

LOUIS PROVENÇALLE, FUR TRADER

FLOATING IN AND OUT of most accounts of trips up and down the Minnesota River by travelers and missionaries during the 1830's and 1840's are brief, casual references to Louis Provençalle or "Mr. Leblanc," trader at Traverse des Sioux, a trading post that served as the first major oasis in the wilderness between the Fort Snelling-Mendota region and Lac qui Parle. Curiously enough, no one seems to have paid much attention to him, but to have taken him for granted, and to have given notice chiefly to Joseph Renville of Lac qui Parle. The student will find pages of description about Renville's establishment, nothing of Provençalle's. Probably Renville was a somewhat more picturesque character, with his band of Sioux retainers, but Provençalle, by reason of his thirty years of service in the fur trade at a strategic point on the Minnesota River and his ingenious method of solving the illiteracy problem merits attention.

Just when Louis Provençalle, often called "Leblanc" or "Skadan," signifying "the white man," arrived in Minnesota is not known, although Sibley in his "Reminiscences" states that he was there before the close of the eighteenth century. His name appears along with those of J. B. Fari-bault and Colin Campbell on a list dated June 21, 1814, of Canadian voyageurs who volunteered at Mackinac to go under the leadership of Captain Thomas G. Anderson against the Americans at Prairie du Chien. Thus he may have been born about 1780.¹ In any event, he was clearly associated

¹"Skadan" is a Sioux word, literally meaning "the little white," according to Stephen R. Riggs, ed., *Grammar and Dictionary of the Dakota Language*, 186 (Washington, 1852). See also Samuel W. Pond, "The Dakotas or Sioux in Minnesota as They Were in 1834," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 12: 335; Henry H. Sibley, "Reminiscences, Historical and Personal," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 1: 382; and "Prairie du Chien Documents, 1814-15," in *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 9: 262.

with the Canadians who played such an active part in the early Minnesota fur trade.

Samuel W. Pond, a pioneer Protestant missionary in the Minnesota Valley, says of Provençalle :

Though a native of Canada, he was a genuine Gaul, and had all the external politeness and internal fire of the native Frenchman, as much as though he had been born on the banks of the Seine. He was vivacious, jovial and bland, but it was said that he was not remarkable for the placidity or equanimity of his temper. It was said that once when greatly enraged at the loss of his chickens, he had skinned an unlucky wolf alive. This last statement must appear incredible to those who saw the old gentleman only in his best moods. He received the casual visitor, though a stranger, with a courteous welcome and on his departure, accompanying him to the door, or farther, dismissed him with a friendly adieu.²

As a Roman Catholic, Provençalle had at least four of his children by his Sioux wife baptized at Detroit on August 4, 1821. Nevertheless, he and his family often attended services conducted at Traverse des Sioux by Stephen R. Riggs, a Presbyterian missionary at that place.³

That Provençalle had knowledge of Indian character, cold nerve, and ability to think quickly in an emergency is proved by his daring defiance of a band of wild Sioux who on one occasion were threatening to pillage his goods. Picking up a blazing firebrand, he swung it within a few inches of an open keg of gunpowder, and declared his intention of blowing the Indians along with himself into the air if a single article was seized. Sibley, who relates the incident, comments that this "reckless conduct had the desired effect, for he suffered no further annoyance of a like kind."⁴

No trader who violated Indian rule and custom, albeit involuntarily, was safe from punishment by the soldiers' lodge, however. On another occasion, Provençalle with

² Pond, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 12: 335.

³ "Mackinac Register," in *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 19: 134, 20: 174n. The family is there listed under the name of "Carboneau dit Provençal." See also Stephen R. Riggs, *Mary and I*, 114 (Chicago, 1880).

⁴ Sibley, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 1: 382.

one of his men was engaged in a search for an Indian camp where there were reported to be a large number of buffalo robes.

Fatigued and hungry, they found themselves near a herd of buffalo, and not suspecting that there were Indians near, they shot a cow and brought her to the ground. The report of the guns put the animals to flight, and in a few moments, Provençalle and his companion were assailed by the Indians, knocked down, severely beaten with their bows, and otherwise maltreated. It appeared that the band of which he was in search, were about completing a *cane*, or surround, of the buffalo, the men crawling cautiously to their appointed stations, when the interference of the white men disconcerted all their arrangements, for which the punishment above detailed was summarily inflicted. Nevertheless, the coveted robes were secured, although the old gentleman declared he would not undergo another castigation of the same kind for all the robes in the country.⁵

That Provençalle was not unskilled in the Dakota, or Sioux, language is demonstrated by the fact that he was specifically engaged by Sibley as clerk and interpreter for one year from July 2, 1835. This agreement was renewed successively with slight modifications until June, 1839, when an "outfit" type of contract was adopted. The trader's ability to speak Dakota is the subject of the following comment by Pond:⁶

Provençalle spoke the Dakota language with fluency and force, but with bold violations of grammatical rules. He was aware that his manner of speaking was not faultless, and he once told the writer that, to please his sons, who thought they could speak much better than he, he had tried them a little as interpreters, but found that

⁵ Sibley, who relates the Provençalle incident, was himself punished by the soldiers' lodge for violating unintentionally the rules of a Sioux hunting party. See his "Reminiscences," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 1: 382, 3: 260.

