Schoolcraft Landing at Lake Itasca in 1832

[From an engraving by Captain Seth Eastman, in Mrs. Mary H. Eastman’s *American Aboriginal Portfolio.*]
ITASCA STUDIES*

THE LEGEND OF LAKE ITASCA

Mrs. Mary H. Eastman, whose collections of Indian legends and sketches written about the middle of the last century are well known, resided in the forties at Fort Snelling, where her husband, Captain Seth Eastman, was stationed. Captain Eastman, besides being an army officer, was an artist of no mean ability and his drawings and engravings have enhanced greatly the value and attractiveness of Mrs. Eastman's publications. Among other works published by her, there appeared in 1853 her American Aboriginal Portfolio. This work contains a number of Indian sketches and legends, many of them illustrated by Captain Eastman, and among others is a story or legend of Lake Itasca, embellished with a pleasing engraving of the lake by her talented husband.

It seems that Nanabozho, or Hiawatha, the great mythical wonder-worker of the Algonquin Indians, — to which racial family the Chippewa, or Ojibways, belong — had a beautiful daughter whose name was Itasca. Although the legend is silent upon the subject, it is to be hoped in the interest of monogamy that Itasca's mother was the ancient arrow-maker's daughter, Minnehaha. At any rate, Itasca lived with her father in his lodge. She was wooed fiercely and impetuously by Chebiabo, the ruler of the lower regions, who governed the spirits of the dead. Itasca, however, had no desire to leave this fair earth for the region of darkness, even to be the bride and consort of Chebiabo, and she plainly told him so. Che-

* The two studies herewith published were made independently, the one by a Minnesota author and the other by an Iowan much interested in the history of the North Star State. Since they supplement each other in unusual fashion, the editor has brought them together under one general title. Ed.
biabo, however, was not to be denied and finally in rage at Itasca's continued refusal, amid fierce shaking of the hills, as if by earthquake, and in the violence of a terrific storm of thunder and lightning, he bore away his unwilling bride below the earth, and the upheaval of the earthquake left the hills as one may see them today; while Itasca's tears, as she still weeps and mourns for the upper world, are the springs and rivulets which trickle to the lake and form the ultimate source of the Mississippi River.

A poetic legend quite in the Greek spirit! The story of Apollo and Daphne is hardly more classic. The legend has in fact considerable resemblance to that of Pluto and Persephone. But where did Mrs. Eastman get it, and what of the maiden's name which, by implication at least, is perpetuated in the name of the beautiful lake?

For many years the origin of the name "Itasca" was unknown and it still has some curious mystery connected with it. Long before Henry R. Schoolcraft discovered the lake in which the Mississippi has its source and christened it Itasca in the year 1832, it had been known to traders and adventurers as Lac la Biche or Elk Lake—translations in French and English of the Chippewa name "O mushkos." It was suspected of being the ultimate source of the Mississippi. Schoolcraft himself, in his Narrative Journal of the Cass expedition of 1820, writes: "La Beesh River is the outlet of Lake La Beesh, which lies six days journey, with a canoe, west-northwest of Cassina [Cass] Lake, and has no inlets." ¹ The Cass expedition of 1820, which Schoolcraft accompanied, ended at Cass Lake. When Schoolcraft set out again in 1832, however, it was with the avowed purpose of penetrating to this Lac la Biche, which in all probability was the ultimate source of the river. On July 13, 1832, Schoolcraft, led by his Chippewa guide Ozawindib, or the Yellowhead, crossed a some-

¹ Schoolcraft, Narrative Journal of Travels through the Northwestern Regions of the United States, 251 (Albany, 1821).
what arduous portage and reached the lake. "What had been long sought, at last appeared suddenly," writes the explorer. "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." And that was that so far as any explanation of the name was concerned, although this was the first time it had ever been made public, much less appeared in print. Schoolcraft, in his *Summary Narrative*, published in 1855 and covering the events of the two expeditions of 1820 and 1832, goes a little more into detail, however.

I inquired of Ozawindib the Indian name of this lake; he replied *Omushköś*, which is the Chippewa name of the Elk. Having previously got an inkling of some of their mythological and necromantic notions of the origin and mutations of the country, which permitted the use of a female name for it, I denominated it *Itasca*.

