, 1872, the *Pioneer* published three of them under the title "Lake Itasca. The Origin of the Name Satisfactorily Explained." That such a heading was used was no doubt due to the inclusion of a letter by Boutwell, who had accompanied Schoolcraft on his journey of 1832. The original of this letter is preserved in the Minnesota Historical Society Archives, and since the newspaper version omits a few portions and departs from the letter in a number of minor details, its text is here drawn from the original:

STILLWATER, May 13th /72

TO ALFRED J. HILL

Chairman of Com. Historical Soc. of Min.

DEAR SIR

Absence from home for weeks past, will explain the cause of delay in reply to your enquiries.

I am happy to give you any and all the information I may be able touching the subject—whether it will be satisfactory or otherwise you will be your own judge.

Coming to Mackinaw in the summer of 1831, I recd. an inv[er]sion to spend the following winter at the Sault St Marys. Here

¹⁰ The present writer found a clue to Neill's statement in a marginal notation, apparently in the handwriting of J. Fletcher Williams, on the manuscript of Baker's article.

I made the acquaintance of Mr Schoolcraft. Early in the spring of 1832, he recd. instructions from Govt. to visit the bands of Inds. on the Upper Mississi[ppi], & also ascertain the true source of the river. He very kindly invited me to accompany him.

Now for the origin or derivation of the name Itasca. One morning as we were coasting L[ake] Sup[erior] Mr S. said to me, I would like to give a name to Elk Lake that will be significant or expressive, as the *head* or *true source* of the Mississi[ppi]. Can you give me any word in Latin or Greek that will convey the idea. I replied no one word will express the idea — the nearest I can come to it is Veritus¹¹ Caput — or if you prefer the noun Veritas — you may coin something that will meet your wishes. In less than five minutes he replied I have got the thing — handing me a slip of paper on which was the word *Itasca* — remarking “this is not poetic liscence [*sic*], but what you will find as you progress in the study of Ojibwa to be Ind. liscense.”

It was then & there & in just this manner the word, the name *Itasca* was coined. The Ojibwas invariably called the lake Omushk-Sagaeigun [Elk lake].¹²

I am unable to give you any information in regard to the Sioux name — my labors for 16 years being confined to the Ojibwas.

With much respect your Obedient Servt

W. T. BOUTWELL

Ver-/itas Ca-/put

A second letter published, with some omissions and errors, in the *Pioneer* of June 16, 1872, was that of Mrs. Mary H. Eastman;¹³ and since the original of this is also in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society, it is herewith printed from the manuscript:

¹¹ When Boutwell's letter appeared in the *Pioneer*, someone had changed this word to *Verum*, but it is clearly *Veritus* in the manuscript.

¹² Boutwell writes the two words here inclosed in brackets above the Chippewa equivalents. It is worth noting that Boutwell in this letter does not state that the “Itasca” episode occurred while the party was journeying westward. Nor did he touch this matter in his letter of July 27, 1880, to Julius Chambers, as published in the latter's *The Mississippi River and Its Wonderful Valley*, 111–113 (New York, 1910). This point was added later in an interview with Jacob V. Brower, reported in his *Mississippi River and Its Source*, 148 n. (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 7).

¹³ Mrs. Eastman's name does not appear in the list of persons mentioned by Hill in the draft of his circular letter of inquiry.

WASHINGTON, DC. May 6th

MY DEAR SIR

I received your letter this morning, and lest I should delay from much occupation that comes to me soon, I answer it without letting more than an hour pass.

Itasca was the daughter of Manabozho, the Spirit God of the Chippeways. In my book of sketches, entitled "Eastman's Aboriginal Port-Folio," published by Lippincott¹⁴ I have an account of the exciting scene of the discovery of the Mississippi, and the tradition of Itasca, after whom M^r Schoolcraft named the lake. The Chippewa guide gave the tradition to M^r Schoolcraft, who gave it to me.

It is a lovely little tradition, and reminds you of Ceres and Proserpine — the amount of it being that Itasca was beloved by Chebiabo, the keeper of the souls of the dead, and was to be torn from her family by him, and borne to his gloomy home — She having refused to go with him. The storm spirits interfere in her behalf, but too late to save her — in the confusion of the fight in which the gods took part, Itasca was buried under hills of sand — forming a mound that the Chippewa guide showed to M^r Schoolcraft as her grave. The rills that flowed from the rocks and sand forming the lake were made by the tears of Itasca weeping for ever for home and friends, the sorrow produced by the revenge of this terrible (Pluto) Chebiabo.

I heard you had some of my books in your Society library. "The Portfolio" is handsomely bound, and illustrated by Gen Eastman, and sold remarkably well in this country and abroad as a library book. I presume M^r Neill had read the sketch of Itasca there. It is very hard to come at the truth about Indian names. The Sioux used to reprove me for calling them Sioux — it never was an Indian name, they said.