⁶ An agreement between Sibley for the American Fur Company and Provençalle dated July 2, 1835, and renewals of July 2, 1836, 1837, and 1838, are in the Sibley Papers, in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society. An agreement of June 24, 1839, in the same collection, specifies that Sibley should furnish goods to Provençalle for his trade at Traverse des Sioux at a twenty per cent advance on cost and charges at Prairie du Chien, and should purchase the latter's furs at current American Fur Company prices. See also Pond, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 12: 335.

though their speech might sound better to the Indians than his, it made less impression on them. He had come to the conclusion that, notwithstanding his grammatical blunders and bad pronunciation, no one could speak so well for him as he could speak for himself, and said that he should do his own talking while he was able.

In a letter of August 20, 1819, Ramsay Crooks, general manager of the American Fur Company, directs that either Leblanc or Duncan Campbell winter at or near the mouth of the Minnesota River. The subject of this sketch, therefore, by that date had emerged from the status of voyageur, and probably was a clerk or interpreter in the employ of James H. Lockwood, to whom Crooks addressed his letter. The following year "Le Blan" is mentioned in connection with a note that was being sent for collection from Green Bay to Prairie du Chien.⁷ Early in August, 1821, Joseph Rolette became general agent at Prairie du Chien for the business of the American Fur Company, and it was probably as a clerk for Rolette that "Provincinal, trader from Prairie du Chien with boat and 6 men" arrived at St. Peter's, the post at the mouth of the Minnesota River, on October 12, 1821, for inspection by Major Lawrence Taliaferro, the Indian agent at Fort Snelling. No indication of his intended wintering post appears on the record. Provençalle had just come on from Mackinac, for there on August 4, 1821, "the father being present," Father Gabriel Richard had conditionally baptized four of his children by a "woman Savage of the Sioux nation." These children had been born at intervals between April, 1814, and December, 1819.⁸

On September 6, 1823, Provençalle arrived at St. Peter's from Prairie du Chien with a trading license dated July 25,

⁷ Ramsay Crooks to James H. Lockwood, August 20, 1819, in the Mackinac Register, 1:224; John Lawe to Tenislaus Chaput, June 8, 1820, in *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 20:172-174. The Minnesota Historical Society has photostatic copies of the Mackinac Register.

⁸ Ramsay Crooks to Michael Brisbois, August 8, 1821, in Mackinac Register, 2:113; Taliaferro Journals, October 12, 1821; "Mackinac Baptisms," in *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 19:134. The Taliaferro Journals are owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

1823, issued by George Boyd, Indian agent at Mackinac, for one year. On the twenty-fifth of the same month he proceeded up the Minnesota River to a destination which Taliaferro neglected to list in his journal. It is probable, however, that Provençalle was trading at the Little Rapids near the present site of Carver, for a printed abstract of trading licenses granted during the year ending September 1, 1825, lists him at that post with a capital of \$2,100.00 and a bond of \$4,200.00. An undated license in his name appears with a group issued by George Boyd at Mackinac in July, 1825. The same list shows that Augustin Rocque and Duncan Campbell were licensed for one year from July 20, 1825, for Traverse des Sioux, with capital respectively of \$1,900.14 and \$2,879.16.⁹

Under an agreement of September 2, 1825, between Joseph Rolette of the upper Mississippi department of the American Fur Company and Alexis Bailly, the latter became the company's factor for three years for the trade at the "Entry of the St. Peter's" and extending as far south as the head of Lake Pepin. Goods for Provençalle and for Jean Baptiste Faribault were to be charged at the same rate as those for Bailly. From 1825, Provençalle's name appears at fairly frequent intervals in Bailly's account books. For example, on November 19, 1825, he was charged with "1 pr. trousers & 1 shirt flannel, \$10.00." The ledger for the period from September, 1825, to May, 1826, shows a total of \$162.74 charged against Provençalle, for goods including one pair of children's morocco half boots at one dollar, one pair of "pegg shoes" at a dollar and a half, one case of "Magnum Bonum" razors at six dollars, a tent at twenty-

