

# A Journalist at Old Fort Snelling

EDITED BY JOHN FRANCIS McDERMOTT

WHEN THE "HIGHLAND MARY" left St. Louis on June 21, 1848, for an excursion tour to Fort Snelling and the Falls of St. Anthony, among its passengers was John S. Robb, a correspondent of the *St. Louis Reveille*. "Solitaire," as he was known to his newspaper readers, was starting out on a "six weeks round in Indian land." Apparently he had an agreement with the artist Henry Lewis, who was then engaged in making the preliminary sketches for his panorama of the upper Mississippi. It seems likely that Robb intended to furnish a continuity for the travelogue when it went on exhibition. He therefore planned to meet the artist at Fort Snelling for a leisurely trip down river, which would be just the thing to provide lively detail for his copy.<sup>1</sup>

## Some Letters of "Solitaire" Robb

But any arrangement he may have had with Lewis by no means absorbed all of Robb's attention, for he also held a roving commission from the *Reveille*. His letters to his paper describing the trip down the Mississippi in Lewis' little boat, the "Mine-ha-hah," will be reprinted elsewhere; they are a valuable addition to the history of the great moving panorama which went on exhibition a year later. Before starting downstream, however, there was a brief period when Robb had no panorama partnership to absorb his interest. During these days he wandered about Fort Snelling and sent off to the *Reveille* detailed accounts of what he saw and did—letters which report frontier conditions in his typical lively style and re-create for us the atmosphere of life at this important military post.

<sup>1</sup> For a biographical sketch of Robb, who arrived in St. Louis in 1843 or 1844 and became assistant editor of the *Reveille* in 1846, see John Francis McDermott, "Gold Fever: The Letters of 'Solitaire,'" in the *Bulletin of the Missouri Historical Society*, 5:115-121 (January, 1949). Lewis and his panorama, and especially the sketching trip of 1848, are described in his journal, which has been edited by Bertha L. Heilbron and published under the title *Making a Motion Picture in 1848* (St. Paul, 1936). The book is a reprint from *Minnesota History* for June, September, and December, 1936. Robb and Lewis do not seem to have collaborated, however, for the descriptive program for the panorama, printed in 1849, was written by Charles Gayler of Cincinnati. Perhaps he took over because Robb left St. Louis for California in January, 1849. A photostatic copy of Gayler's booklet, made from an original in the Library of Congress, is owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

Robb arrived at Fort Snelling on Saturday morning, July 1, 1848. To his regret he was a week too late for the peak of the excitement which Lewis witnessed at Wabasha Prairie when the Winnebago paused there on their course northward to a new reservation at Long Prairie. But Robb saw Indians enough to please any reporter, for five hundred Winnebagoes and Sioux were encamped within sight of Fort Snelling and three hundred more were staying near St. Paul. Like Henry Lewis, "Solitaire" became the guest of the post commandant, Captain Seth Eastman, and his wife. A letter written by Mrs. Eastman nearly a year later gives a glimpse of Robb's enthusiastic response to "savage life."<sup>2</sup> She reports that "Some friends from St. Louis were visiting us at that time [during the Winnebago difficulty], and one of them enjoyed, beyond everything, the relief from the confinement and routine of city life. He never tired watching the amusements and enjoyments of the savages; indeed, he almost denied himself time for eating and sleeping, so fearful was he of losing some spectacle which he might never again have the opportunity of witnessing. Even after the tattoo had beat in the fort, the sound of the Indian drum, accompanied by the voices of the musicians, would lure him again to the scene of the dance, in spite of the inflictions of the mosquitos, flying about, as they were, by thousands."

In his journal, Lewis gives many glimpses of Robb playing his part in the sketching expedition after artist and reporter left Fort Snelling on Monday, July 10. They did not complete their voyage together, however. Toward the end of July, when they drew near the rapids at Keokuk, Robb, perhaps a bit wearied with the long, slow journey, boarded the "Kate Kearny" bound for St. Louis. There it arrived on the last day of July.<sup>3</sup>

"Solitaire's" feature series on Fort Snelling, consisting of four letters

<sup>2</sup> Lewis' account of the Winnebagoes at Wabasha Prairie, now Winona, appears in *Making a Motion Picture in 1848*, 23-28. Mrs. Eastman's letter, which is undated but is subscribed "Fort Trumbull, New London, Connecticut," is printed in the *Weekly Reveille*, November 12, 1849. Apparently when her husband was transferred from Minnesota to Texas in October, 1848, she went to Connecticut; it is known that she was living in New London in the spring of 1849. On Eastman, who was an artist as well as a soldier, see David I. Bushnell, Jr., *Seth Eastman: The Master Painter of the American Indians* (Washington, 1932), and Bertha L. Heilbron, "Seth Eastman's Water Colors," in *Minnesota History*, 19:419-423 (December, 1938).

