

S Schoolcraft S Sesquicentennial

Russell W. Fridley

A CENTURY and a half ago, Henry R. Schoolcraft discovered the source of the Mississippi River to be the lake we now call Itasca. That event, a perennial favorite in any narrative about Minnesota and a frequent topic for many a student's term paper, remains one of the great outdoor "true adventure" stories of our region. The epic dimensions in which the episode is usually cast seem deserved when one recalls the three centuries it took to unlock this geographical mystery.

The Spanish explorer Hernando De Soto first saw the lower Mississippi in 1541 — 289 years before Schoolcraft came upon Lake Itasca. The quest to find the river's fountainhead took on an international flavor because the Minnesota country was a pawn in the geopolitics of the time. The search was also closely linked to one for a northwest passage to the Pacific — an undertaking successfully realized by Alexander Mackenzie 40 years before Schoolcraft reached Lake Itasca.

After De Soto's discovery, more than a century elapsed before Father Jacques Marquette and Louis Jolliet, under the flag of New France, floated down the Wisconsin River into the upper Mississippi in 1673. European geographical knowledge was advanced another degree of latitude in 1680 when Father Louis

Hennepin, a member of the Sieur de La Salle's expedition, reached the only major cataract on the Mississippi and named it the Falls of St. Anthony.

During the British regime (1763–83) the tentacles of exploration were intertwined with the fur trade, with activity concentrated along the transcontinental canoe route that marks the international boundary. The location of the Mississippi's source was still a matter of conjecture in 1783 when the Treaty of Paris ended the American Revolution. Treaty commissioners, unaware that no part of the river lies west of Lake of the Woods, delineated this segment of the Canadian-American boundary: "to the said Lake of the Woods; thence through the said lake to the most northwestern point thereof, and from thence on a due west course to the river Mississippi."¹

As the 19th century approached, British fur traders of the North West Company, increasingly concerned that the United States had wrested the "voyageur's highway" from them, made one last attempt to validate their boundary claim by commissioning an expert map maker to try to determine it. David Thompson, exploring along 4,000 miles in 1797–98, failed to do so but en route declared Turtle Lake in Beltrami County to be the Mississippi's source.

Exploration in the United States intensified after the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. Just a year after the Lewis and Clark expedition headed west, Lieutenant Zebulon M. Pike traveled up the Mississippi in 1805, reaching Leech Lake in present Cass County the following year. He declared it the "main source" of the river and called Cass Lake the "upper source."² Governor Lewis Cass of Michigan Territory (for whom the lake was later named)

¹Henry Steele Commager, ed., *Documents of American History*, 118 (3rd ed., New York, 1944). More information may be found in William E. Lass, *Minnesota's Boundary with Canada: Its Evolution since 1783* (St. Paul, 1980).

²Donald Jackson, ed., *The Journals of Zebulon Montgomery Pike*, 1:87, 156n (Norman, Okla., 1966).

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visited the region in 1820 and reached virtually the same conclusion as Pike, although he considered Cass Lake the main source. The flamboyant and contentious Italian adventurer, Giacomo Constantino Beltrami, arrived in 1823 on the first steamboat to reach Fort Snelling. He joined the government-sponsored expedition of Major Stephen H. Long, but they parted company in the Red River Valley. With considerable help from a métis guide, he reached Lake Julia in Beltrami County, near Thompson's 1798 claim, and named that body of water the source of both the Mississippi and the Red rivers.

Henry Schoolcraft, mineralogist on the Cass expedition, had spotted two little streams entering Cass Lake from the northwest. He probably learned from Ojibway Indians in the area that one stream flowed out of a lake accessible by canoe. In 1832 Schoolcraft returned with his own exploring party. From Cass Lake an Ojibway, Ozawindib (Yellow Head), led the group through Lake Bemidji and up a small stream to a swamp. From there they trekked overland in a southwesterly direction.

As they tramped through the woods on July 13, the excitement rose. Finally, wrote Schoolcraft, "What had been long sought, at last appeared suddenly. On turning out of a thicket, into a small weedy opening, the cheering sight of a transparent body of water burst upon our view. It was Itasca Lake — the source of the Mississippi."³

In 1836 the brilliant French scientist, Joseph N. Nicollet, visited the area. Giving full credit to Schoolcraft, he made a detailed, definitive map of the Itasca basin. But others challenged Schoolcraft's claim. Wil-