This statement is rather cryptic. It certainly does not help to clear up the mystery of the origin of the name, unless it be that a short poem, which will be referred to hereafter, was intended by Schoolcraft as a partial explanation. In his *Personal Memoirs*, published in 1851, and in his "Memoir on the History and Physical Geography of Minnesota," contributed to the Minnesota Historical Society in the same year, the explorer gives no further explanation of the meaning of the name, although both include accounts of the Itasca expedition of 1832.

Apparently Schoolcraft's fellow travelers and contemporaries did not take the new name very seriously; at least it seems to have made no deep impression upon them. Lieutenant James Allen, who commanded the military escort accompany-

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2 Schoolcraft, *Narrative of an Expedition through the Upper Mississippi to Itasca Lake*, 56 (New York, 1834); *Summary Narrative of an Exploratory Expedition*, 243 (Philadelphia, 1855).

3 The "Memoir" appears in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 1:108-132.
ing Schoolcraft on the expedition, in his official report to the war department refers to the lake as Lac la Biche or Elk Lake and never once as Itasca. Stranger still is the contemporary silence of the missionary, Boutwell, a most estimable man, the friend and companion of Schoolcraft in the expedition and the very person who, as it afterwards appeared, furnished the Latin words from which Schoolcraft constructed the name. Boutwell kept a daily journal during the entire trip, but like Lieutenant Allen, he is completely silent about Itasca. He refers to the lake simply as Elk Lake, named by the Indians “in reference to its branching horns.” The first time apparently that the new name appeared in print, other than in Schoolcraft’s *Narrative of an Expedition*, was in Joseph M. Nicollet’s *Report*, published in 1841. The courteous and kindly Frenchman, who visited and surveyed the lake in 1836 for the United States government, seems to have adopted the new name whole-heartedly, although he did identify the lake with the Lac la Biche of the French and the Elk Lake of the British; adding that “The actual name of this lake, given by Mr. Schoolcraft, without defining it, is already laid down in some book as of Indian origin.”* Major Lawrence Taliaferro, the Indian agent at Fort Snelling, however, did not accept the new name so kindly. After Nicollet showed him a copy of Schoolcraft’s *Narrative of an Expedition* with its account of the discovery of Lake Itasca, the agent wrote the following rather sarcastic comment in his journal under date of July 15, 1836:

Oh thou wiper out of names of places—to swell your own consequence upon the fall of La Beasch & rise [of] Ithaka or Itashkah now the true source of the Miss. & never known to hundreds before this worthy desciple made it known in July

In 1846 Charles Lanman made an interesting and leisurely expedition into the Minnesota region. He visited Lake Itasca and described it as "Elk or Itasca Lake." What his real feelings were, however, with reference to the change of name may be inferred from his remarks respecting Red Cedar Lake, which Schoolcraft, in his expedition of 1820, had christened Cassina:

Red Cedar Lake is the sheet of water Mr. Schoolcraft has attempted to name after a distinguished friend; I say attempted, because the Indians and traders of the northwest do not recognize his change. I agree with them in the opinion that it is not right for travellers to glorify themselves or friends by attempting to supplant with their own, the original and appropriate names that belong to the rivers and lakes of our land. If the ambitious can discover nameless wonders, they will then be privileged to use them in extending their reputations.⁶

Notwithstanding these protests, however, the name Itasca sounded "Indianish" to the uninitiated, it was musical, and it had the advantage of the publicity given to it by Schoolcraft's literary name and fame. Like Americus Vespucius' name, justly or unjustly, it "took." Forty years went by before further light was shed upon the story of its origin. Students of Indian lore, both Chippewa and Sioux, were perplexed equally with traders and missionaries to know where Schoolcraft got the name. It was not until 1872 that the mystery was explained by a letter from Boutwell. In this letter, published in the *Saint Paul Pioneer* of June 16, 1872, the missionary tells the now well-known story of how, when he and Schoolcraft were outward bound along the south shore of Lake Superior in 1832, the name was fabricated by the ex-

⁵ The Taliaferro Journals are in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.
plerer from two Latin words — *veritas* meaning truth, and *caput*, head — ready for use and application when the lake should be reached.¹

How fares it then with the ancient Chippewa legend of the fair maiden whose name was Itasca, daughter of Nanabozho, who was wooed and seized by Chebiabo and whose tears well up to fill the basin of Itasca’s lake? Are her tears totally dried up under the fierce rays of historical criticism?