<sup>3</sup> Though Robb wrote of spending a "week" at Fort Snelling, he actually was there ten days, since he arrived on Saturday, July 1, and left on Monday, July 10. Lewis recorded in his journal that they left on "Monday afternoon 27 July at 3 o'clock"—an impossible date. The "Kate Kearny" was among the boats that reached St. Louis on July 31, 1848, according to a list of arrivals in the *Missouri Republican*. See also Heilbron, ed., *Making a Motion Picture in 1848*, 29 n., 52.

*written at the post and one and part of another forwarded on the journey downstream, is here reprinted from the Weekly Reveille, a file of which is in the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis. To clarify the narrative, the order of the two final letters has been reversed by the editor.*

FORT SNELLING, July 1, 1848<sup>4</sup>

DEAR REVEILLE:—After a very pleasant trip, we arrived this morning at the fort. There were rumors of trouble with the Winnebago[e]s when I left, and I learned after my arrival at Wabashaw Prairie, and here at the fort, that at one time an outbreak was apprehended. Gen. [Jonathan E.] Fletcher held a council at Fort Atkinson, at which the Indians appointed a day for departure; but when it arrived they refused to leave, but appointed another day; when that arrived they deferred it to another—until the agent, under the impression that they were trifling with him, ordered them peremptorily to move forthwith.<sup>5</sup> To this they demurred, showed some hostility, and some fled from the camp and dispersed in Wisconsin, and on the route to the Missouri. A large portion of them were finally collected and sent up to Fort Snelling on the "Dr. Franklin." At Wabashaw Prairie the Sioux used all their arts to persuade them not to move, for they rightly supposed that their location in the Chippeway country would, from the very influence of locality, unite them with that tribe, and thus strengthen their Sioux enemies. The latter may blame themselves for this. I understand that government offered to buy a twenty mile strip from the Sioux for the Winnebagos, but the former would not sell until they found that the government agent had made a purchase from the Chippeways. About five hundred Winnebagos and Sioux are now encamped within sight of Fort Snelling, and three hundred of the former are at St. Paul's six miles below. They are, truly, a picturesque sight. I was with Capt. Eastman today while he held a talk with several of the chiefs of the Winnebagos. The interpreter was a little bare-legged half-breed, about twelve years of age, and the spokesman of the chiefs was "Little Hill," a celebrated Winnebago. The chief informed the Captain that a strange gun was found on the other side of the fort, upon the hill, which they supposed was a Chippeway gun, and that they were

<sup>4</sup> Reprinted from the *Weekly Reveille*, July 10, 1848, p. 1756.

<sup>5</sup> The full story of the removal of the Winnebagoes from Iowa to Minnesota, of the difficulties involved, and of their short periods of residence on reservations at Long Prairie and on the Blue Earth River is given by William W. Folwell in his *History of Minnesota*, 1:310-320 (St. Paul, 1921). Jonathan E. Fletcher was an Indian agent; the title of "General" was a courtesy title only. For his report of the difficulties involved in the removal of the Winnebagoes, as well as that of Thomas H. Harvey, superintendent of Indian affairs at St. Louis, see 30 Congress, 2 session, *Executive Documents*, no. 1, p. 439, 459 (serial 537).

afraid the latter tribe was hovering near them with hostile intentions. After their fears were quieted upon this point, they informed the Captain that they desired to go on a fishing excursion to the Falls, and requested to have a guard of soldiers detailed to accompany them. The Captain kindly consented, and they prepared, well pleased, to depart. Twelve or fourteen athletic Indians, armed, and mounted on horseback, started off under the protection of *three* U.S. soldiers.

From all that I can learn, the Sioux have alarmed the Winnebagos with stories of the hostility of the Chippeways towards their tribe, when such is not the fact—the latter named tribe are, however, deadly hostile to the Sioux, and on last Saturday night a war party of them killed two Sioux within a mile of the Fort. Five hundred of the latter tribe started in pursuit; but their dread of their ancient enemy prevented them from continuing it into any dangerous proximity to the pursued.