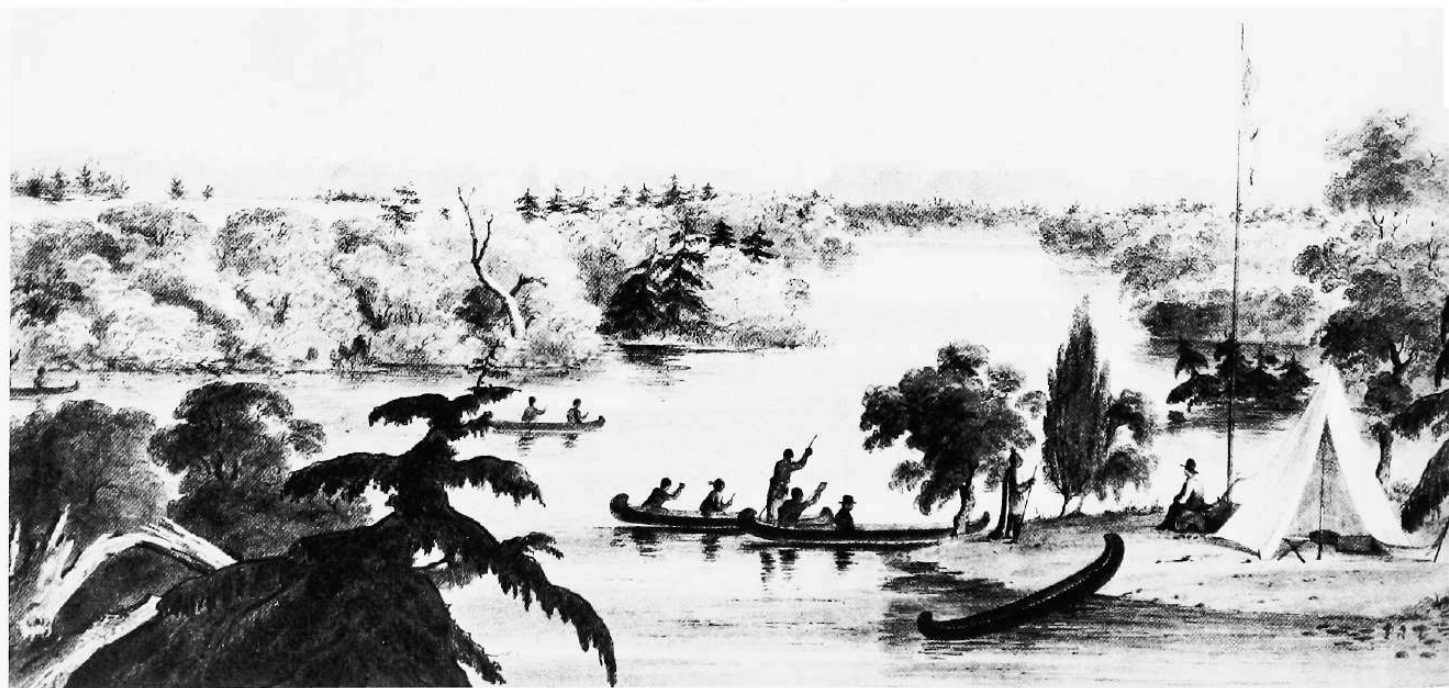
liam Morrison, a fur trader, probably saw Lake Itasca as early as 1804 but made no official claim until decades later. Willard Glazier, best known for a well-orchestrated publicity campaign surrounding his 1881 expedition, proclaimed Elk Lake — like Itasca, in Clearwater County — the true source of the Mississippi. Schoolcraft's discovery of 1832, however, has never been seriously contested in more than 150 years.

What is the significance of the discovery that Lake Itasca is the source of the Mississippi? First, it marked a genuine geographical advance by unrolling more of the map of the region and adding detailed knowledge about the upper Mississippi River country. Second, it stimulated numerous other expeditions to the Minnesota region during the 1830s and 1840s. Third, it lengthened the roll of explorers and significantly added to the travel literature of the area with narratives, reports, and diaries. Fourth, it dramatized what local Indian people and French, British, and American fur traders long had known — that northern Minnesota was an intricate system of interconnected waterways. Fifth, Schoolcraft's discovery and Nicollet's survey laid the basis for the Webster-Ashburton Treaty of 1842, which resolved the controversy over that section of the international boundary that had remained muddled since the Treaty of Paris. Finally, the discovery of Lake Itasca paved the way for the creation, 59 years later, of Minnesota's first state park.

It is a sesquicentennial worth remembering!

³Henry R. Schoolcraft, *Narrative of an Expedition through the Upper Mississippi to Itasca Lake*, 56 (New York, 1834).

A SETH EASTMAN engraving, after a sketch by Schoolcraft of his camp at Lake Itasca





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