

A Winter in the St. Croix Valley, 1802-03

Edited by Richard Bardon, M.D., and Grace Lee Nute

THE SECOND installment of George Nelson's reminiscent narrative, recording his experiences as a fur trader for the X Y Company in the vicinity of Yellow Lake, Wisconsin, during the season of 1802-03, is presented herewith. The first section, with an introduction by the editors of the document, appears in the March number of this magazine, ante, p. 1-14. In it Nelson tells of entering the fur trade at Montreal and of his voyage with a brigade by way of the Great Lakes to Grand Portage in the autumn of 1802. The present installment carries the trader to his company's winter quarters, and describes life in and about the wilderness post. Ed.

The next day (I do not remember the date, in June) we reached the, to the inhabitants of Canada; the far famed, "Grand Portage." It is located, about the middle, of a bay, with a very handsome island before, the only *obstruction* to an immense & boundless view. The establishment of the N. W. C^o, tho' there was nothing superfluous or unnecessary, but was of an extent to prove at once the great trade they carried on, their judgement & taste in the regularity & position of their numerous buildings. The neatness & order of things was not [the] least part of it.

Our company had a few buildings, a few hundred yards to the East of the N. W C^o *below* the hill; but were busy building a very fine "fort" upon the hill.¹⁶

We were here several days before any one arrived either from Montreal or from the interior of the Country. I was placed in one

¹⁶The X Y Company's post at Grand Portage is described in Grace Lee Nute's "A British Legal Case and Old Grand Portage," ante, 21:117-148. A replica of the North West Company's stockade and post at Grand Portage was erected on the original site in 1938-40. See ante, 21:206. This part of Nelson's reminiscences is very valuable to the historian and the archaeologist because the exact sites and relationships of some of the numerous posts at Grand Portage, despite detailed research and extensive excavations, have never been clear.

of the Stores to Serve the people. At last they began to come in, all was business. Receiving Goods, corn, flour, pork &c &c from Montreal & Mackinac, & furs from the different wintering posts—Gambling, feasting, dancing, drinking & fighting. After a couple of weeks to rest, for the Winterers to give in their returns & accounts, & to make up their outfits, they began to return again, to run over the same ground, toils, labors, and dangers.

But in this country too, where every step was beset with difficulties of themselves sufficient to exert every faculty & try the nerve, even here, the Demon of Ambition followed us, blinded our better judgement, & sharpened our wits only to oppose, annoy & injure each other. One of our brigades, fitted out I believe, for Fort des Prairies, slept as usual at Portage la Perdrix, only a few hundred yards from our Stores at the north end of the Grand portage,¹⁷ where they feasted & got drunk upon the "régale" that was always given them when they arrived from, or departed for, their winter quarters. When they arose the next morning they found thirty Kegs of High Wines (containing 9 Galls. ea.) had all run out! Upon examination it was found they had been bored with two gimlets holes each! The consternation & injury this occasioned may be imagined. Enquiries were set on foot & affidavits given in. No bible was to be found to swear upon. I lent mine, for the purpose, but never saw it after though I enquired diligently. These were called *witty tricks*. Rumor gave out that it was Benjamin Frobisher & [blank in MS] who bored the Kegs.¹⁸ It created an excessive bad feeling & led to retaliations some of which would have ended tragically but for providence, but nothing further ever followed.

I was the last that left, of the "Winterers." There two Canoes

¹⁷ Fort des Prairies was a post on the Saskatchewan River. See Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 98n. Portage la Perdrix is still called Partridge Portage. It is near the site of old Fort Charlotte at the western end of the Grand Portage, where the X Y Company also had a fort. See Grace Lee Nute, "Posts in the Minnesota Fur-Trading Area, 1660-1855," *ante*, 11:358.

¹⁸ Benjamin Frobisher was the son of one of the most famous of the Nor'westers, Joseph Frobisher, and was himself in the service of the North West Company from 1799 to 1804 as well as for several years prior to his untimely death in 1819 during the bitter struggle between his own company and the Hudson's Bay Company. For both Frobishers see Wallace, *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, 446.