The Winnebagos are as timid as children. They say that it is so long since they have been at war, that they are not fit to fight. They would not land at St. Pauls, but insisted on being encamped at the Fort, under the protection of the guns. The troops apprehend considerable trouble before they will be enabled to gather the scattered remnants of the tribe, and get them started on their way west [*north*].

As an example of the progress of degeneracy in this tribe, brought about by their contact with the whites, I may cite a few facts, stated to me by an old trader. Twenty years ago, they were a temperate people, and traded from eighteen to twenty thousand dollars worth of furs per annum, at Prairie du Chien. Last year their stock of furs amounted to about two thousand five hundred dollars worth. There was, twenty years ago, but one woman in the tribe known to be a harlot, and her they drove out from among their women. Now, there is not one virtuous female in the whole tribe. Disease and intemperance—the evils which civilization entail upon the red men, are here most sorrowfully manifest.

P.S.—the traveller who desires to enjoy a trip through the wild scenery of the Upper Mississippi, should select, if possible, a boat like the “Highland Mary,” for his conveyance. I have travelled on many boats, but never on one where, from the first officer down, every one on board were so competent to fill their posts, and where the traveller might so fully resign himself to the delightful pleasures of the journey. Capt. [John] Atchison merits his high reputation as a kind and skillful officer, and Mr. Brooks, his clerk, is gifted with a gentlemanly courtesy which must always impress the memory of those who travel in his company.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Apparently the “Highland Mary” ran as an excursion steamer between St. Louis and Fort Snelling during the entire season of 1848. While on his way north, Lewis noted the

FORT SNELLING, July 4th, 1848<sup>7</sup>

REVEILLE:—We have had a very interesting time in and about the Fort the past few days. The whole plain beneath the Fort has been covered with Winnebagos, and among them we had our tent pitched. On the opposite side of the river two bands of Sioux are encamped; one of them is the Wauk-pe-tons, under the celebrated chief, Sha-ke-pe.<sup>8</sup> Since we have been here, it has been a continued succession of dancing, feasting, and visiting among the Sioux and Winnebagos. The night before last the Sioux braves danced their war dance in the midst of the former tribe, and the scene, lit up by the different watch fires, presented the most picturesque sight it has ever been my good fortune to witness. The same night, notwithstanding these friendly passages between the tribes, two of the Sioux young men stole four Winnebago horses, and when morning exposed the theft, there was considerable excitement in camp. "Little Hill," a noted chief of the latter tribe, together with three of his warriors, immediately armed, and started upon the trail of the missing animals—he soon tracked them across the St. Peters [*Minnesota River*], and into the Sioux country, where, after a half a day's chase, he found and recaptured three of them. They were tied in a thicket, with another strange horse. Little Hill followed the depredators so closely that they were forced to desert their plunder. When he returned to camp a number of Sioux were here, and one claimed the strange horse; this immediately brought about a warm talk. Little Hill said he did not want the animal, but he had brought him along to see who would claim him, and now, that an owner appeared, he was certain that the said owner was cognizant of the theft, and knew something of his missing horse. The other denied it, and Little Hill gave him to understand, in a very polite manner, that he told a lie; he said he was sorry the Sioux chief could not tell a better story, and with this inuendo [*sic*] he turned upon his heel, adding, he had said enough, and marched sullenly to his lodge. The matter was finally settled by Captain Eastman making the Sioux give Little Hill a good horse, in return for the one they had stolen from him.

boat at Dubuque, moving down river with a "pleasure party" aboard; and notices and advertisements in St. Louis newspapers record similar trips. See Heilbron, ed., *Making a Motion Picture in 1848*, 23; *Saint Louis Daily Union*, June 20, July 7, 1848. Captain Atchison died of cholera at St. Louis in 1850, according to William J. Petersen, "Steamboating in the Upper Mississippi Fur Trade," in *Minnesota History*, 13:233 (September, 1932).

<sup>7</sup> Reprinted from the *Weekly Reveille*, July 31, 1848, p. 1777.