Curiously enough, in the same issue of the *Pioneer* in which Boutwell’s letter appears, a letter from Mrs. Eastman dated May 6, 1872, also is printed. There she stoutly defends the legend, which she says she got direct from Schoolcraft, who in turn got it from his Chippewa guide; and she asserts that “the name and tradition of Itasca are as reliable as any other. It is a subject for a grand poem.” This idea of a grand poem might well have been suggested by Schoolcraft’s own verses — for he was something of a poet in addition to his other gifts — published in his *Summary Narrative* of 1855, immediately following the account of the discovery and naming of Lake Itasca."²

STANZAS

ON REACHING THE SOURCE OF THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER IN 1833

I

Ha! truant of western waters! Thou who hast
So long concealed thy very sources — flitting shy,
Now here, now there — through spreading mazes vast
Thou art, at length, discovered to the eye
In crystal springs, that run, like silver thread,
From out their sandy heights, and glittering lie
Within a beauteous basin, fair outspread

² This account was corroborated subsequently in a conversation between Boutwell and Jacob V. Brower, who recorded it in his volume on the *Mississippi River and Its Source*, 148 n. (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 7). The whole story is well told by Warren Upham in his *Minnesota Geographic Names*, 252 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 17).

³ Schoolcraft notes that the verses had appeared earlier in the “*Literary World*, No. 337.” *Summary Narrative*, 243 n.
Hesperian woodlands of the western sky,
As if, in Indian myths, a truth there could be read,
And these were tears, indeed, by fair Itasca shed.

II
To bear the sword, on prancing steed arrayed;
To lift the voice admiring Senate's own;
To tune the lyre, enraptured muses played;
Or pierce the starry heavens — the blue unknown —
These were the aims of many sons of fame,
Who shook the world with glory's golden song.
I sought a moral meed of less acclaim,
In treading lands remote, and mazes long;
And while around aerial voices ring,
I quaff the limpid cup at Mississippi's spring.

The legend reported by Mrs. Eastman, then, is the one that gave Schoolcraft, as he says, "an inkling of some of their [the Indians'] mythological and necromantic notions of the origin and mutations of the country," whatever that may mean, and which "permitted" him to give the lake a new Latinized name of the female gender! Clearly Schoolcraft, and he alone, must assume the responsibility for the legend's authenticity.

It is to be regretted that Schoolcraft in his Algic Researches, published in 1839, — from which Longfellow took the material, if not his inspiration, for the poem "Hiawatha," — does not include among the Ojibway legends there told the story of Itasca. He is equally silent about the legend in his Myth of Hiawatha, and Other Oral Legends published in 1856. Neither work, however, attempts an encyclopedic enumeration of all Ojibway legends, and of course neither could. As Schoolcraft himself writes: "The story of this chief [Nanabosho or Hiawatha] of Northern myths is dropped in my notes at this point. . . . But his feats and adventures by land and sea do not terminate here. There is scarcely a prominent lake, mountain, precipice, or stream in the northern part of America, which is not hallowed in Indian story by his fabled deeds." 9

Of the same import is the statement by George Copway, the well-known native Ojibway writer of the last century:

The Ojibways have a great number of legends, stories, and historical tales, the relating and hearing of which, form a vast fund of winter evening instruction and amusement.

