

Lewis Cass, Exploring Governor

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ALL DAY LONG ten voyageurs, colorful in leggins and gay capotes accented by the bright caps and sashes of their trade, had been beating a path to the shore at old Detroit. It was on May 24, 1820, that the Michigan waterfront buzzed with life as these picturesque French-Canadian boatmen loaded three huge canoes. Thirty feet long and six feet wide, each could carry some two tons of baggage in addition to a dozen or more men. Carefully the voyageurs loaded them with bales and boxes, packs of food and clothing, compactly folded tents, supplies of gum and bark for mending the craft, and oilcloth covers to keep everything dry. For in the weeks ahead, these canoes were to carry an exploring expedition on a long and dangerous voyage across the stormy waters of Lakes Huron and Superior. A hundred and thirty years later, in the summer of 1950, Minnesotans in particular are recalling that voyage anew. Its first objective was the head of the lakes, now dominated by the twin ports of Duluth and Superior.

At four in the afternoon everything was ready. The voyageurs manned two canoes; ten Indians sprang into the third. Throngs of people were gathered along the shore to watch the departure and wish the travelers luck. How often did voyageurs have such an audience before which to display their skill! With the first stroke of the paddles they burst into song—perhaps the favorite "*A la claire fontaine*"—and challenged their red companions to a race. The challenge was accepted and the canoes cut through the water with increasing speed as the paddlers, red and white, bent their backs to the task, the voyageurs dipping and pulling to the rhythm of the song, the Indians shouting as they strained at their paddles.

At first it looked as though the voyageurs would be outclassed, for the Indians shot forward until they were well in the lead. But they soon tired, and the voyageurs, who had wisely saved their energy, left the red men far behind. After the voyageur victory, all went on to Grosse Pointe on Lake St. Clair.

There, about ten miles north of Detroit, the party met its leader, who had gone thus far by land with some friends. He was no less a person than Lewis Cass, governor of Michigan Territory, which in 1820 extended westward from Lake Michigan to the Mississippi River. It was to

learn something about the vast section of his territory to the west of Lake Superior — an area later to become part of Minnesota — that Governor Cass was undertaking this expedition. Of course it was authorized as well as financed by the federal government. Cass was given not only permission to explore and money to pay expenses, but a number of able helpers. With him went Captain David B. Douglass, a professor of mathematics from West Point; Dr. Alexander Wolcott, the Indian agent at Chicago; Henry R. Schoolcraft, who in time was to make a name for himself as an explorer; James Duane Doty, later governor of Wisconsin and Utah territories; and others of equal note. When the party left Lake St. Clair, it included thirty-eight people.

The trip over the Great Lakes was rather uneventful. There were a few wind storms, but to escape their fury the agile Indians and voyageurs quickly paddled the canoes to shore. Although their big canoes were made for use on the Great Lakes, they were not strong enough to weather severe storms. Like the small craft used on inland lakes and rivers, the lake-going canoes were made of birch bark fitted over a framework of thin cedar wood. Five or six bars held the canoes in shape. To make them watertight, the seams were smeared with gum. In such boats Cass and his party went to Sault Ste. Marie and skirted the south shore of Lake Superior to its westernmost extremity. After rounding the peninsula now called Minnesota Point, they entered the mouth of the St. Louis River on a bright, warm July day. Past the site of the present city of Duluth, they paddled, and before evening landed at the American Fur Company's post at Fond du Lac, some eighteen miles upstream.

This was the gateway to the wilderness, but the adventurers from Detroit did not waste much time there. They exchanged their large canoes for small ones, better suited to wilderness streams, and by ten o'clock of the next morning they were ready to go on. Fond du Lac was located at the foot of a long series of rapids, around which the canoes and supplies had to be carried. The road around the rapids had long been used by fur traders; it was known as the Grand Portage of the St. Louis River. Sixteen Indians from a near-by village were hired to help the voyageurs make the portage, for the country was very rough and walking was difficult. It was made more difficult than usual by hot and sultry weather and showers that filled the well-worn path with mud and water. The Grand Portage was only nine miles long, but it took the voyageurs and Indians the better part of three days to carry Cass's baggage and canoes over it. On the way they made nineteen pauses, stopping to rest and smoke as many times. The usual distance between the voyageurs' portage pauses was half a mile; but if, as in this instance, the going was diffi-

cult, the distance covered between rests might be much shorter, and if the walking was easy it might be longer.

Six miles by water in the small canoes, and there was the Knife Portage. It was only a mile and a half long, but it was a most uncomfortable path to walk on. The sharp rocks along this stretch of country cut through moccasins and even the hardened soles of voyageurs' feet. Therefore the name "Knife Portage." Schoolcraft compared the rocks at this place to the "leaves of a book standing edgewise."

By the time he reached the head of Knife Portage, the governor was a bit discouraged. He decided to divide his party in order to lighten the canoes, and he directed sixteen of his men, including Schoolcraft, to go overland to Sandy Lake. The Indian guides took their course from the sun and they struck straight into the thick pine forest. Through tangled underbrush, ponds, marshes where the mud was knee-deep, over stretches of sand, across streams, and around woodland lakes they led their white companions.