<sup>8</sup> This was Shakopee, or Six, a chief of the Mdewakanton Sioux whose Minnesota River village was located on the site of the present city of Shakopee. For information about the chief, see Frederick W. Hodge, *Handbook of American Indians*, 2:521 (Washington, 1910), and Thomas Hughes, *Indian Chiefs of Southern Minnesota*, 15-18 (Mankato, 1927).

Yesterday afternoon the Winnebagos began to move, and the Sioux hung upon their track until they got above the Falls of St. Anthony—the latter tribe live in such dread of the Chippewas that they dared not go further. The Winnebago encampment upon the bluff, in the neighborhood of the Falls, as viewed from the opposite side of the river presented a sight full of wild beauty. Their lodges were pitched upon a gradually sloping plain, and upon the sides of the hill might be seen innumerable groups of the Indians, watching the gambols of the boys and young men, who were sporting below in the rapids beneath the falls. Indian anglers might also be seen stationed at every trout pool along the shore, busily tempting from the flood a mess of the fine fish which sport beneath the cataract. The red blankets, the floating feathers, and the swarthy skin of these forest children, dotted about among the wild scenery where they were encamped, formed a living picture of rare beauty.

Wa-ba-sha, the Sioux chief who caused so much trouble at the Prairie, has been arrested, and is now a prisoner in the Fort. Capt. Eastman despatched Lieut. [Cyrus] Hall down to arrest him, and the steamer arrived with him in charge about an hour since.<sup>9</sup> Wa-ba-sha is the head chief of the whole Sioux tribe. He tried to influence the Winnebagos not to move. He now says, that he knows he acted wrong, and is sorry for it. To-morrow the agent, Wa-ba-sha, and the Winnebago chiefs, hold a grand council, at which they will no doubt settle all their difficulties and disperse. As soon as they have gone we will commence our trip down stream.

FORT SNELLING, July 5th<sup>10</sup>

REVELLE:—The grand council between the Sioux and Winnebagoes has terminated with much friendly feeling on both sides. A number of the chiefs of the Winnebagos, who had refused to come up at first, finally accompanied Mr. [Henry M.] Rice, one of the American Fur Company's agents, and among them came Win-ne-sheek, the principal chief.<sup>11</sup> He is Wa-ba-sha's uncle. About three hundred of the principal men of the two

<sup>9</sup> Wabasha, sometimes spelled Wapasha or Wapashaw, was the third in a line of Mdewakanton Sioux chiefs by this name; his village was near Wabasha Prairie. See Charles C. Willson, "The Successive Chiefs Named Wabasha," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 12:510-512; Mary Eastman, *Dahcotah: or Life and Legends of the Sioux around Fort Snelling*, 81-91 (New York, 1849); and Hughes, *Indian Chiefs*, 9-12. On Lieutenant Hall, see George W. Cullum, *Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the United States Military Academy at West Point*, 2:140 (Boston, 1891).

<sup>10</sup> Reprinted from the *Weekly Reveille*, July 31, 1848, p. 1777.

<sup>11</sup> On Henry M. Rice's role in the removal of the Winnebago, see Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1:310-313. Winneshiek, as his name is usually spelled, became the leading chief of the Winnebagoes in 1845. A detailed biographical sketch appears in Hughes, *Indian Chiefs*, 117-125.

nations assembled at Mr. [Philander] Prescott's who is the Sioux interpreter,<sup>12</sup> and here, the Winnebagos having seated themselves upon the porch, the Sioux formed into a semi-circle in front, all crouched upon the ground, except the head chief, Ope-en-dah, or "Two Quills," to whom was assigned an arm chair. After some quiet talk among themselves, Wau-kou, or *Spirit*, a gray haired half-breed of the Winnebagos, who is distinguished as the chosen orator of the tribe, arose. He stated, that he thought they had been hurried off too fast from their old grounds, and that sufficient provision had not been made for their transportation. He then recommended the agent to proceed in advance to their new lands, and make provision for their arrival, while the tribe could proceed leisurely forward, and hunt upon the road. The agent objected to such an arrangement, and informed them, that he would find them horses and wagons sufficient to convey them up, whenever they were ready to move. He also informed them that he had received orders to pay them no money until they were upon their new lands.