⁹ Taliaferro Journals, September 6, 25, 1823; *Abstract of Licenses to Trade with the Indians . . . during the Year Ending on the 1st September, 1825*, sig. 4 (19 Congress, 1 session, *House Executive Documents*, no. 118 — serial 136); Alexis Bailly Account Book, Bailly Papers; invoice of goods of Louis Provençalle at Little Rapids, September 30, 1825, Taliaferro Papers. The Bailly and Taliaferro papers are owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

five dollars, calico, men's country socks, two pounds of tea at six dollars, lead, powder, brooches, seven quarts of whisky, tallow, beaver and rat traps, and other items. The tea was evidently a mistake, for on the credit side of the ledger appears the entry, "2 lb tea charged by error, \$6." Fifty pounds of tallow also came back. Other credits include, eighty-four bushels of corn at a dollar a bushel, twenty bushels of potatoes worth fifteen dollars, a keg of onions valued at seventeen dollars, and sundry minor items.¹⁰

Provençalle received two trading licenses for 1826, one issued by Boyd at Mackinac for Traverse des Sioux with a capital of two thousand dollars, and one by Taliaferro at Fort Snelling for the Little Rapids with a capital of two thousand five hundred dollars. In the same year Alexander Faribault and Louis Bergen obtained permits for the Traverse from the Fort Snelling agent. It would thus appear that Provençalle transferred his operations from the Little Rapids to Traverse des Sioux about this time.

In his journal for June 14, 1827, Taliaferro notes the arrival of Provençalle, who was to trade at Traverse des Sioux the following season. The companion entry to this one is found on October 5, as the trader moved out to his post for the winter. According to Taliaferro, "Mr. Provençalle alias Labland arrive[d] this day with his trading boat from Prairie du Chien." The following day Provençalle secured his license from Taliaferro for trade at Traverse des Sioux, and got permits for six men, all foreigners, to go in with him as his employees. Perhaps the one barrel of whisky that an officer at Prairie du Chien allowed Provençalle to bring up on his boat was for the use of these men. Entries in the Bailly account books show that the furs and peltries turned in by the Provençalle and Faribault outfits

¹⁰ Agreement between Joseph Rolette and Alexis Bailly, September 2, 1825; Bailly "Blotter," — an account book, — November 19, 1825; Bailly Account Book, September, 1825, to May, 1826, and June, 1826; in account with "Louis Provensall," Bailly Papers.

were sold with those of Bailly, and that the wages of their interpreters and men were handled in the same way, the necessary debits and credits being made.¹¹

The extension of Bailly's trading territory to include the Little Rapids by agreements concluded with Rolette in 1828 and 1829 brought Provençalle into still closer contact with the Bailly outfit at the mouth of the Minnesota. Alexander Faribault was transferred from Traverse des Sioux to the Little Rapids, and certain Indians were to be brought down to the latter place as part of Bailly's outfit. In June, 1829, both Provençalle and Faribault went down to Prairie du Chien in charge of boats belonging to the Bailly outfit. The account of the "U. P. Outfit" shows figures of \$4,717.79 as half the profit on Provençalle's outfit. Sundries furnished to the outfit on June 16, 1827, amounted to \$2,285.55. The Provençalle outfit accounts on Bailly's books from July, 1828, to July, 1830, show charges for tallow, pork, flour, tobacco, "proportion for transportation of one bale and 200 lb. lead from the mouth of Chippewa River \$5," rations of bread, sugar, tea, lead, a comb, a pair of leggins, a half axe, and sundry repairs.¹²

That the fur trade on the middle Minnesota was fairly profitable at this period is shown by the accounts for the Little Rapids outfit for the year 1828-29. A total of \$4,024.30 was credited to the outfit on furs and peltries produced, with a neat profit of \$1,803.00. By far the largest item was muskrat skins, numbering 10,805, valued at \$2,161.00 at the current price of twenty cents. Deerskins at twenty-five cents a pound, otters at three dollars a skin,

¹¹ Taliaferro Journal, January 24, 1826, June 14, October 5, 6, 1827; *Abstract of Licenses . . . to trade with the Indians, during the Year Ending the First of September, 1827*, 4, 5 (19 Congress, 2 session, *Senate Documents*, no. 58 — serial 146); Bailly Account Book, June 26, 1826, June 12, 1827.

