

THE POND BROTHERS¹

A hundred years ago, on a spring day in 1834, the steamboat "Warrior" puffed its way to the landing at old Fort Snelling and two young Connecticut Yankees, Samuel William Pond and his brother Gideon Hollister Pond, stepped ashore.

They were laymen who had been converted in a New England revival three years earlier and were now seeking a field for missionary work among the Sioux or Dakota Indians of the Northwest. They were without experience as missionaries, had no official backing, lacked even a government permit to enter the Indian country, and did not know the language of the people whose conversion and civilization they wished to promote. Yet they were not without qualifications for the work they proposed to do. They had enjoyed an excellent elementary schooling, had worked on farms, knew how to use their hands, and had practical good sense, simplicity of taste and habit, active and inquiring minds, persistence, and quiet courage. Both men, we are told, "were over six feet tall, stalwart and sinewy, alert and genial." The Sioux named them "Red Eagle" and "Grizzly Bear." The Ponds harbored a pious zeal for their mission, coupled with a firm belief that God had prepared the way for them. "I have a friend who sticketh closer than a brother," wrote Gideon a few days after his arrival. He summed up his first impressions in these words, "Through the protection and mercy of God I have arrived at one of the most beautiful places I ever saw."

¹ An address presented at Lake Harriet on July 14, 1934, as part of a "Pond Centennial Program" arranged by the Hennepin County Historical Committee. This program formed the final session of the twelfth state historical convention conducted by the Minnesota Historical Society. *Ed.*

The brothers were given an abrupt initiation into their labors. Major Bliss of Fort Snelling held a hearing to determine whether or not to exclude them from the Indian country as unauthorized visitors. He plied Samuel with questions and suddenly asked him to explain the plans that he and his brother had formulated. Samuel answered simply that they "had no plan except to do what seemed most for the benefit of the Indian." The major then told him that the Sioux at the village of Kaposia not far from the fort "wanted plowing done and had a plow and oxen," but did not know how to use them, whereupon Samuel promptly offered to give them a practical demonstration. The offer was accepted. The Indians themselves conveyed a plow in a canoe from Fort Snelling to their village and Samuel drove down a yoke of oxen. He then spent a week's time teaching plowing to Big Thunder—the father of Chief Little Crow—and Big Iron, the missionary driving the oxen, the two Indians alternately holding the implement. Samuel had the insight of a good teacher. "I could have ploughed as well, perhaps better, without their aid," he wrote later, "but I promised to help them only on condition that they would help themselves." Gideon, meanwhile, had a similar experience, for he worked with a plow among the Sioux living near Lake Calhoun. Not least among many notable contributions of the Pond brothers was the willing help they gave the red man in meeting the transition to the white man's mode of life. They grasped the need of understanding the Indian mind; they saw that the natives must learn through doing.

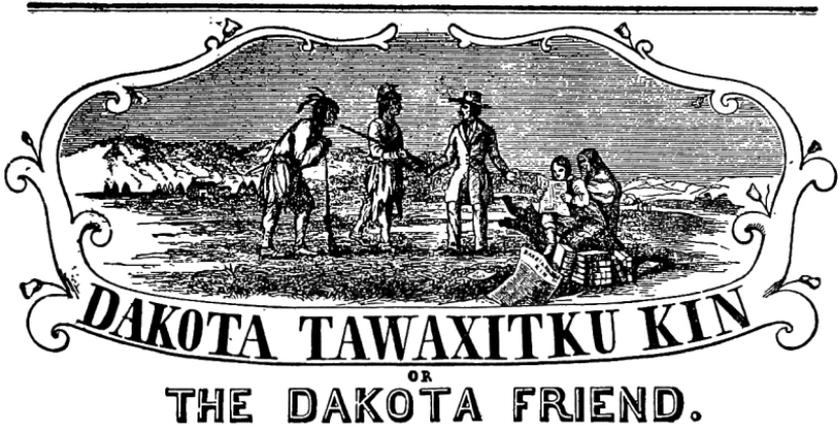
Major Lawrence Taliaferro, the noted Indian agent, had sponsored a Sioux agricultural village under Chief Cloud Man on the southeast side of Lake Calhoun. Upon his suggestion, the Ponds decided to establish their first mission station at that place. They built a two-room cabin of peeled logs with a bark roof. Gideon described it as "a good snug little house"; it "seemed like a palace" to