*Win-ne-sheek* now arose. He is a fine muscular looking savage, with a small keen eye, and possessed of a bold, commanding air, easy gesture, and much emphasis in speech. His words were as follows:

"Brothers, White Brothers, Sioux and Winnebagos: I have been one of the chiefs, who placed brush in the road to the new lands—it was not Wa-ba-sha alone, but I who helped him to built a wall upon the Mississippi to stop the Winnebagoes. You all know me—my father and the great father of the Sioux nation had their lodges near each other, and they were always open to one another, and to the young men of the tribe; when they died their sons became friends, and have remained so; but I heard that the Sioux bands, who lived near the new country, were hostile, and I held back from the path. From what I learn now, I find I was wrong, and I will hold back no longer. I give up and consent to go. Let our young men and brothers here, who are on the path, prepare the road, and we will follow. *The Winnebagoes do not write their words like their white brothers, but they remember them much better, and here, upon their great mother earth, they say they will go, and they will keep their word*—the Great Spirit had heard them say it."

After his speech, he shook hands with the chiefs, agent, Capt. Eastman, and interpreter, and took his seat. *Win-ne-sheek* was naked to the waist; an otter's tail was twisted around his head, and fastened in front

<sup>12</sup> An amusing but uncomplimentary description of Philander Prescott's house, as well as a sketch of the interior, both by Frank B. Mayer, appear in Bertha L. Heilbron, ed., *With Pen and Pencil on the Frontier in 1851*, 135-139 (St. Paul, 1932). For a reference to Prescott's reminiscences, see above, p. 196.

with a silver arrow; a single claw of a bear stuck out from the hair on his forehead; a dyed buck's tail ornamented the top of his head, and wolf-hide bands bound his leggins, to which were attached numerous feathers, denoting by their marks how many he had killed in battle.

*Ope-en-dah*, an old Sioux chief, spoke next. He had not a single ornament on his person. He said, that if the Winnebagos intended to come up, they should have come at once, and not stop on the road—he intimated that it showed too much suspicion. He said the road was open, even through his lands, to their new hunting grounds, and they might go in safety. It was true, he said, that his young men had attacked the *Chippewas* but it was because *they* had a forked tongue, and would not keep their treaties. He hoped, now that his Winnebago brothers had come up, that he and his young men would have many new relations, and that they would live in peace together. He said, they would find out who he was when they got to their new homes.

*Win-ne-sheek* now pleaded for the release of *Wa-ba-sha*, and Capt. Eastman finally consented, on condition that the Winnebagos kept their word and moved. The council now broke up with much harmony.

FORT SNELLING, July 8th, 1848<sup>13</sup>

REVEILLE—On last Friday we had quite an excitement here, in the way of a Chippewa alarm. "Hole in the Day's" band, of the latter tribe, frequently makes hostile excursions to within a few miles of the Fort, and last spring they killed and scalped a Sioux within one mile of the sally port, almost within view of the sentinel.<sup>14</sup> Intelligence was brought here on Friday by a squaw, that "Red Boy's" son, a young man, had been shot and scalped in a ravine on the St. Peters, six miles above this post—the news created great excitement, and all the Sioux in this region armed and started upon the war path. For two hours squads of them, on horse and foot, might be seen rushing madly by Fort Snelling, on the trail leading to the Falls. Many of them were naked, with the exception of the breech cloth, and as they dashed by, with their eagle plumes dancing in the wind, they looked the true impersonation of the fierce warriors of the wilderness. Capt. Eastman sent out about twenty men to prevent a fight between the two tribes, and, if possible, arrest the Chippewas. Not being able to obtain a horse, to mingle in the chase, I mounted the round tower of the fort, and looked out in safety at the different bands scouring

<sup>13</sup> Reprinted from the *Weekly Reveille*, July 31, 1848, p. 1777.

<sup>14</sup> Hole-in-the-Day, like his father of the same name, was the leader of the Chippewa in their hereditary feud with the Sioux. Raids like those here described occurred whenever a group of Chippewa left their homes to the north for a visit to the vicinity of Fort Snelling. On Hole-in-the-Day, see Hodge, *Handbook of American Indians*, 1:557.



the far off prairie the bluffs and valley of the St. Peters, and the hills skirting the Mississippi. At least three hundred Sioux started in pursuit. A party dashed through the Winnebago camp near the Falls, and about fifty of the latter joined with them. After vainly scouring the whole country for nearly fourteen miles above here, penetrating every thicket, and beating every bush, they returned, to learn that they had been imposed upon by a false report. A band of the Sioux were dancing at St. Paul's, seven miles from here, when the alarm reached them, and in an incredibly short space of time they joined the foremost in the chase. They were of the Wah-pe-ton band, a much more warlike race than those surrounding the Fort.