fitted out, one to supply "Leach Lake" where M^r [John] M^cBean had charge.¹⁹ The other, to the "Folle avoine."²⁰ In these two Canoes were three men, W^m Smith, Frs: Savoyard & Pre: Sanfacon who had only this year left the N. W. Cos. Service.²¹ As it was a "maxim" carefully impressed upon all of us, indirectly indeed, but so as not to be misunderstood, to do all we could to get *returns & oppose* our neighbors, no means were to trivial, nor method too base?—Yes! I say *base*, so that we could succeed. This occasion then, of these 3 men was too good a one to be let pass without a trial. M^r Duncan M^cGillivray one of the Agents of the N. W. C^o walked round the Canoes the men were arranging,—a quarrel ensued. We were at dinner. The men came running up saying M^r M^cGillivray was going to carry off the men by main force. "The Knight" ran down, we all followed. And no small affair it was, all in words, menaces & gestures indeed, but those are often the fore-runners of blood. We at last embarked fully determined to defend ourselves, fight, & kill, if driven too it; & armed for the purpose. M^r M^cGillivray got into a boat with a *couple* of men, he hailed their vessel that was then anchored in the bay,—the Captain sent out the Jolly boat, But they at last gave up the chace, assuring us however, that they would come upon us at *night*; and for several days we were in great fear. As yet, such things were new to me:—the men dreaded it, & I tho't they were right.

It was of a Wednesday, the 13th Sept^r 1802, I was shipped off on board a Canoe, with Three men, to winter & trade amongst a tribe of indians remarkable for their courage, being at perpetual war with the Sioux, insolence & brutality. It was an "adventure"; in the "Invoice" it was merely said "Invoice of Goods sent to Folle-avoine"! Smith said *he* had the Charge; Savoyard main-

¹⁹ The Leech Lake fort, on the large lake of that name near the source of the Mississippi River, was an important post in Nelson's day. McBean is mentioned in Curot's diary, in *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 20:398.

²⁰ "Folle Avoine" was a term used to designate the region about the upper stretches of the St. Croix River. The Indians of that region were often termed the Folle Avoine Saulteurs. See *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 20:396n.

²¹ Smith's first name, which is given correctly here, is through an error of translation given as Gardant Smith in *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 20:399n. See the same volume, pages 396 and 397, for mention of Toussaint Savoyard, who may or may not be the man who was with Nelson.

tained it was he and this was the cause of interminable quarrels the whole year.

We were, the above W^m Smith, the Son of an old Scotch Soldier with a canadian woman. Frs Savoyard, & Jos: Boisverd.²² The two first had been about 14 years among the indians; Boisverd, this was his second year!

On the 15th Smith shot a duck. I was very glad, because I was already tired of corn; for *they* had "made no allowances" for me. But when I saw the manner he was dressing it! He plucked, Singed, scraped off the ashes that had adhered to the bird in singeing it on the coals, pulled out a few of the longest of the *stumps*, split it open, & *threw* it into kettle, wherein the *indian corn*, for our supper, was boiling. He did not even rinse it in the lake. This procedure shocked me terribly. He then broiled the entrails of the duck on the coals & eat them himself! "O, what a barbarian! what a hog! Am I to become like that! — is it for this I have left my father's house, the affectionate care of the *best* of mothers, deprived of the society of my brothers & sisters!" — My heart swelled almost to bursting point with disgust, indignation, horror & grief. "But *I* shall *not* remain long here. I will save my earnings, return to the "civilized"(!) world, buy a farm & pass my life quietly & comfortably." How easily is the mind consoled & the heart relieved, with reflections that are not, can never be realized, very often from the influence of the very cause that gave rise to them! Alas! poor human nature! The duck was soon cooked, for in those countries "all things are pretty much of a piece." Smith offered me a very reasonable share, — I refused, thanking him; he rightly guessed the cause, "What? said he, because forsooth I did not wash it! oh, lah! — that squeamishness of yours will soon vanish. Why did you remain hooked to your mothers apron?" This, accompanied with many oaths & ribaldry, called wit there, only served to increase my pain & cause me more to feel my wretchedness.

A few days after, we came to a place where were two families

²² Joseph Boisverd was with Curot for the winter of 1803-04 at the Yellow River post. See *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 20:397.

of indians. They had killed a moose dear & the men went out with them to help carrying it home. They at last returned, cooked some & we sat down to eat. I found it excellent though it had only been *passed* thro' the water. But, at this spot, the beach happened to be covered with those round, flat greyish stones, bearing a striking resemblance to Sea biscuit. I took up one as a biscuit & gave it a bite!—I was woefully, but effectually undeceived:—I made no more such mistakes.