Samuel. "That hut," wrote Gideon later, "was the home of the first citizen settlers of Hennepin County, perhaps of Minnesota, the first school room, the first house for divine worship, and the first mission station among the Dakota Indians." Major Taliaferro was highly pleased with the thought that the two Yankees, thus stationed, would fall in with his idea of teaching the Indians the arts of civilization—how to plow, how to plant corn and potatoes, how to cultivate mother earth. They did indeed give notable assistance to Major Taliaferro, but they made his civilizing scheme secondary to the conversion of the Indians to Christianity. This was their first and central purpose. To achieve it, however, called for a mastery of the Sioux tongue, which had not yet been reduced to written form, and to this task the Pond brothers addressed themselves with industry and shrewd intelligence. Meanwhile, a tour of investigation in Minnesota made for the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions at Boston by Dr. Thomas S. Williamson in 1834 was bearing fruit. Other missionaries appeared on the scene. In 1835 the Ponds aided Jedediah Stevens in establishing a mission station at Lake Harriet a mile south of their cabin and almost at the very spot where we are holding this meeting tonight. Gideon joined Dr. Williamson at Lac qui Parle in 1836 and remained there three years, aiding the doctor in translating the Bible, while Samuel, not content with his layman's status, returned to Connecticut, was ordained in 1837, and received an appointment as a regular missionary from the American Board. Both brothers returned to Lake Harriet in 1839.

During these years the Ponds, while meeting other demands and performing other duties, were engaged in a thrilling hunt, and their success in bagging game gives them a secure place in history. "The language was the game I went to hunt," wrote Samuel, telling of a Sioux hunting party that he joined, "and I was as eager in the pursuit

of that as the Indians were in pursuit of deer." As early as the winter of 1833, when Samuel, then at Galena, first proposed to Gideon a plan to work among the Sioux, he remarked, "From them we could learn the language which is spoken by a vast number of Indians, from the Mississippi to the Pacific." In his unpublished narrative he tells of his first triumph in the campaign to acquire the Dakota language. This occurred at Prairie du Chien on the way northward to the Minnesota country. He was told by a white man how to ask in Dakota what a thing is called. Seeing a Sioux standing near a heap of iron, he walked up to him, pointed to the iron, and inquired of him the Dakota word for it. The Indian "promptly replied *maza* and then dipped a little water in his hand from the river and said *mini*—then took up a handful of sand and said *wiyaka*." This episode greatly pleased Pond. Telling of it later, he said that "no other acquisition ever afforded me so much pleasure as it did then to be able to say in Dakota What do you call this? We had a key now to the Dakota names of visible objects, and it did not rust in our hands for want of use."

By 1839 Samuel Pond had a dictionary collection of three thousand words and had completed a small manuscript grammar. He and his brother, pioneering in the field, adapted the English alphabet for use in writing Dakota. In order to express a number of strange Dakota consonant sounds they took certain English letters that were not needed in Dakota and gave them "new names and powers." In their alphabet "no two letters could be used to denote the same sound so there was but one way of spelling any given word." That this "Pond alphabet" was workable was proved not only by the fact that a native Sioux, using it, quickly learned to write his own language, but also by the circumstance that it was adopted generally and formed the basis of a great *Grammar and Dictionary of the Dakota Language*, published in 1852 under the patronage of



PUBLISHED MONTHLY BY THE DAKOTA MISSION.—G. H. POND, EDITOR.

VOL. 1.

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA, SEPTEMBER, 1851.

NO. 11.

Imnia Skadan, Wi Ict 7, 1851.

