

## PETER RINDISBACHER, ARTIST

The earliest artist of note in the Minnesota country seems to have been a young Swiss, Peter Rindisbacher, or Rindesbacher. Had he lived even to middle life, it is more than likely that he would now be classed with George Catlin as one of the outstanding portrayers of savage and frontier life in America.

Rindisbacher was born in 1806 in Upper Emmenthal in the canton of Berne, Switzerland. There is a tradition in his family that he manifested, while still a schoolboy, his passion for drawing, using chalk and charcoal on walls, doors, or fragments of paper.<sup>1</sup> His father, recognizing the child's talent, provided him with pencils and colors; and his mother, seeing evidence of musical ability, began when he was eight years old to teach him to play the zither. At the age of ten or thereabouts he became a drummer in a company of Bernese volunteers. A small boy sitting on his drum sketching is the picture that family tradition has preserved of this period of Rindisbacher's life. At twelve he was taken by the painter Weibel into the Bernese Alps on a sketching tour. This man was probably Rindisbacher's only instructor in the technique of drawing and painting. Probably it was during this period of his life that the boy made a little sketch of the Swiss home from which his family was soon to migrate to North America. His sister, Mrs. Monnier, preserved it, and this, with a miniature of herself, was the proud possession of members of her family within fairly recent times.

To Lord Selkirk's colony the Rindisbachers were lured by fervent hopes in 1821. The Earl of Selkirk, a Scotch nobleman, had founded a colony on the lower Red River in

<sup>1</sup>A letter of May 25, 1932, to the writer from Miss Cora M. Rawlins, a grandniece of Rindisbacher, contains considerable information on the artist, and from it many of the facts in this sketch are drawn.

1812. His agents in Switzerland, as elsewhere in Europe, painted the valley as an Eden when they interviewed discontented or ambitious Europeans. In the summer and autumn of 1821 many Swiss families of good birth and some means sailed the stormy Atlantic and passed through the ice of Hudson Bay in the Hudson's Bay Company's annual ship to York Factory. But this painful experience was only the prelude to the hardships and dangers that were to be the normal course of the immigrants' existence for some years. It is physical pain to read the accounts of the journey of this band of settlers from the icebound shores of Hudson Bay to the almost equally bleak settlement at Pembina.

In a series of forty water-color sketches that he prepared on this journey and a little later Peter Rindisbacher makes very vivid the vessel, the shore line, the natives, the shivering groups at campfires, the arduous crossing of portages, and other aspects of a never-to-be-forgotten trip. These sketches, about six by eight inches in size, are in the possession of the Public Archives of Canada, where many of them are on display. Most of them are unsigned, but an occasional "P. R." on them and the similarity of style throughout the series prove that they are Rindisbacher's work. The colors are still vivid, especially the copper tones depicting the skins of the natives. The title of each sketch is written in a fine, German script, which shows that the Rindisbachers were German-speaking. Many of these inscriptions are faded almost to illegibility. It is fortunate, therefore, that someone has penciled a translation on nearly every sketch. A water color of particular interest is the one that gives a view of the little settlement at Pembina in 1822, just after a Sioux raid. Particulars of this event are known from other sources, chiefly from the letters of Abbé Sévère Dumoulin, whose chapel, just finished at that time, must surely be one of the buildings depicted in the sketch.

Most of the Swiss families found life on the Red River



Drawn by P. Ruckelshausen.

Alex. Lawson, sculp.

### INDIANS GATHERING WILD RICE AND SHOOTING WILD FOWL

[From an engraving in the *American Turf Register and Sporting Magazine*, 4: 57 (October, 1832).]

intolerable and made their way by cart or afoot across the prairies, through hostile Sioux country, to Fort Snelling. The great flood of 1826 discouraged the Rindisbachers and sent them south. That year the Red River defied all its former banks and inundated almost the entire valley. The family story has it that from Fort Snelling the Rindisbachers descended the Mississippi in Mackinac boats and landed at the old portage on Fever River in November.<sup>2</sup> In the spring they moved to Wisconsin, where they remained for three years. Then they moved once more, this time to St. Louis. There, according to the *St. Louis Republican*, on August 13, 1834, "Mr. P. Rindisbacher, Miniature and Landscape Painter," died, aged twenty-eight years. The newspaper that printed this notice added that he "had talents which gave every assurance of future celebrity. He was generally known by his graphic sketches of Indian Life; some of which engraved for the *Sporting Magazine*, have excited much attention."<sup>3</sup>

The periodical referred to was the *American Turf Register and Sporting Magazine*, which published ten lithographs and engravings of pictures by Rindisbacher in its first, third, fourth, and fifth volumes.<sup>4</sup> They bear the following titles: "Sioux Warrior Charging," "Buffalo and Prairie Wolves," "Deer Hunting, Nocturnal and Aquatic," "Grouse," "Indians Gathering Wild Rice and Shooting Wild Fowl," "Prairie Wolf," "Killing Two Deer with a Bird Gun," "Wilson's Pinnated Grouse," "Wild Turkey Trap," and "Killing a Deer at Full Speed." Accompanying a lithograph of Rindisbacher's pen sketch of a buffalo attacked by wolves, in the issue for July, 1830, is a letter to the editor, written from Jefferson Barracks on April 6, 1830, which contains the following information about the artist:

<sup>2</sup> *History of Jo Daviess County, Illinois*, 783 (Chicago, 1878).

<sup>3</sup> *St. Louis Republican*, August 15, 1834.

<sup>4</sup> This magazine was published at Baltimore from 1829 to 1844. A complete file is in the library of the agricultural college of the University of Minnesota in St. Paul.

Mr. H. informs me that you are alive to the merits and promise of Mr. Rindisbacher, the artist who designed the Sioux warrior charging; a lithograph of which appeared in the second number of the *Sporting Magazine*.

It affords me great pleasure to introduce him yet more particularly to your notice, by a *pen drawing of a buffalo attacked by a band of prairie wolves*. His familiarity with these subjects, the accuracy of their delineation, their freshness and novelty, give to him and his works an interest which few others can challenge. The generous anticipation of the Washington writer, that "an enlightened public will not hesitate properly to appreciate him," we feel assured will be most abundantly realized.

The Editor of the *Sporting Magazine*, in thus spreading on its pages that generous tribute of lively interest in a young artist, self-taught, and without advantages, has done much to invest his periodical with the high merit of fostering genius. He is entitled to the satisfaction of learning, that this flattering testimonial has been neither unseen nor unfelt by Mr. Rindisbacher. His port folio contains many fine efforts. The Indian dance is without fault; and, of itself, sufficient to establish a reputation. The buffalo chase is pronounced true to nature, by all who can estimate its merits. He is very happy in his landscapes; and when time and opportunities shall permit him to spread the magnificent west before the admirers of the grand and picturesque, his sketches, from Hudson's bay to St. Louis, will, I have no doubt, secure him a lasting reputation.

The artist's brief life must have been a busy one. At least sixty-four works from his pencil or brush besides those that appeared in print, are still in existence. Forty are in Ottawa; eighteen are in the library of the United States Military Academy at West Point; four are owned by Mr. David I. Bushnell, Jr., of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C.; and two were, and probably still are, in the possession of the Rindisbacher family. Two examples of his art are reproduced in Bushnell's *Villages of the Algonquian, Siouan, and Caddoan Tribes West of the Mississippi* (United States Bureau of Ethnology, *Bulletins*, no. 77—Washington, 1922). In that volume Mr. Bushnell mentions still another sketch that appeared in *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* for April, 1840.

GRACE LEE NUTE



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