Finding the people were rather a long time absent, I took their "road." "It is a good road, but as you are not accustomed to these things yet, you had perhaps better not go." However, I went. The road was *discoverable* by the falling leaves being "here & there" disturbed, from the feet hooking into a root or rotten stick, *turning them up* & every 2 or 300 yards a branch broken. I made out however to follow it well for perhaps half or $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile; but lest I might get astray, I thought it most prudent to return. Such are Indian roads, & many hundred miles have I travelled upon them, with no other indications; but custom & a little attention to the *course* or direction of the route, render travelling upon them, comparatively sure. We at last reached "Fon du Lac," i. e. the furthest extremity, West end of the lake.²³ Here it is about six miles broad: the northern shore rocky, the mountains constantly near the beach; on the South, the mountains were much farther off, the shore flat & Sandy. The river S^t Louis which is properly speaking the Source of the S^t Lawrence, enters at the South side of the lake, takes an immediate bend, and follows the lake to the North Shore, leaving a narrow strip very much like an ox's tongue, tapering so gradually & so very regularly.²⁴ This Strip of land is beautifully studded with the handsomest red & white pine trees, in all the magnificence & grandeur of unpolluted nature. I was mightily charmed with the view, & it is one of those that has rivetted itself most firmly in my mind.

²³ The term Fond du Lac, as used here by Nelson, must be distinguished from a later settlement of the same name, which is now a suburb of Duluth. The older term was much more comprehensive, including the areas now occupied by Superior, Wisconsin, and Duluth and Fond du Lac, Minnesota, as well as some adjacent territory.

²⁴ Minnesota Point is the "ox's tongue." It extends into the bay from Duluth.

The River is about a mile wide. The western side is a Swamp. The N. West C^o had a trading post here: we had none.²⁵

There were one or two indian families on this strip of land and though they were a considerable distance from us, I was terribly uneasy at night; *for our men said* they were great rascals, bad indians. I was very much afraid: this was the 2^d chapter of my fears. The men slept round the goods, lest the indians might have been employed by the N. W Co to "play off some trick" upon us, and the boring of our Kegs at the *Partridge & Duncan M^cGillivrays* threats at our departure from the "Grand portage," with a multitude of other similar gentilities were all fresh in our mind.

I *barricaded* my tent & secured myself the best I could. I was surely in great dread. How "home," at this great distance, reflected beautiful thoughts in my mind! I was young,—had not been instructed *how to think*, nor how to apply the Scanty education I had—my thoughts were vague & confused. I could only think of my father, my mother, my brothers & sisters; their Security, peace & comforts; my duty to my creator again called upon him to defend & protect me: shivering with apprehensions, at last fell asleep. In the morning, all was right; nothing, even the indians, had not been near us.

In the afternoon we reached "Riviere Brulée" which we were to take to get to our "Wintering Grounds."²⁶ It is Seven leagues east of "fon du lac," Small but deep & takes its rise in a small lake or Swampy pond, nearly in a direct South direction. It is also the Source of the S^{te} Croix river, falling into the Mississippi a little above the "Falls of S^t Anthony."²⁷ They both (the S^{te} Croix &

²⁵ The Fond du Lac post of the North West Company was nearly ten years old when Nelson was there. A trader named Dufaut of that company had a wintering house there, probably on the site of Superior, when Jean Baptiste Perrault passed in 1784. In 1793, when Perrault went to "fond du Lac with 10 men in order to build there a fort which would be a depot for the fond du Lac region," he established Fort St. Louis on Minnesota Point. See Jean Baptiste Perrault, "Narrative of the Travels and Adventures of a Merchant Voyageur," in *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, 37:519, 568.

²⁶ Brule River is the uneuphonious modern corruption of this famous stream's original French name. Famed in modern days for its trout and for the homes of wealthy summer residents, it was equally renowned among fur traders as a major canoe route of the continent.

²⁷ The author is, of course, in error here. The St. Croix enters the Mississippi some miles below the Falls of St. Anthony.

Brulé) take their rise in this Small lake, & the men told me that the indians with Small canoes, paddle in, and out of it, as some others I have known.²⁸

We here found an old indian with his wife & Son. He told us that the N. W. people had passed up long since & had no doubt bought up all the wild rice &c. He was employed to make us a canoe, to lighten the one we had, on account of the shallow waters above.