Four hundred more of the Winnebagoes have arrived per steamer [Dr.] Franklin, and joined the advance party of the tribe. I have no doubt all will soon be on the path towards their new homes.<sup>15</sup>

About forty wagons from Selkirk settlement, arrived at St. Paul's, and at this place, within the past few days. A trade had been recently opened to the northwest, through this route, which will swell, yearly, until it soon attains equal, if not greater, importance than the Santa Fe trade.<sup>16</sup> By the regulations of the Hudson's Bay Company, traders are prevented from dealing in furs, with the exception of buffalo robes, yet a large quantity of furs find their way into our territories over this line. The traders bring down dressed skins, buffalo tongues, and large quantities of Indian curiosities, and they take back dry goods, boots and shoes, and *whisky*! This settlement is scattered for twelve miles along the Red River of the north, and now numbers about 6,000 souls. Each settler has a farm, and each, in a small way, dabbles in the Indian trade. One of the greatest characters belonging to this settlement is an old Irish trader, named *Peter Hayden*—he has been for the past thirty years been engaged in trade in the northwest, and I am informed that he has grown wealthy in the business.<sup>17</sup> He is cunning as an Indian, as good natured as a happy

<sup>15</sup> Fear of being caught between the warring Sioux and Chippewa continued to plague the Winnebagoes, and many of the latter left the tribe as it moved northward to Long Prairie. Folwell, in his *History of Minnesota*, 1:312, notes that the Winnebagoes "strung themselves along the Mississippi from Sauk Rapids up"; and the *Missouri Republican* of August 2, 1848, contains a report that "having arrived at what is called the *Saux Rapids* of the Mississippi," the Winnebagoes "were not allowed by the Chippewas to pass." On the "Dr. Franklin," see Heilbron, *Making a Motion Picture*, 34 n.

<sup>16</sup> For an account of the cart trade between the Canadian Red River settlements and St. Paul, see J. Fletcher Williams, *History of the City of Saint Paul*, 304-308 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 4). The trade began in 1844 with six carts; in 1851 more than a hundred reached St. Paul.

<sup>17</sup> The name of Peter Hayden, or Haydn, appears from time to time in diaries and letters relating to the Red River trade. In the spring of 1858, Hayden was living near Pembina, on the Red River near the international border, according to Daniel Hunt, who describes Hayden as a "poor but hospitable man." The Minnesota Historical Society has a typewritten copy of the Hunt Diary. See especially the entries for April 21 and 24, 1858.

Irishman can be, and, if we may believe common report, a braver man never travelled the west. Peter first opened this road from the settlement to St. Peters, and since, a number have followed in his track. He is as good a *Yankee* inside of our territory as ever upheld the stars and stripes, and at the settlements he is a truly loyal subject of her majesty. Peter complains this season that the regiment stationed at the settlement having been ordered home, has interfered materially with his trade, for all the officers were buying trinkets, and thus raised the rates so high upon him that he could not purchase with any thing like a certain chance for over 500 per cent profit.

On the "Mini-Ha-Ha," RACCOON SLOUGH, July 17th, 1848<sup>18</sup>

REVELLE—Previous to my departure from the upper region of the St. Peters, I visited a number of the *Uda-ko-tah* [*Dakota* or *Sioux*] lodges, and smoked with the inmates; witnessed the interesting operation of the Indian culinary department, particularly in the preparation of young dog; examined their weapons, trinkets, &c., of which I have obtained some very interesting specimens. Capt. Eastman kindly accompanied me, and as he is well acquainted with all the principal men, and can converse fluently with them in their own language, the visit was to me made peculiarly interesting. The principal chief of one of the Wah-pe-ton bands conducted us into his *te-pee*, or skin lodge, and assigned us seats on buffalo robes. His family, consisting of wife, children, and some relations seated themselves around the cauldron, which was sitting in the centre, and here we held an interesting private chat with the wildest looking circle of savages it has ever yet been my lot to encounter. An infant papoose lay under the edge of the *te-pee* in its cradle, apparently wondering at the brightness of the world without, as seen through a small hole in the covering of its father's primitive habitation. The squaw was cutting up a young dog into delicate pieces for a stew, while the men sat leisurely smoking *kin-ni-kin-nick* in their red stone pipes. After they had conversed awhile with *Chas-ka*, (as they call Capt. Eastman,) and told him their wants, and shown us their ornaments, we, in return astonished them with a specimen of the effect of gun cotton. When told by Capt. E. that it was *cha-ha-dee*, or shooting powder, they were incredulous. To convince them, he touched some off, and there was a general exclamation of "Ho!" One, still in doubt, proceeded to unload his pistol, and offered it to be charged—as soon as it was returned to him loaded, the whole of the occupants of the lodge adjourned outside to witness the