The name and tradition of Itasca are as reliable as any other. And it is a subject for a grand poem.

I am, dear Sir Very truly yours,

MARY H. EASTMAN

1221 K. st, Franklin Row.

The third letter made public in the *Pioneer* on June 16, 1872, was that of Gideon H. Pond, written on June 3 at Bloomington. The gist of this letter — drawing upon the original — was that so far as Pond knew, the Sioux had no name for the lake. He wrote:

If it [*Itasca*] is a Dakota word, it has been so much altered, that I cannot identify it. I think it is not a Dakota word. Old persons — 70 years old — tell me that they never heard of the Dakota name of any lake in that region, though I know them to have been

¹⁴ Mrs. Eastman's book was published in 1853.

connected, by marriage with some of the most noted & intelligent men of the Dakota nation, such as "His-tomahawk — Black-Tomahawk, & Joseph Renville senior." If such men had been acquainted with a name for the lake in question, these women, it is to be presumed would have heard & remembered it. Besides, they do not hesitate to say that the Dakotas had no name for lake "Itaska."

The *Pioneer* did not make public the replies of Dr. Williamson, Samuel W. Pond, and Riggs, probably because Boutwell's explanation was considered conclusive. The "Itasca" problem still engages the attention of students, however, and it may therefore be of interest to note what these replies contained. Samuel W. Pond on April 22, 1872, wrote from Shakopee that the Dakota had names for the lakes about the source of the Mississippi, but used them chiefly in their legendary tales.¹⁵ "They doubtless had a name for the lake now called Itaska," he said, "but there is no Dakota now in this neighborhood who can tell me what it was. I do not recognize Itaska as a Dakota name, but think the conjecture that [it] is of Dakota origin not very improbable." After some comments on the pronunciation of Indian names by white people, he concludes that "it is not probable that Itaska very closely resembles the real Indian name whatever it was, whether Chippewa or Dakota."

Dr. Williamson, though he thought that "Itasca," as usually spoken, "sounds more like a Dakota than an Ojibwa word," was under the impression that the name "was given by some one approaching the lake through the Ojibwa country ignorant of the Dakota language." His first letter, dated April 30, was supplemented by a second written on May 31, in which he considered it "possible and not very improbable" that Itasca is a corruption of a Dakota name.¹⁶ If the Chippewa named the lake in consequence

¹⁵ Pond's letter is preserved in the Minnesota Historical Society Archives.

¹⁶ Dr. Williamson's letters are in the Minnesota Historical Society Archives.

of the abundance of elk in the neighborhood, he thought it "quite probable the Dakota name had the same meaning, and so was Hehàka lake." Though this is somewhat unlike Itasca, "the difference in sound is not greater than is found to have taken place in some other words passing through the Canadian voyageurs as this must have done if the name was derived from the Dakotas." Dr. Williamson offers a cautious conclusion: "Still I do not think it very probable that this is the origin of the name Itasca. If it shall be made clear that the Dakotas called the lake Hehaka lake the probability of this origin will be greater."

Meanwhile Riggs had written to Hill on April 23 from Good Will Station, Dakota Territory, explaining that he had accepted the name "as of Ojibwa origin, because it was so claimed and because the Lake bearing the name was in what has been, for many years past, Ojibwa country."¹⁷ Several considerations moved him to look into the question, however. For one thing, the Sioux had once occupied the region; for another, "Schoolcraft is passing more and more under condemnation as not reliable authority." Turning to "Itasca," he declares that it "may very readily be recognized as a Dakota word; the last syllable 'ska,' meaning *white*, has undergone no change whatsoever." The word "is just what it would be coming to Americans through the French. The 'I' in that case would answer to our English 'e' in sound, but when seen and read by Americans it would come to have the long 'i' sound. The first 'a' had originally the first or long sound of English 'a,' and has in the passage been changed into the second sound of 'a' in English. Carrying the word back through these changes, which are simple and natural, we have the Dakota word, as we would write it now, Iteska, meaning *white countenance* or *white face*." Why such a name should be given to the lake, Riggs frankly confesses he does not know, but

¹⁷ This letter is in the Hill Papers.

he offers some illustrations of how names have been derived from "some little incident or circumstance."

So the case stood at the end of the discussion in 1872. Dr. Williamson, after reading Boutwell's letter in the *Pioneer*, wrote to Hill that it "fully settles the contest about the origin of the name Itaska."¹⁸ The *Pioneer* itself took the position that "Boutwell's letter would appear to preclude all further research."¹⁹ Baker did not press the theory he had advanced; no serious consideration was given to the Indian origin suggested by Schoolcraft in the fifties; and Mrs. Eastman's explanation seemingly won no converts. There is an interesting sequel to the story, for in 1919, nearly a half century after the events here described, Baker, then living at Zellwood, Florida, wrote a long letter to the secretary of the Minnesota Historical Society, telling of his early Minnesota experiences.²⁰ He alluded to his paper on "Itasca" and suggested that "what it led to was of far greater value than the paper itself," for one consequence of the discussion was that Boutwell "gave definitely the derivation of the name and circumstantial details that left no doubt as to his accuracy."