**Treaty at Mendota.
Makoce Erpeyapi.**

Wakpa Minisota mdote kin ea Waxonpa wi kin en anpetu izaptan, omaka kektopawinge wanjidan, sanpa opawinge xahdogan qa sanpa wikcemna zaptan sanpa wanjidan (1851) he ehan Isantanka Wicaxtayatapi tanka hecen ke, ea Wicaxtayatapi nonpa, uman Ikcewicaxta owasin ate yapi, Luke Lea eciyapi qa uman kin Minisota makoce kin en Waxicu Ikcewicaxta ko ate yapi Alexander Ramsey eciyapi, hena Dakota Mdewakantonwan Warpekute ko makoce erpeyapi kta on woldakapi qa wowapi kagapi kin he dee.

Oehde L Isantanka oyate qa Dakota oyate Mdewakantonwan Warpekute ko om ociwaxtepi kin he owihanke xniyan hdoeyapi kta.

ecooni kta. Tuka Mdewakantonwan Warpekute kici okunwanjidan tawayapi qa umanan iyotan kte xni, qa detanhan tokata wapa wawicakicupi kinhan, taku owasin akideceken wicakicupi kta.

Oehde. IV. Hehan makoce taku iyope-wicakiyapi kte cin ix decetu kta.

1st. Taku hdutkunzapi, qa oicazo tonsa owotanna hdajujupi, qa makoce cajewicakiyatapi kin ekta iyotankapi kinhan, tolic-xkupi hdajujupi, qa ekta iyotankapi kinhan, hetanhan waniyetu wanjidan hehanyan do-ityopeiciyapi [kta] henskiya on mazaska kektopawinge ece opawinge nonpa qa sanpa kektopawinge wikcemna nonpa (\$230,000)

Tuka hena on takudan sanpa Isantanka kin erpeyapi kte xni; qa wowapi kin de yuece tupi kinhan, hetanhan waniyetu wanjidan en hena hduxtanpi kta. Mazaska kin hena Mdewakantonwan wicaxtayatapi wicayuhapi hanke wicacupi, qa hanke Warpekute

hanyan hdoeyapi kta taku cajewicakiyatapi kin hena decetu, tuka omaka 1852 Can-paxa wi kin hetanhan tokaheya ayapi kta, taku token wowapi kin de en cajewicakiyatapi kin, tanyan ihuni wicakiciciyapi qa sanpa eooni kte xni; Ateyapi tanka token eye cinhan hecetu kta.

1st. Markicanyanpi, Waxicun wicoran iyokihiwicakiyapi kta on mazaska kektopawinge wikcemna sanpa nopa (\$12,000.)

2. On wowapi yawapi kin mazaska kektopawinge take (\$6,000.)

3. Woyuha taku yutapi ko mazaska kektopawinge wikcemna (\$10,000) iyope-wicakiciyapi kta.

4. Mazaska ece wicakicupi kte cin he kektopawinge ece wikcemna yanni (\$30,000.)

Oehde V Omaka kektopawinge wanjidan sanpa opawinge xahdogan sanpa wikcemna yanni sanpa xakowin (1837) [he e-

the Minnesota Historical Society by the Smithsonian Institution. This work was officially edited by Stephen R. Riggs, who had been tutored in Dakota by Samuel Pond, but it was in a sense an outcome of the collecting begun by the Ponds in 1834. It embodied much of their material and must be considered a climax to their Dakota studies.

Word hunting and recording, however, represent only one aspect of the achievement of the Pond brothers in reference to the Dakota language. Samuel was responsible for a Dakota spelling book issued in 1836, the first work printed in that language. In 1839 he and Gideon brought out a

translation of the *History of Joseph*, from the story in Genesis, and Gideon collaborated with Dr. Riggs in a *Dakota First Reading Book*. Samuel prepared a *Second Dakota Reading Book* in 1842, a *Dakota Catechism* two years later, and various other works; and in the early fifties Gideon actually edited a monthly newspaper or illustrated journal, the *Dakota Tawaxitku Kin*, or *Dakota Friend*, most of which was written in Dakota. This unusual venture had as its purpose the promotion of mutual understanding and good will between red men and white. So a veritable Dakota library was created by the pioneer missionaries among the Sioux. The Ponds, who according to Dr. Folwell "knew and spoke Dakota better than any other white men," deserve honor and recognition as the pioneer recorders of that language, which they found an oral and left a written language. In performing this fascinating task they both became linguists. They learned not only Dakota but Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and French; and Samuel also acquired German.