Two things here Surprised my inexperienced mind a great deal. Smith had bro't him a lancet, for which he seemed extremely thankful. To try it, he bound up his arm & made the puncture—after allowing it to bleed freely for a little while, on the ground he removed the bandage, took a leaf, moistened it with his saliva[,] applied to the orifice & resumed his work. I wondered & wondered at such Simplicity.—The other thing was, his Son had Killed a crow, they plucked, cooked & ate it! —“Carrion, barbarians, to eat carrion!” I thought it horrid.

At last our Canoe was ready; we took a reasonable proportion of the lading & pushed off, Savoyard & Boisverd in the “big” canoe, Smith & I in the other. I steered! but such zig zags! how many times I crossed & recrossed the river! Smith, with all his petulance & irascibility, was certainly very patient & indulgent.

On our way up this river, one evening, they gave the old man rum. They all three enjoyed it very quietly & comfortably together untill next morning, when some words ensued, the Son, a chap about my own age, fell upon his mother & beat her, striking with his fist & Kicking her in the face & body! How I was astonished! a Son striking his mother! *kicking* her in the face & body!!! I was enraged, & finding the men, nor even the father would interfere, I was proceeding to give him a Sound drubbing But the men would not allow me; “for if you do they will all three get upon you: besides, it is among themselves— we dare not interfere.” I tho't it an excessively hard and disgraceful act. I had an aversion to the wretch ever after & could not bear the sight of him. We

²⁸ The two rivers have their sources in a swampy area close to each other, but certainly not in the same “lake.”

soon, however, Separated & I never Saw him after. Surely, thought I, the curse of God will fall on these people.

We soon got to the "Portage S^{te} Croix," about half a mile long, on a fine dry rising ground well wooded with beautiful pine. Here we left Savoyard & Boisverd to go in search of the indians & collect what we could of rice from them. At the South end of the Portage is a handsome lake, between 2 & 3 miles circumference, & at very short distance from the one where the river takes its rise.²⁹ The Portage is, I dare say 100 miles from the lake (Superior) & 80, or 90, from the Mississipi where it discharges itself.

We soon entered into the S^{te} Croix & glided gently down its placid bosom, but little obstructed with rapids. I do not remember if we were two or 3 days. But we arrived in the afternoon opposite the mouth of the "Riviere Jaune," where we landed [on] a most beautiful island.³⁰

The indians, the moment they saw us gave the whoop. They were all drunk, the N. W. Co. had a little before given liquor. They came rushing upon us like devils, dragged our Canoe to land, threw the lading ashore, ripped up the bale cloths, cut the cords & Sprinkled the goods about at a fine rate. Such a noise, yelling & chattering! "Rum, Rum, what are you come to do here without rum?" — after a while, when they saw we had no rum, they gradually dispersed. A few of the more quite [*sic*] remained; they entered into friendly intercourse with Smith whom they knew for many years; & it is but bare justice to say that he acquitted himself like a man, both as regards prudence & courage on this critical and trying occasion. It was enough to test the nerve of any man. I soon became the object of their attention. They gathered round me, spoke kindly, laughed with me & tapped me friendly on the Shoulders & head. But I understood nothing of what they said. Smith done all the needful in this business for me. I never felt the least fear, as if the bouts I had experienced at

²⁹ This is Upper Lake St. Croix. Solon Springs, Wisconsin, is on its shores.

³⁰ Rivière Jaune becomes Yellow River on modern maps. There, at the junction with the St. Croix, is an Indian hamlet to this day, overlooking the "most beautiful" island and at the foot of a hill topped with Indian mounds. Danbury, Wisconsin, is the closest town, some eight miles to the south.

the Long Sault & the last night in *Fon du lac*, had been "for all time to come," and indeed I did quake, and shake and tremble enough on those two occasions. On my side, though I was not fit to make any philosophical remarks nor draw deductions from what I did see, yet their appearance, manners & ways, struck me powerfully. They were the first I had seen in numbers & at their homes. Men of the common Stature, most of them besmeared (painted) black, with bruised charcoal & grease, being most of them in mourning for some of their relations, killed the year before in a drunken quarrel on this very spot. There were five killed out-right & six very severely & dangerously wounded, with knives, only with a Capot & brich clout on, their Tommyhaw-pipes & k[n]ives in their hands. They look fierce, & were so. Strait as arrows, their motions & their eyes showed plainly, how frequently these faculties must have been bro't to the test.