There is not a lake or mountain that has not connected with it some story of delight or wonder, and nearly every beast and bird is the subject of the story-teller, being said to have transformed itself at some prior time into some mysterious formation—of men going to live in the stars, and of imaginary beings in the air, whose rushing passage roars in the distant whirlwinds.\(^{10}\)

Charles Lanman, to whom reference has been made heretofore, while he does not mention Schoolcraft's legend, tells another legend about Lake Itasca which he says he got from an old Chippewa living alone in his lodge by the lake. It seems that there was once a mammoth elk, whose length was that of two large canoes and whose horns had the power to split a pine tree, living in a valley in the hills near Itasca, where he reigned supreme. Every year all the animals of the North visited this king of beasts to consult him about the forests and plains they were to occupy during the following year and to partake of the water of the lake, which had the power to protect them from every disease or accident. It so happened, however, that a party of Indian warriors from the South, who were also giants, penetrated the lair of King Elk and killed him with a poisoned arrow. The heavens were immediately filled with clouds and a heavy rain deluged the earth, causing the lake to overflow its banks and forming a little stream that finally widened into a broad river and emptied into an unknown sea. On the bosom of this river the mighty hunters of the South floated in their newly made canoes until they found themselves in their own country, and the lake received its name from the giant elk who thus met his doom.\(^{11}\)

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\(^{10}\) Copway, *The Traditional History and Characteristic Sketches of the Ojibway Nation*, 95 (Boston, 1851).

\(^{11}\) Lanman, *A Summer in the Wilderness*, 99.
This legend has the characteristic Indian motif of warriors, giants, supernatural feats, and the like, rather more so than Schoolcraft's legend; but it lacks the latter's poetic fantasy, and if we must choose between the two, let us stand by the Muses rather than the War Gods.

Neither legend, however, is mentioned, so far as has been ascertained, in any collection of Ojibway myths known to the writer. A rather diligent search has failed also to show that either legend is known today among the Indians or the white residents in the region of Lake Itasca. This, however, is not very conclusive evidence against the existence of such legends in years gone by. As Mr. Arthur Beaulieu writes, "The old Indian has gone beyond to the Happy Hunting Ground and with him his customs and traditions. Very few live today who possess the folklore of our Aborigines."

It must be borne in mind that the mythology of the North American Indian is a very loose aggregation of primitive and animalistic folklore, shifting, sketchy, sometimes incoherent, often changeable. It is far removed from the compact, sophisticated system of Greek mythology. It varied considerably from generation to generation and from place to place in the same generation. Old legends were forgotten and new ones took their place. Indeed, there seems to have been an element of improvisation in Indian legendry, giving considerable variety as well as local coloring to the stories that were told from mouth to mouth around the camp fires or in the teepees of the old. The scattered tribal condition of the Indians and the paucity of their numbers, spread as they were over a continental area, no doubt contributed to all this. There was,

12 Acknowledgment is due in this search to Miss Frances Densmore of the Bureau of American Ethnology; the Reverend Benno Watrin of Ponsford; Mr. Earl Lang, superintendent of Itasca State Park; Mr. Arthur Beaulieu of White Earth; Mr. Mel R. Nyman of Minneapolis; Mr. Mark L. Burns, superintendent of the Consolidated Chippewa agency for Minnesota at Cass Lake; Dr. Orin G. Libby, secretary of the State Historical Society of North Dakota; and others.
however, a loose general structure in Algonquin mythology, and in this structure Hiawatha, or Manabozho, or Winabozho, or Nanabozho, or Nanabushu—various names and spellings for the same personage—the wonder-worker, the super-warrior, occupied, with his grandmother, a central position. The number of his exploits and the variety of his appearances were almost limitless; in fact he seems often to have served as a mere point of departure. It is not surprising therefore that a legend purely local, such as this, should be found woven into the Indian concept of Lake Itasca and explanatory, according to the primitive mind, of its origin.

According to other recorded legends Nanabozho was married and had children, one of whom was a daughter. Still other legends represent this daughter as reaching maturity and being sought in marriage in vain by various suitors, followed by her complete disappearance from the earth. Nanabozho is supposed to have had a brother, Chipiapoos, who lost his earth life by drowning at the hands of the manitos and became the warder of the dead and the ruler of the "country of the manes." He is undoubtedly the "Chebiabo" of the Itasca legend. The chief persons in the Schoolcraft story thus appear in much their same characters in other well-authenticated legends of the Ojibway people. It is quite possible therefore to agree with Mr. Matthew W. Stirling, chief of the Bureau of Ethnology of the Smithsonian Institution, in his opinion that the Itasca legend is a "fragmentary story of some event in the life of Nanabozho." The very fantasy of it is characteristic of the Indian imagination at its best.