The Ponds were recorders not only of the Dakota language but also of Sioux life and customs. With characteristic missionary patience and fidelity they recorded their experiences and observations in letters and other manuscripts that are today a rich storehouse of dependable information. Samuel's elaborate account of the Sioux as they were in 1834 is perhaps the most detailed and informing description that we have of that nation before it lost its vast hunting grounds. And in his poems he has left a lasting record of the legends of Winona and of the Falls of St. Anthony and also of his own impressions of the beauty and natural charm of Lakes Harriet and Calhoun and of Minnesota, which stirred his imagination:

As with a wild delight I view
Nature, unmarred by hand of man.

There were scenes of barbarism in this primitive Minnesota, however. In 1839, the year when Samuel took charge

JOSEP

OYAKAPI KIN.



MAZA ON KAGAPI.

CINCINNATI, OHIO.

1839.

THE

DAKOTA

FIRST READING BOOK,

PREPARED BY

STEPHEN R. RIGGS, and GIDEON H. POND,
(*Missionaries.*)

PRINTED FOR THE AMERICAN BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS FOR FOREIGN MISSIONS.

CINCINNATI:
KENDALL AND HENRY PRINTERS.
1839.

of the Lake Harriet mission, these friendly shores became a "dark and bloody ground." The killing of a Sioux hunter at Lake Harriet in the summer of that year caused the ancient Chippewa-Sioux feud to flare into open war, with bloody battles at Stillwater and Rum River. For a month the Sioux celebrated their triumphs in their Calhoun village with dances under the seventy poles on which they flaunted scalps torn from the bleeding heads of their enemies. The brave agricultural experiment of Taliaferro had run its course; the village was exposed to Chippewa attack on the edge of the Sioux country; and so the Sioux warriors, their wild dances ended and their crops garnered, prudently removed to the Minnesota River near Bloomington.

Thither the Ponds, after some time spent at Fort Snelling and elsewhere, followed them; and there Gideon built a sturdy cabin of tamarack logs in the winter of 1842-43. From that cabin he went to St. Paul to be a member of Minnesota's first territorial legislature in 1849. The present brick house replaced the cabin in 1856, but Gideon, who had been ordained as a Presbyterian minister in 1848, remained at Bloomington until his death in 1878, serving in his later years the incoming white settlers. Samuel in 1847 removed to the village of Chief Shakopee to launch a mission and school there, laboring in the midst of a turbulent band until the Sioux removal in the fifties. Then, declining to follow these "lawless, reckless sons of Belial," as he called them, he ministered to the pioneer settlers until 1866, when he retired. But he lived on until 1891, the year when Sibley, who like himself reached the Minnesota country in 1834, died.

In the saga of the Pond brothers a notable place should be given to their wives, who joined the missionaries in meeting the difficult problems of life on the Indian frontier. Gideon married Sarah Poage in 1837, and seventeen years later, following her death, he married Mrs. Robert

Hopkins. Samuel was married in 1838 here at Lake Harriet to Cordelia Eggleston, who died in 1852, after which he married Rebecca Smith. In later generations, as in the frontier era, the Pond family name has been an honored one, and today a Pond Family Association helps to keep green the memories and traditions that bind the name to Minnesota history through a century.

The Minnesota Historical Society is happy to join in this celebration commemorating the centennial of the arrival of the Pond brothers. They fixed in written form the language of the mighty nation of the Sioux. They recorded the native life that flourished in this region a hundred years ago. They taught agriculture and the arts of civilization to the Indians and tried to promote better understanding between the white and red races. They persisted courageously in their efforts to Christianize the Indians in the face of a general tendency of the Sioux to reject the white man's religion. They contributed something to the cultural texture of our western frontier society. They served as ministers to congregations of pioneer settlers. They left a legacy of character marked by simplicity, honor, and good sense. For what they were and for what they did they richly deserve to be remembered and honored by Minnesota and America.

THEODORE C. BLEGEN

MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ST. PAUL



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).