Several interesting puzzles remain unanswered, however. What is the key to Schoolcraft's curious allusions to the origin of the name? Why did he wait nearly a quarter of a century before offering any explanation at all? Why did he never mention the alleged Latin derivation? Why did he never record in detail the alleged Itasca legend? Did he arbitrarily bring together the Indian syllables *ia-totosh-ka*? Why is Boutwell's detailed diary of the expedition of 1832 absolutely silent as to the coinage of "Itasca" from Latin words? Why is there no mention of the subject in Dr. Douglass Houghton's diary? Why

¹⁸ This letter, dated June 21, 1872, is in the Hill Papers.

¹⁹ *Pioneer*, June 16, 1872.

²⁰ Baker to Solon J. Buck, June 9, 1919, in Minnesota Historical Society Archives.

is it ignored by Lieutenant James Allen?²¹ These men, companions of Schoolcraft, refer to the lake in their contemporary records as Lac la Biche or Elk Lake. These contemporary silences indicate that there probably was no formal christening of the lake by Schoolcraft at the time of the discovery. The naming seems to have been reserved for Schoolcraft's written report of the expedition. It is curious to find Boutwell ignoring "Itasca" in 1836, four years after the discovery. On September 5, 1836, Boutwell wrote to Schoolcraft about Nicollet's visit to Lake Itasca, but he did not call the lake "Itasca." He used instead the French name for Elk Lake, remarking that Nicollet "after spending three days at Lac La Biche has returned highly gratified with his visit."²²

Perhaps the most interesting bit of evidence that has been brought forward on the problem of "Itasca" since 1872 is that mentioned by Jacob V. Brower on page 154 in his book on the *Mississippi River and Its Source*, published in 1893. He had addressed an inquiry to the Reverend Jeremiah Porter of Beloit, Wisconsin, who in 1832 was "in Mr. Schoolcraft's family" when the explorer returned to Sault Ste. Marie from his western expedition. Porter wrote to Brower that on the return of Schoolcraft, Dr. Houghton, and Allen, "they told me how they had named so beautifully the lake from two Latin words." Mr. Hart

²¹ A transcript of Boutwell's diary is in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society. See also Boutwell's account of "Schoolcraft's Exploring Tour of 1832," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 1: 121-140 (1902). Dr. Houghton's manuscript diary of the expedition of 1832 is owned by the Michigan Historical Commission; the Minnesota Historical Society has a transcript. Allen's narrative report is published in *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 5: 312-344.

²² Boutwell's letter, written from Leech Lake, is in the Indian Office Archives at Washington; the Minnesota Historical Society has a copy. It should be noted that the name "Itasca" occurs in Boutwell's diary for March 13, 1835, when he records, "In my reading this morning, I met with Mr Schoolcraft's observations upon the source, length, and probable height, of Itasca Lake, above a level with the Atlantic."

properly notes this as "distinctly corroborative of Boutwell's statements," but he adds the caution that Porter, at the time he penned his letter to Brower, "was a man in whose case advanced age may have added something to the normal fallibility of memory." In the light of Porter's corroboration, the case at present seems to lean toward the Boutwell explanation, though the episode of the Latin words may possibly have occurred on the return journey rather than on the trip west. It is obvious that something is lacking in the evidence, however. It is an intriguing little problem and it is to be hoped that from some source will come the key that will unlock the mystery.

THEODORE C. BLEGEN

MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ST. PAUL

AN OPTIMISTIC PIONEER IN A PERIOD OF DEPRESSION

The panic of 1857 struck Minnesota a severe blow. Pioneers had been developing the territory largely on credit and when the financial collapse occurred in the East, loans were called and failures and disaster resulted. The strain and stress on business were still felt acutely in 1858, but at least one pioneer was inclined to view the situation optimistically. He was John N. Treadwell, who on July 30, 1858, wrote the following letter to a friend in the East. Instead of bemoaning conditions in Minnesota, he gave his reasons for preferring to live in the place to which he had removed from Franklin, New York, three years earlier. Although just beginning his career as a clerk and a bookkeeper, Treadwell was interested in the opportunities for farming in Minnesota and he had a good understanding of its natural resources. By nature too wary to be seized by the "gold fever" of the day, he rose to the position of vice president of the First National Bank of St. Peter. In 1874-75 he served as a representative in the Minnesota



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