

SOME SOURCES FOR NORTHWEST HISTORY

RINDISBACHER'S MINNESOTA WATER COLORS

ONE OF THE EARLIEST and least-known artists of the Minnesota scene was Peter Rindisbacher, a young Swiss of the 1820's. An earlier attempt to evaluate his work mentioned paintings that have survived in Ottawa, Washington, and other places.¹ Most of them are of general western interest, but not primarily of Minnesota origin. It may interest some readers to learn that the eighteen water colors at West Point, mentioned in the earlier article, have now been examined and are found to be practically all representations of Minnesota places and people.

In the summer of 1938 the author called at the library of the United States Military Academy at West Point, where these water colors were reported to be. It turned out that they were in the Ordnance Museum. There every facility was afforded her to examine them and photograph them on color film. Prints from these films are now in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society. Inquiry was made as to the date when the pictures reached the museum or the academy and how they chanced to be there. The earliest reference to them was discovered in a catalogue of 1898. Who presented them or when they were received could not be determined.

The *Catalogue* of the Ordnance Museum of the United States Military Academy, prepared by Lieutenant Colonel Earl McFarland in 1929, lists the paintings as follows: " 'Keoke,' a Distinguished Sac Chief "; "Indian Women in Tent "; "Scene in Indian Tent "; "Fight between Two Indians, One with Lance, the Other with Bow and Arrow "; "Indian Taking Scalp "; "Chippewa Mode of Traveling in

¹ See Grace Lee Nute, "Peter Rindisbacher, Artist," *ante*, 14: 283-287.

the Spring and Summer"; "Chippewa Mode of Traveling in Winter"; "Trout Fall Portage in the Hudson Bay Country"; "Chippewa Canoe"; "Indian War Dance"; "Winnebago War Dance"; "An Indian Chief in War Dress, Mounted"; "The Murder of David Tully and Family by the Sissatoons, a Sioux Tribe"; "Chippeway Scalp Dance"; "Drunken Frolick amongst the Chippeways and Assineboins"; "The Bison Attacked by the Dog Trains"; "Mode of Chasing the Bison by the Assiniboins, a Sioux Tribe, Snow Shoes"; and "Indians Hunting the Bison." Three of these paintings are known to have been published. One reproduction is the lithograph entitled, "Sioux Warrior Charging," which appears in the *American Turf Register and Sporting Magazine* for October, 1829, and which is reproduced with the article in MINNESOTA HISTORY for September, 1933.²

The view of "Indians Hunting the Bison" appears in color as the frontispiece of the second volume of Thomas L. McKenney and James Hall's *Indian Tribes of North America* (Edinburgh, 1934). In the "Notes" at the end of the section based on this reproduction, on pages 6 and 7, is an interesting discussion of Rindisbacher and his work, with the suggestion that probably at one time much of the Rindisbacher collection was in Philadelphia. It also refers to duplicates of paintings that are to be noted in the several extant groups of his productions. The "Indian War Dance" appears as the frontispiece of volume 1 of the same work, where it is entitled "War Dance of the Sauks and Foxes." A detailed description of the dance is supplied by Caleb Atwater, a prominent Wisconsin pioneer. On page 2, Rindisbacher is mentioned and a footnote purports to correct the title, explaining that the painting represents a war dance of the Winnebago. On the same page the author evaluates the

² The date of the *American Turf Register* is given erroneously as October, 1929, in the caption of the illustration appearing *ante*, 14:286. Rindisbacher's "American Hunter's Camp," which is reproduced in the *American Turf Register*, 11:493 (October, 1840), is not mentioned in the author's earlier article on this artist and his work.

water color: "This drawing is considered as one of his best efforts, and is valuable not so much as a specimen of art, in which respect it is in some particulars defective, as on account of the correct impression which it conveys of the scene intended to be represented. It was drawn on the spot as the scene was actually exhibited. The actors are persons of some note, and the faces are faithful likenesses." Atwater's remarks make it clear that the first title was correct, for he shows that the well-known Sauk and Fox warriors, Keokuk, Morgan, and Tiahma, are represented in the picture. A footnote on page 4 indicates that there are two other forms of this picture in existence: an oil painting in Washington, owned by Fred B. M'Guire, and a lithograph in Charles Augustus Murray's *Travels in North America during 1834, 1835, and 1836* (London, 1839).

It is possible to date at least roughly these eighteen paintings, which seem to be a group executed at one period, by an episode depicted in one of them. In 1823 a Swiss family by the name of Tully left the Red River settlements for the United States by way of Fort Snelling. En route David Tully, his wife, and their infant daughter were killed by a party of Sioux, and their two boys, John and Andrew, were taken captive. The most vivid of the eighteen pictures, "The Murder of David Tully and Family by the Sissatons," represents the Indians about to kill their unfortunate victims. So detailed is the picture that one is led to the conclusion that Rindisbacher witnessed what he depicted, or had very recent evidence from which to work. The aftermath of the murder is well known through the manuscript reminiscences of Henry Snelling, a playmate of John Tully.³ The latter and his brother were rescued by troops sent out from Fort Snelling. Snelling, a son of the commanding officer of the fort, gives a detailed account of the whole affair,

³ These reminiscences are preserved in the Ayer Collection of the Newberry Library, Chicago. The Minnesota Historical Society has a photostatic copy of the first volume, which covers the Minnesota portion of Snelling's life.

but makes no mention of Rindisbacher. It is likely that Rindisbacher's eighteen pictures were secured at this time by an officer at Fort Snelling, Fort Crawford, or another post on the Mississippi-Missouri River frontier. The fact that Keokuk and Winnebago Indians are the subjects of at least three pictures suggests that Rindisbacher parted with the pictures at Fort Crawford.

In the author's opinion these eighteen items surpass in workmanship, color, and general significance the other Rindisbacher items that she has seen. Their faithfulness to reality makes them of great value for the historian of Minnesota, particularly as all relate to Minnesota or adjacent territory. The Indians look like Indians, not like a poet's conception of the "noble red man." Rindisbacher was particularly interested in transportation methods in the Indian country, and he shows in his paintings the use of dog trains, travois, canoes, snowshoes, Indian ponies, carioles, and even a Red River cart. Probably there are no other faithful, graphic representations of these vehicles at such an early date. Family life among the Chippewa must have appealed to the artist, for at least seven of the paintings depict families, in canoes, traveling with their dogs, at a portage, in tepees, where a pleasing domesticity prevails in the midst of hearth and calumet smoke, participating in a drunken frolic, and in or near the two main types of Chippewa dwellings. The colors are soft, well blended, and admirably preserved.

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