¹²Agreements between Joseph Rolette and Alexis Bailly dated February 12, 1828, and August 18, 1829; packing account for furs sent down, Bailly Account Book, June 4, 1828; Alexis Bailly in account with Louis Provençalle, Bailly Papers.

martens at sixty-two and a half cents, raccoons at thirty cents, and fishers at seventy cents stand out prominently in the figures. Only eleven and a half pounds of beaver were reported, although the skins brought \$3.50 a pound.¹³

Muskrat skins rated at twenty cents had by this time become a standard of value, and Provençalle's own Indian credit book, kept at Traverse des Sioux in 1830 and 1831, gives not only the prices charged for goods reckoned in that medium, but the equivalents in the various skins as well. Guns at one hundred and twenty rats (twenty-four dollars), twelve-pound brass kettles at one hundred rats, blankets of various sizes, from the three point at forty rats to the one point at fifteen, powder at ten rats per measure, tin kettles of different sizes from number twelve at fifty rats down to number six at twenty, pipe tomahawks at twenty rats, wrist bands at twenty rats a pair, and rat spears at fifteen were the most expensive goods from the standpoint of the Indian customers. Knives cost four rats, gun flints one rat each, and ten balls for the guns could be secured for a single rat-skin.

Charged against these items are the returns in skins made by each customer, in otters worth twenty rats, beaver at about fourteen or fifteen rats a pound, deer, fisher, marten, and wildcats at three rats apiece, and others in proportion. A study of the whole account book shows that only one Indian, Sleepy Eyes, came near to squaring his account, and even he, by later buying, incurred an additional debt of \$24.40. One other Indian did nearly as well. Other unpaid balances ranged from \$122.00 down to about \$30.00, with the average account in the neighborhood of \$75.00. Under the circumstances, one can scarcely wonder that the trader charged high prices for his goods and that the unpaid credits presented on the rare occasions when treaties were made were very large. It should be remembered also that

¹³ Bailly Account Book, Bailly Papers.

the prices charged for Indian goods sold over the trader's counter were pretty well stabilized over a long period, while the prices that he could get for his furs on the outside fluctuated very greatly, with a general downward tendency.¹⁴

Provençalle, according to Sibley, was a man of even less education than Joseph Renville, although "gifted with a strong natural intellect." Sibley describes the trader's method of keeping accounts as follows:

He kept his Indian credit books by hieroglyphics, having a peculiar figure for each article of merchandise, understood only by himself, and in marking down peltries received from the Indians, he drew the form of the animal, the skin of which was to be represented. He had also a mode of indicating the names of his Indian debtors on his account books peculiar to himself. Fortunately he had mastered the mystery of figures sufficiently well to express by them the amount he wished to designate, and the general correctness of his account did not admit of question.¹⁵

Pond records that in the winter of 1835-36, while he was detained for a day or two at Provençalle's post by wind and snow, the trader brought out his account book and asked him to write in the names of his debtors. Some of the names had already been written in, presumably by one of Provençalle's sons, but he wanted the record completed, "so that in case of his death others should know who were meant." Pond continues: "This mode of keeping accounts had one advantage over others, in that the Indians could easily learn to read this picture writing and see for themselves how their accounts stood; but the old gentleman told me he had met with an insurmountable difficulty in attempting to write the names of persons so that others could read them." Pictures served well enough for visible objects, but intangible ideas could not be so expressed. Pond explains that "Le Blanc was very industrious and economical, and had accumulated some property, but he found it easier to

¹⁴ Provençalle's Indian credit book for 1830-31 is in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

¹⁵ Sibley, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 1: 381.

acquire property while his children were young than to keep it after they were grown up, and this was the case of many of the fur traders."¹⁶

Fortunately for the student of his affairs, a good part of Provençalle's accounts, which are owned by the Minnesota Historical Society, were kept in the customary longhand fashion, for the one kept in pictographs is for the most part a puzzle. Some items, such as powder horns, blankets, knives, and rat spears, can be identified from his drawings; others, such as measures of powder and balls, can be deciphered from the prices charged. Many of them, however, still remain a problem for the cryptographer.

Louis Provençalle died, according to Sibley, at Mendota in 1850. His old cabin, however, still stood at Traverse des Sioux in 1851, when the artist, Frank B. Mayer, visited that place and made sketches of it. The cabin must have been a low two-room affair of logs, roofed with slabs of bark that were held down by poles laid across them. In the corner of one room was a rude fireplace, and in another was a rough bunk of the usual "one-legged" type. The floor is represented as composed of rough boards carefully laid together.¹⁷

In this crude hut Louis Provençalle, trader at one of the major points on the Minnesota River for twenty-five years, lived and carried on his business. His activities were those of the inland trader of his time, and the part which he played in the history of preterritorial Minnesota can only be known in imperfect fashion from the scanty records which have survived.

WILLOUGHBY M. BABCOCK

MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ST. PAUL

¹⁶ Pond, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 12: 335.

¹⁷ Sibley, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 1: 382. Mayer's sketches are reproduced in Bertha L. Heilbron, ed., *With Pen and Pencil on the Frontier in 1851: the Diary and Sketches of Frank Blackwell Mayer*, 71, 72 (St. Paul, 1932).



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](#).