Savoyard came the next day. We had to make our presents of liquor also. Singing, dancing, & yelling, & fighting too; but no stabbing,—they had had enough of it the year before, and besides, the worst of them were off for River au Serpent, some distance below.³¹ But I got tired of it. I felt I wanted something. I resorted to my Prayer book, & by chance fell upon the 120th psalm—"Woe is me, indeed! that I am constrained to dwell with Mesheck & have my habitation among the tents of Kedar!" I thought this wonderfully appropriate to my present situation; "it was my lot, but I must not despond" for there seemed to me as a ray of promise that I was not altogether "cast off." This, & some of the 119th afforded me great comfort. I became more naturalized and gradually, (in the course of years) I became quite reconciled. The indians took great pity upon me. One of them adopted me as his Son, & told his own Son, a lad of about my age, to consider me as his Brother & to treat me so, and he did indeed the very few times we happened to meet after this.

We remained here three or four days, getting what little rice

³¹ Snake River is the modern rendition of Rivière au Serpent of the French explorers and voyageurs. It enters the St. Croix from the Minnesota side not many miles below the mouth of the Yellow River.

we could from them & giving out our "fall credits." We at last set off & went up the "Yellow river" being one continued rapid, for six or Seven miles. We encamped on a very handsome lake.³² We passed the N. W. people at their encampment. They had some deer meat hanging upon the trees. It looked so much like mutton I longed for some—it also gave me a longing for *home*. The next day we encamped on a beautiful low point on the border of "Yellow Lake." The indian name is "Yellow water lake" from the yellow sand in the bottom. It is quite round, about 2, or 2½ miles diameter. At the S. E. side it is flat & miry; & an immense quantity of rice grows there; and in their Season, ducks of various Sorts, Geese & Swans in multitudes. There is also plenty of fish, Carp of several sorts, some of monstrous size, pikeral, pike, &c. &c.

Their method of *making* the rice is this. Two persons get into a canoe, setting face to face; they each have two sticks of about 4 feet long. The one behind thrusts his sticks one on each side into the standing rice, & bend it over into the canoe, the other one with his two sticks beats it off. They soon fill a canoe, & carry it to land, where others place it on a rack exactly similar to those our habitants use for their flax. When it is sufficiently heated it is put in a skin, a hole about the size of a half bushel being made in the ground, where another one treads off the husks—it is then fanned out in a bark dish. Some families I have been told make as much as 40 & even 50 bushels in some seasons, and I do believe it. They also roast some in old copper Kettles, as they take it out of the Canoe, & then tread & fan it. This is eaten so, or melting grease till *very* hot, the rice thrown in & stirred smartly, swells & bursts; becomes very crisp & is very good; but it requires teeth & good gums, for there are always many grains that only harden, not getting enough of the grease, & these frequently plant themselves in the gums & make them bleed.

The allowance is one quart, with two ounces of grease, (when

³² Yellow Lake in Burnett County, Wisconsin, empties into the St. Croix through a twisting river that widens in spots into so-called lakes. It is obvious from later entries that the North West Company post, sixty yards from its rival, was located between the first and second "lakes," a half mile from the "beautiful low point on the border of 'Yellow Lake,'" to quote Nelson in the same paragraph.

we have it) to season it, to each man. It is pleasant & good, but is not very nourishing, I should have said strengthening. When boiled very leisurely, between three & four hours, so slowly as not to replenishing with water, it has a strong resemblance to boiled milk. The grain resembles the rye but much longer.

We remained here several days before they could decide upon the place where to build; for, where the wood or locality suited, there was no clay, & we required this article to build our chimneys & plaster our houses. At last they fixed upon a place, in a "pinery" on a beautiful small river below us, about half a mile. While here, I got a great diarrhea. The men said it was from eating meat without bread; all new hands were thus attacked; but it would wear off. Indeed it had to "wear off," for we had not particle of any discription of medicine with us: neither tea nor Sugar; & the little flour we had was nearly all consumed. The Company certainly treated me very ill. add to this, we had several days of rain & the ground was low & wet. The poor fellows felt uneasy. After a few days, thank God, I recovered.

At long last, we proceeded to our winter quarters & began to build, the N. W. about 60 yards from us. Here, as the Sioux [came] every Spring in war excursions, we had several proposals from the N. W. to build nearer to them, so that we might assist each other in case of being attacked. The arguments they gave were good & Sound; but we were traders "consequently opponents" This being our first year, strangers & weak, no indian could come to us that was not more or less indebted to them virtually or impliedly, they would not therefore dare to deal with [us] in the presence of their old traders & friends: and we could not steal out to go after the indians. Besides we were afraid of incurring blame from our employers. So there the matter rested, & each built his own way.