The fact that the legend was related by Schoolcraft with all his knowledge of Indian lore and his reputation for historic

integrity makes a strong presumption in favor of its authenticity, notwithstanding the circumstance that another and different overlapping legend is related by Lanman. But why did Schoolcraft not relate at one time or another the full legend and give the fair Itasca, or whatever her true name was, her just dues as the presiding genius, or "genia," or goddess of the lake? Was it because he was just a little ashamed of her Latin name or was it because, having yielded at the moment to his poetic fancy, he could not withdraw without embarrassment? Or was it because he just did not choose to tell?

On July 13, 1932, occurs the one-hundredth anniversary of Schoolcraft’s discovery of Lake Itasca. It is to be hoped that some note will be taken of this interesting event and that if there are any public exercises at the lake, they will include proper recognition of the old legend and of the fair Indian maiden whose tears still trickle down to replenish its waters.

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THE ORIGIN AND MEANING OF THE NAME "ITASCA"

The question of the origin and meaning of the name given to the principal body of water lying within the Itasca basin, from which the Mississippi River takes its source, has for many years been one of interest to historical etymologists. The publications of the Minnesota Historical Society contain many references to it and have several times repeated the accepted story of its origin based upon information given by the Reverend William T. Boutwell, a companion of Schoolcraft upon his memorable journey in 1832 to the "true head" of this great river system.

Difference of opinion has existed at various times as to the identity of the real discoverer of the lake now called Itasca. The claims of William Morrison and of Giacamo C. Beltrami, the Italian explorer, have been advanced for this honor; but
in a report presented before the Minnesota Historical Society in 1887 James H. Baker reached the conclusion that Henry Rowe Schoolcraft discovered the headwaters of the Mississippi and that the lake from which the infant river flows was named by him Itasca from the Latin words *veritas* and *caput*, suggested to the discoverer by Boutwell.¹

Boutwell’s account of the time, place, and occasion of his suggestion of the Latin words from which Schoolcraft is said to have coined the new name “Itasca” occurs in letters to Alfred J. Hill and to Julius Chambers dated May 13, 1872, and July 27, 1880, and in the report of an interview by Jacob V. Brower.² Brower further substantiates this statement as to the origin of the word by quoting a communication from the Reverend Jeremiah Porter, who was a member of Schoolcraft’s family at the time of the expedition, and who said that when Schoolcraft, Dr. Douglas Houghton, and Lieutenant James Allen returned to Sault Ste. Marie they told him “how they had named so beautifully the lake from two Latin words.” When the name of the new territory, eventually called Minnesota, was being discussed Boutwell proposed Itasca.³

In Schoolcraft’s own first account of the discovery of the lake, published in 1834, no explanation of the origin or meaning of the name is given; but in a later book, which combines accounts of the Cass expedition of 1820 with that of 1832, published in 1855, the following statement is made with reference to the meaning of the name:


² *Saint Paul Pioneer*, June 16, 1872; Julius Chambers, *The Mississippi River and Its Wonderful Valley*, 112 (New York, 1910); Jacob V. Brower, *The Mississippi River and Its Source*, 145, 147-149 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 7). Brower’s interview with Boutwell occurred a few months before the latter’s death in 1890.

I inquired of Ozawindib the Indian name of this lake; he replied Omushkös, which is the Chippewa name of the Elk. Having previously got an inkling of some of their mythological and necromantic notions of the origin and mutations of the country, which permitted the use of a female name for it, I denominated it Itasca.