<sup>18</sup> Reprinted from the *Weekly Reveille*, July 31, 1848, p. 1778. Since the final portions of this letter do not relate to Fort Snelling, only the first part is here reprinted.

test—the trigger was pulled with much solemnity, off it went, and then there was another exclamation of “Ho!” which was followed by a general “How!” and a hearty laugh at the wonder. They all decided that it was “*Cha-ha-dee Waukin*,” or “spirit powder.”<sup>19</sup>

After leaving the chief’s *te-pee*, we entered the lodge of a young couple, whose principal household goods and furniture consisted in a tin kettle, two buffalo robes, a small bundle, and a young pappoose, which latter article was swung in a cloth hammock to the lodge poles. The little savage had his fists doubled up in a threatening attitude, as if defying the white intruders, but he made no further demonstrations toward hostility than the silent position of a reclining pugilist, accompanied by a very expressive roll of a full dark eye. I shall not soon forget my visit to this band. . . .

On Board the “Mini-Ha-Ha,” BELOW LAKE PEPIN, July 15th<sup>20</sup>

REVEILLE:—Our flat, built upon two canoes, has progressed this far since Monday last; so you may guess we have navigated the distance between here and Fort Snelling very leisurely. I have never passed a more interesting week in my life than during our sojourn at the Fort. We had, daily, opportunities for seeing Indian life in all its rudeness, for fishing and bathing in the clear adjacent streams, sailing on the Mississippi and St. Peters, and last, and what was a gratification ever to be remembered, enjoying the kind hospitality of Capt. Eastman and his amiable and talented lady. I confess that I was much surprised at the Fort. Until recently I had known but little of Capt. Eastman, and that little only through a few samples of his fine historical paintings of Indian life.<sup>21</sup> On encountering him, I soon discovered that my host was not only an accomplished soldier, but an artist of rare excellence, as his collection of original paintings and sketches abundantly testify, and, moreover, learned in Indian history and character. It is true, he had had rare opportunities, both in Florida and on the Upper Mississippi, for studying savage life, both in its warlike and peaceful aspects and with the true eye of artistical

<sup>19</sup> Mrs. Eastman recorded that “‘Solitaire,’ besides taking an unusual interest in the Indians, was possessed with the wish to own a collection of Indian curiosities. He purchased pipes, &c., without number, and when I learned the prices he paid for them, I am sure the Indians were rapidly learning the system of extortion practised upon them by their white brethren.” She also tells of a visit, on which apparently she accompanied her husband and Robb, to an encampment of Shakopee’s band. While there Robb purchased an ornament made of a deer’s tail stained red, which the Sioux wore a “little below the crown of the head.” See Mrs. Eastman’s letter in the *Weekly Reveille*, November 12, 1849.

<sup>20</sup> Reprinted from the *Weekly Reveille*, July 31, 1848, p. 1777.

<sup>21</sup> Eastman was stationed at Fort Snelling in 1831 and almost continuously from 1841 to 1848. By 1848 he was well known in St. Louis as an artist, for a number of his paintings had been displayed there. On the early history of the post, see Marcus L. Hansen, *Old Fort Snelling, 1817-1858* (Iowa City, 1918).

genius he has gloriously improved them. Nor has he been alone in his labors. Mrs. Eastman, with a mind vividly alive to every thing around her, interesting or romantic, connected with Indian character, has learned from the lips of the Sioux many of their historical legends, and strange superstitions in regard to venerated points on the Upper Mississippi and its tributaries. I have myself listened to her converse in the Dahcotah language with a celebrated old "medicine woman" of the Wah-pe-ton band, mother-in-law of the interpreter at Fort Snelling. This old woman herself is almost what might be called the historian of the Sioux tribe—her long hair hangs around her head, whitened by the frosts of nearly ninety winters. From her, and others, Mrs. E. has gathered material for a legendary work, full of the most curious romance, thrilling incident, and strange superstitions, and which the talented pen of this fair lady will make a standard production to add to our national literature. From a few legends, with the perusal of which I was favored, I predict that this work, when published, will create a lively sensation.<sup>22</sup>