We did not make *palaces*,—ours was about 16 or 18 feet long, made thus:—We build up the two sides, to the height required, say five & a half, or perhaps six feet. These are secured by two stakes at each end, as a common rail fence, & braced by a good strong stick, the whole breadth of the house, & notched at each

end, to lay on the two sides, to prevent their moving. Then two trenches wherein to plant or set the *ends* upright, & of the same size as the sides. Two strong posts in the middle, to receive a ridge pole, two & a half or 3 feet higher than the sides, so that the roof, which consists of straight poles or split slabs, when the timber admits, may have sufficient slope for the water to run off. An opening is left at one end; that part *below* the cross stick or beam, for a *door*, & that *above* for a *window*. The ends, being upright are secured by a pole, bound with good strong withs, to prevent their falling. The whole is well plastered, the *Shop* only out-side, as some of it will fall & dirty our furs or spoil our grease, meat, &c. but the house is plastered on both sides, inside & out. The joints between the roofing is also plastered; carefully covered about a foot thick with grass which we cut with our knives, & four or five inches of ground thrown on to prevent its being blown off, also as a preservative against the fire. The window is made of the thinnest parchment skin we can procure. The chimney in one side of the house, part of stone, when handy, but most commonly of earth made into mortar & wrapped in grass. The doors of slabs, split with the axe & then Squared down. The floors, when good wood to rive, cannot be had, is squared from trees & then dubbed off with an adze, when we have one, if none, then with the hoe, which we sharpen with the files, for we cannot take in grind stones. Our beds, two posts, at the head & foot with a stick fixed one in the post & the other in an auger hole (when we happen to have such article) or forced into one of the chinks of the house. The door is secured by a wooden latch, & a leather thong to raise it from the outside. Thus the house is finished, & surely simple enough it is. The wood is cut about 2½ feet long, & set upright in the chimney, it burns much better & gives more heat. Tho' thus roughly & rudely constructed, we soon get accustomed, & when we have enough to eat we feel comfortable; for, here as every where else, we live in anticipation of better times & never, at least very few of us know to enjoy what we possess. When the indians come in we give them a few beaver or bear skins & they ly on the floor.

From the simplicity of the construction, & the season of the year, we always haste to put ourselves under Shelter. The N W C^o also soon finished theirs, which they surrounded with stockades, about ten feet out of ground, with two Bastions, loop holes &c. in case of an attack from the Sioux, whose visit we had more than ordinary reasons to apprehend.

We had two widows, one very old, to pass the winter by us in a wretched hut. They had two daughters & two boys, between 12 & 14 years of age. I [was] surprised to remark the boys frequently with black faces, upon enquiring, I found they were *fasting*. They sometimes *dreamed* of their departed friends, — “on those occasions, when they awake in the morning, they bruise soft charcoal in their hands, with which they rub their faces so as not to leave one spot of the natural color, take their guns or bow & arrows & go into the woods a hunting, and to mourn & weep where they may not be seen nor heard.” They return at even & eat *after* Sun Set! The old woman would frequently go out to the foot of the hill some distance off, & weep & mourn & moan, addressing her departed husband & friends in accents & a tone of voice not to be misunderstood even by me, young, thoughtless & boistrous as I was.

What is this? is it Barbarism? if so, what signify the “Irish Wakes”? our own wailings on the departure of those dear to us? after a few months, & not unfrequently only some days, & we return to the busy occupations of life, & finally become quite reconciled & oblivious:—here, children after several years, go into the woods & bewail their departed friends in quiet & solitude, fasting the whole day. And [sic] old woman, many years after the melancholy events, goes & hides herself at the foot of a tree & holds a “talk” with them; complaining of her bereavement & asking forgiveness if she had ever injured, offended, or hurt their feelings! On their return, they would generally be cheerful, as if it had not been them who but a moment before were making such wailing, or, as if they had just been pouring off *all* their grief! I have very often witnessed such scenes: I was very young & reckless, but being a *Christian*, & *civilized*, these superstitious barbarities were beneath the attention of my superior knowledge; but they have left an

indelible impression, which, with my years increases & furnish subject for reflection.