This obscure and circumlocutory statement may possibly be elucidated by Schoolcraft’s footnote to the word “Itasca,” which includes his “Stanzas on Reaching the Source of the Mississippi in 1832.” Two lines of the poem referring to the Indian legend follow:

As if, in Indian myths, a truth there could be read,
And these were tears, indeed, by fair Itasca shed.*

The myth to which allusion is here made and from which it might be concluded Schoolcraft derived the name is outlined in a letter of Mrs. Mary H. Eastman to Alfred J. Hill, which was printed in a St. Paul newspaper in June, 1872. It includes the following statement:

Itasca was the daughter of Manabazho, the Spirit God of the Chippewas. In my book of sketches entitled “Eastman’s Aboriginal Portfolio” published by Lippincott, I have an account of the exciting scene of the discovery of the Mississippi and the tradition of Itasca, after whom Mr. Schoolcraft named the lake. The Chippewa guide gave the tradition to Mr. Schoolcraft who gave it to me.

It is a lovely little tradition, and reminds one 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 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 struggle in which the gods took part, Itasca was buried under hills of sand, forming a mound that the Chippewa guide showed to Mr. Schoolcraft as her grave. The rills that flowed from the rocks and sand, forming the lake, were made by the tears of Itasca weeping forever for home and friends—the sorrow produced by the revenge of this terrible (Pluto) Chebiabo.

* Henry R. Schoolcraft, Summary Narrative of an Exploratory Expedition to the Sources of the Mississippi River, 243, 244 (Philadelphia, 1855).
The name and tradition of Itasca are as reliable as any other. It is a subject for a grand poem.

Chambers speaks of "considerable merriment" having been created by this letter, and adds, "What can be thought of the statement that Mr. Schoolcraft is responsible for this yarn?" The evidence in the Schoolcraft poem quoted above, however, seems to remove all possible doubt that Schoolcraft did have in mind a myth similar to the one told by Mrs. Eastman.⁵

Nowhere in Schoolcraft's writings with reference to this matter is there any mention of Boutwell or of the alleged Latin origin of the word. Brower writes:

It is not proposed herein to express any opinion as to what purpose Mr. Schoolcraft had in withholding from the public the manner in which this name was selected, nor to discuss the inference drawn from the record he has left us, in which he plainly intimates that the name was that of a female, mythological, necromantic or otherwise. . . . Certain it is, the word was never heard of or known in Ojibway mythology. "There is no such word nor even any remotely resembling it in the Ojibway language," writes Rev. J. A. Gilfillan, for sixteen years a student of the language.⁶

Recently what seems to be an entirely different explanation by Schoolcraft of the origin of the word has come to light. In one of a series of government reports prepared by the explorer is an article entitled "Names Based on the Indian vocabularies, which are Suggested as Appropriate for New Subdivisions of the Public Domain," which includes the following statement: "I-TAS-CA. From Ia, to be, totoșh, the female breast, or origin, and ka, a terminal subs, inflection." In a footnote Schoolcraft states that "This name has been applied to the lake in which the Mississippi River originates."⁷

⁵ Chambers, Mississippi River, 117. Mrs. Eastman's letter, which is dated May 6, 1872, appears in the Pioneer for June 16, 1872, and is quoted in part by Chambers.

⁶ Brower, Mississippi River, 147.

Here then is another explanation of the origin of this much discussed geographic name, endowed with all the authenticity which usually characterizes a statement of an honored and esteemed public servant. If this statement is to be accepted, the name was created by Schoolcraft out of words or parts of words of Indian origin. It seems strange that this explanation of the origin of the word "Itasca," written by the discoverer of the lake at least seventeen years before Boutwell made his first statement, should at that time and since apparently have gone unnoticed.

It is doubtful that the question of the real origin of this name can be settled. The conflicting evidence, furthermore, cannot be reconciled without sacrificing somewhat the reputation of one or more of the men involved in the discovery of Lake Itasca. The student of history must satisfy himself as best he can by weighing all the evidence and reaching his own conclusions. The evidence of the Reverend Jeremiah Porter is distinctly corroborative of Boutwell's statements. If Schoolcraft himself immediately after his return from the expedition of 1832 ascribed the origin of the name to the Latin words suggested by Boutwell, his later inference of mythological origin and the statement of the coining of the word from Indian etymological sources given above are inexplicable on any basis of fidelity to truth. It must be remembered, however, that Porter, at the time when he wrote to Brower, was a man in whose case advanced age may have added something to the normal fallibility of memory. The weight of testimony seems to favor Boutwell, but the problem must apparently remain one of the unsolved questions of history.

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