After the first night the Indians left a record at their camping place for any of their tribe who might pass that way. The message astonished Schoolcraft, who remarked that "Here was a historical record of passing events, as permanent certainly as any written record among us, and full as intelligible to those for whom it was intended." It consisted of a piece of birch bark, on which the Indians made a series of drawings representing the whole party. To distinguish the white men from the Indians, the former were shown wearing hats. An army officer was represented with a sword; the figure of a white man with a tongue near his mouth was that of the interpreter; and so each member of the party was distinguished. The bark with the drawings was fastened to a pole which had been hacked in three places, and it was driven into the ground in such a way that it leaned toward the northwest. To an Indian this would mean that the people described in the drawing were going on a trip of three days in a northwest direction — a journey that would lead to Sandy Lake.

And sure enough, on the third day the travelers did reach Sandy Lake, where they were welcomed by traders in charge of the American Fur Company post. Cass had not yet arrived, so on the following morning the overland party went out to meet him. He had followed a well-known canoe route between the St. Louis River and Sandy Lake — the East Savanna River and the swampy portage which led to the West Savanna. At the west end of the portage the two parties met. There they spent the night, and there, no doubt, they exchanged stories about their wilderness travels. The next morning all started for Sandy Lake; some in

canoes on the winding East Savanna, the rest on foot over a deeply worn path. When the governor arrived at the trading post the Indians fired a salute, and the balls dropped into the water all around the approaching canoes—a strange token of welcome for weary travelers.

With a few picked men Cass continued up the Mississippi, leaving the main party at Sandy Lake, for it was one of his ambitions to discover the source of the great river. Like an earlier explorer, Lieutenant Zebulon M. Pike, who followed the Mississippi northward in 1805-06, Cass went as far as Upper Red Cedar Lake, and like Pike, Cass was satisfied when he reached it. At the time, Schoolcraft accepted the judgment of his chief. But Schoolcraft really was wiser than his companions, for he noticed two little streams flowing into the lake from the northwest. Perhaps by questioning the Indians, he learned that one of these streams flowed out of a lake that could be reached by canoe in six days. The stream gave Schoolcraft an idea, an idea that he did not forget. He thought about it for twelve long years, and then he went back and followed the stream he remembered to a lake he named Itasca.

But Cass was satisfied, so he led his party back to Sandy Lake, picked up the other members of the expedition at the fur company's post, and began to drift southward with the Mississippi current. It took the explorers only six days of downstream paddling to reach the Falls of St. Anthony and the newly established American fort at the mouth of the Minnesota River. There on the last day of July they were greeted with a national salute. And there, after weeks of wilderness fare, they enjoyed feasting on such delicacies as green corn, new peas, cucumbers, radishes, and lettuce, all raised in the garrison garden. After persuading some representatives of the ever-warring Sioux and Chippewa to sign a treaty of peace, Cass and his men continued down the Mississippi to Prairie du Chien; turned into the Wisconsin River, and followed the old route by way of that stream and the Fox River to the Great Lakes; and so home to Detroit.

Six years passed, and Governor Cass was again at the head of Lake Superior ready to enter the mouth of the St. Louis River. This time he came as a special commissioner appointed by the government to make a treaty with the Chippewa at Fond du Lac. About two thousand of these Indians had gathered at the American Fur Company's post to welcome the governor when, on the morning of July 28, 1826, his party approached the treaty ground "in squadron." The governor's barge was surrounded by ten or twelve small canoes filled with Indians; others carrying soldiers and the rest of the party followed, making a flotilla a quarter of a mile long. Flags were flying and the strains of martial music

filled the air. The Indians, painted and decked out in all their finery, watched the colorful array in awed silence. As the governor's barge approached the shore his Indian guard fell back; at the same time the musicians struck up the tune of "Hail Columbia." The landing was greeted by a salute from the Indians and by the playing of "Yankee Doodle." In this manner the treaty-makers of 1826 arrived at Fond du Lac. There, on August 5, they made a treaty which gave the United States the right to mine and take away metals and minerals from any part of the Chippewa country. But neither the white men nor the Indians knew that this grant gave the American government access to the world's richest iron mines!

Although in later years Cass became widely known as a statesman and a diplomat, and even was a candidate for the presidency, he is remembered in Minnesota chiefly for his tour in search of the Mississippi's source. The beautiful body of water that he considered the object of his search is named in his honor, and the lake-studded area that surrounds it was called Cass County when it was organized as a political unit toward the close of the past century. Thus one cannot look at a map of Minnesota without encountering the name of the exploring governor who penetrated the northern wilderness a hundred and thirty years ago.

SUMMER HOURS

DURING THE SUMMER MONTHS — June, July, and August — all departments of the Minnesota Historical Society except the museum will be closed on Saturdays. The museum, as usual, will be closed on Mondays and will be open on Saturdays from 8:30 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. and on Sundays from 2:00 to 5:00 P.M.

The entire Historical Building, including the museum, the library, the manuscript department, the newspaper room, and the picture department, will close at 5:00 P.M., Friday, June 30, and will not reopen until 8:30 A.M., Wednesday, July 5. Labor Day will be the occasion for another long weekend closing. The Historical Building then will be closed on Saturday, Sunday, and Monday, September 2, 3, and 4.



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