We had frequent visits from our indians, & though they bro't in but little to *us*, we had always to give them liquor, so that at one time we had perpetual drunken songs & noise for, I think, it was ten days. On one of these occasions, two young men of 20 to 22 years of age, plotted to kill *us* all. I mean we four. The widows put us on our guard. Laprairie, the master at the N. W. C^o house also warned us, and one night he overheard them say—"we will watch at the door, & when one comes we will shoot *him*, the report will cause another or perhaps all to rush out to see, we will shoot them also & rush in & dispatch the rest."⁸⁸ Laprairie called out to them "and have you forgotten that I shoot deer running thro' the woods? touch them if you dare & I will shoot you like dogs as you are." Finding they were discovered they dropped the idea, pretended to be *very drunk*; & coming to sleep at the house as they usually did, Smith scolded them very much, took their k[n]ives from them & gave them to me to put by. Laprairie had secured their guns. They slept upon the floor. I also slept after sometime. In the morning they asked for their knives, & returned they [*sic*] very reluctantly, & after jabbering a good deal in french at them, which they no more understood than I did the indian; & I saw with indignation & wrath, seeing Smith did not keep the promise he had made the night before—"to give them a sound whailing." But Smith was experienced & prudent—I was without discer[n]ment, boistrous & very foolish.

We could never divine the reason why they wanted to murder us; for we had always been extremely kind to them. Had this occurred in the "North," where, not a few of the white have no such "qualms of conscience" *every soul of us would have been murdered*. I say this wittingly; for I there saw too much, & heard too much to have the least shadow of a doubt. But here, *opposition* was carried on in a more rational manner; the traders had always indeed had separate interests, & the turbulent & warlike character

⁸⁸ Laprairie's first name has not been found, though references to him occur frequently in Nelson's reminiscences and Curot's diary.

of these indians who were still very numerous, proud, haughty & fierce, often compelled them, (the traders) to unite for their mutual safety: hence they were vastly more sociable & humane. But in the "North," it was "neck or nothing." *They* did not "stickle at trifles." In the course of this Journal, it will be too often sadly proved, & if I am permitted (with health & leisure) I will assign some of the causes.

We saw these indians once or twice after, but they were quite altered. One evening, after this, we heard an owl oooing in the woods, his notes & tones were so different from the others that we feared it might be a Scouter of the Scioux giving information of his "whereabouts" to some of his friends. These two chaps went off to see—they were with us, & tho' we kept a strict look as we thought, they *disappeared*, & shortly after we heard a Shot and one crying out "there dog, go, & make your noise elsewhere." It was indeed an owl, perched in a lofty pine tree. He flew off.

Some time about the latter end of October I went out with Boisverd & one of the indian lads to two families four or five miles off, towards the Mississipi. I was surprised to find them in a dense cedar Swamp, so that it was with difficulty we got to them. At other times they would have encamped on a beautiful spot, quite near them; but the apprehension they were in of the Sioux induced them to select this spot. They gave us what little they had & bid us be off immediately "for the men have discovered suspicious appearances." We accordingly returned, being very late in the day we had to sleep upon the ground under some pines in a beautiful dry spot: the heavens for a blanket & the earth for a bed. We were excessively thirsty & no water to be had. In the night, I dreamed it was raining & I thought I opened my mouth to receive the little that might fall in. I thought I did catch a very [few] drops, & I awoke quite refreshed. The next morning we got home for breakfast.

After this, about the middle of November, Smith took me with him "en derouine," up "Rivier la Chaudiere," a river several leagues from the place where we found the indians last fall (See p 21)

falling in the S: Croix from the N. W. side.⁸⁴ The next day we found the indians, Two or three "lodges." The men were out a hunting & returned towards evening. They were all highly pleased to see us. They had some furs & plenty of meat. They cooked a large Kettle full for us & helped us generously but Smith eat very little being disgusted with the woman. One of her children had a "looseness," & the little black devil was running about the lodge squatting out yellow stuff like mustard; she scolded & laying the bratt on her lap opened the *cheeks* & with the back of her knife Scraped off the Stuff, scolded him again for a dirty little dog, wiped her knife upon the brush, scooped water with her right hand out of the Kettle in which our meat was, to wash both, & finished cutting up, with the same knife, a piece of beautiful fat meat, as a relish to what she had put on before. I was sadly disappointed, for I was hungry & always had a very strong appetite. I kept my eyes upon her during the whole performance, which certainly was dirty enough. But the knife was *cleaned*. There was nothing on her hands. We gave them rum; — they got drunk, sang, danced, quarreled & fought; trampling, treading, & falling upon me in their Scuffles. I was annoyed, but "my brother," who happened to be there with his father was very Kind indeed to me; as well as the others. At last, after a great deal of talking, which neither of us could understand, they made room for me to lye down. I soon fell into a sound sleep; & tho' awoke several times in the night by their falling upon me in their scuffles & in their dances tripping up each other, yet I awoke in the morning quite refres[h]ed. We took our breakfast, & re-embarking in our canoe, we returned.