Capt. Eastman, to aid him in his artistical illustrations of Indian character, has collected a choice and beautiful cabinet of Indian curiosities, dresses, pipes, ornaments, &c., which, aside from their value to an artist, are invaluable as a collection of an interesting race fast passing away. He is so familiar with everything relating to the Dahcotah, or Sioux tribe, that he has nearly taught me to read the private history of a chief or brave by the ornaments which decorate his person.

The Government has recently commenced the collection of material for a correct work of Indian history, the habits and customs of the tribes, &c. We know not whether it is the intention of the projectors to illustrate this work; but we cannot well understand how they could give a proper history of this character without illustrations; and if such is the purpose, Capt. Eastman possesses more ability for such a task than any man in this country. It would be hard to find a man possessed of the same artistical ability, who combined with it a thorough knowledge of Indian character. Illustrate such a work by all means, set Capt. E. to work upon it, and our country will possess a history of its original inhabitants which will reflect credit upon the administration under whose direction it is produced.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Mrs. Eastman published the tales collected at Fort Snelling and other military posts in *Dahcotah*, which is especially interesting for its introduction and preliminary remarks, in *The Romance of Indian Life* (Philadelphia, 1853), and other works. Her books were illustrated by her husband.

<sup>23</sup> In February, 1850, Eastman was instructed to prepare illustrations for just such a work. They appeared in Henry R. Schoolcraft's *History, Condition and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States*, a monumental work in six volumes published at

I passed a few hours very pleasantly at the residence of Mr. [Henry H.] Sibl[e]y, the courteous agent of the American Fur Company's post on the St. Peters.<sup>24</sup> He has been sadly annoyed at times by those vagabondizing scribblers who ascend our streams on *steam boats* for the purpose of making books — who look at a solitary Indian half an hour, bore a fur company agent, an interpreter, or old resident, with innumerable questions, beg curiosities, and then write histories of the tribes and early white settlers. As such have frequently handed him down on paper after a romancing fashion I, who have come here to study nature and the *uncivilized* inhabitants of her beautiful haunts, shall only say, the agent at St. Peters is not the kind of human nature I am looking for. He is too *civil* to pass for an Indian, although he has been long enough in the wilderness to almost forget civilization, were it possible for so courteous a gentleman to ever forget so strong a natural feature of his character.

Philadelphia from 1851 to 1857. Fifty-one original water colors prepared by Eastman as illustrations for this history are in a collection owned by the Hill Reference Library, St. Paul. Heilbron, in *Minnesota History*, 19:420.

<sup>24</sup> Sibley's house at Mendota still is standing; it is maintained as a museum by the Daughters of the American Revolution. His "Unfinished Autobiography," with an introduction and notes by Theodore C. Blegen, appears in *Minnesota History*, 8:329-362 (December, 1927). For a detailed obituary by J. Fletcher Williams, see *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 6:257-310.



A *SOD HOUSE* on the prairie near Litchfield was the scene of a Christmas celebration of 1872 in which a visitor from Sweden, Hugo Nisbeth, joined a family of settlers from his homeland. Upon returning to Europe, the traveler published an account of his experience, and this, in turn, as translated by Roy Swanson, was printed in *Minnesota History* for December, 1927. Of the frontier holiday, Nisbeth reports: "There was no Christmas tree, for fir trees are not yet planted in this part of Minnesota, but two candles stood on the white covered table and round these were placed a multitude of Christmas cakes in various shapes made by the housewife and such small presents as these pioneers were able to afford, to which I added those I had brought. Nor were *lutfisk* and rice porridge to be found on the table, but the ham which took the place of honor in their stead banished all doubt that the settler's labor and sacrifice had received its reward.

"The meal was eaten in the happiest of moods and afterward the few presents were distributed to the children. The gifts were neither costly nor tasteful, but they were *gifts* and that was all that was necessary. On the wooden horse I had brought, the little three-year-old galloped over the hard-packed dirt floor of the sod house with as much joy and happiness undoubtedly as the pampered child upon one polished and upholstered."



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