The weather, the day before, was very cold & Snowy. There was ice in many places, & it formed also on our paddles; But this day it was more pleasant.

⁸⁴ *En derouine* was a *voyageur's* expression, meaning that the traders visited the Indians instead of letting them take their furs to the fort or trading post. Rivière la Chaudière is Kettle River, a beautiful stream rising in Carlton County almost on a parallel with the western end of Lake Superior. It empties into the St. Croix a little above the mouth of Snake River, after passing through an interesting gorge and forming many rapids. Nelson's reference, "See p 21," is to the portion of his manuscript in which he describes the meeting of the white men with the Indians at the mouth of the Yellow River; it is printed *ante*, p. 149.

When we had reached a certain part of the S^{te} Croix, on our return, Smith proposed we should leave our Canoe & cut thro' the angle to the house which he said was not above 6 or 7 miles distant.³⁵ "If you are Sure you will not lose yourself I am willing enough. We accordingly carried our canoe into the woods, bundled up our things & off we went. He was a Smart walker, but extremely impatient & rough, as he complained a great deal of the weight of his load & his [gun], tho' I had one too, & within a few pounds my load was as heavy as his, to pacify him, I took his gun too, which was extremely cumbersome. But the country was level & but little "under brush." The Sun shone beautifully. We halted two or three times after long walks, to rest a little; finally as it was getting dark, we had to encamp. We were lost! We had nothing to eat, for the little meat we had we left at the canoe: "it is not worth while to embarrass ourselves with it, as we would soon 'get home."

The next morning we awoke with four or five inches of Snow upon the ground, & of course a good share on our blankets. We shook it off, bundled up & away we went. Shortly after we fell upon a low grassy flat, through which meandered a fine little brook covered with ice and Snow. In true military "neck or nothing" style we plunged in, nearly up to our breasts, Scrambled up the opposite bank, & walked on. After about an hour, we fell upon two tracks *quite fresh!* we followed Smartly to *overtake* them. In a few minutes we came to our fire we had so lately left! Smith was furious. Off we set again, & at furthest half an hour after we again came to our fire! Smith was humbled. "Stay here, and wait for me, said he. I will go out in an other [direction] "see if I can fall upon anything whereby I may recognise our position."

I was so extremely Simple that the serious predicament we were in never once struck me! Smith being gone sometime longer than I anticipated, I then *did* begin to think. Of the many distressing cases where sometimes poor creatures had to draw lots. Others

³⁵ Tradition in the vicinity of Danbury, Wisconsin, tells of a Sioux trail between the St. Croix and Yellow Lake, which began below the present Danbury bridge. This would have been about where Smith and Nelson apparently left the river.

expiring of hunger only a few hundred yards from home where they had lingered for days not knowing where they were. Some imputing their misfortunes to each other destroyed themselves in their rage. Some too, possessed with an evil spirit, would leave a weak or lame companion to perish. We were not very far from the Grounds where the Scioux used to hunt about this Season. These, & I dont know how many other stories passed in my mind rapidly. I knew the violence & irritability of Smith's temper. I thought of my mother, got on my knees, with tears in my eyes! We had not eaten since noon before; but I was neither hungry nor faint. I lamented & Sighed. He was about half an hour absent. O, how glad I was when I saw him return! "Let us go. I know now where we are: we took quite a wrong course." Off we set again, & walked, & walked, & walked. We came upon a high sand bank. "What is this? where are we?" All of a Sudden as one just awoke from his sleep, "oh I know now where we are: this is river La Coquille, & we have been quite near home."⁸⁶ We turned back & for some time actually retraced our steps. We soon after got home. My joy was full indeed, but I doubt if I thanked God, so extremely thoughtless was I.

[*To be concluded.*]

⁸⁶ "La Coquille" means "shell," but the modern translation of the river's name is Clam. Shell Lake, a little farther east, is the source of the Yellow River. The Clam River, after draining Clam Lake in its course, empties into the St. Croix a little above the mouth of the Kettle River.



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