

THE EDMUND FRANKLIN ELY PAPERS

In the summer of 1923 the Minnesota Historical Society, with the aid of the Honorable William E. Culkin of Duluth, located the diaries and other papers of one of the earliest Protestant missionaries to the upper lakes region, Edmund F. Ely. Mr. Culkin found them in the possession of Mrs. Henry Ely of Eveleth, who perceived their historical significance and at Mr. Culkin's suggestion placed them in the custody of the St. Louis County Historical Society. In November, 1923, the Minnesota Historical Society borrowed the papers to make typed copies for its manuscript division, for the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, for the Library of Congress, and for the St. Louis County Historical Society. The work of copying these documents is now finished and it seems advisable to publish a short sketch of them, for they are a unique group and will be of great service to many students of Minnesota history.

Edmund Franklin Ely was born in Wilbraham, Massachusetts, on August 3, 1809. In 1828 he began to prepare for the ministry, but he was able to pursue his studies only by devoting part of his time to teaching in order to defray his expenses. He had a good singing voice and was for a time leader of the choir of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Albany.

In 1832 he decided, on account of poor health, to go as a teacher to one of the missions recently established on Lake Superior by the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions. At that time he expected to remain only two years. He left Albany on July 6, 1833. Here his diaries take up the narrative, to finish it only in June, 1854. The story as told by the diaries is not absolutely continuous, for there are wide gaps in the period after 1842, but for the years from 1833 until the middle fifties most of Ely's activities can be

followed without difficulty by using these diaries and his file of correspondence.

Twenty books, some large, some small, contain entries which unconsciously record the very things that students of Minnesota history now wish to know — the habits of Indians and traders of the period; their names; their nomenclature for topographical features, themselves, their enemies, their utensils, and their foods; the routes they followed by canoe, snowshoe, dog train, or wagon; their attitude toward the missionaries and their response to attempts to civilize and Christianize them; and their methods of fishing, hunting, fighting, playing, working, feeding, and clothing themselves. Besides these twenty books written by Ely, there are many letters to him from other missionaries and from traders, relatives, and friends; and a small diary kept by Mrs. Ely in which she records, as naïvely as every young mother utters, her wonder at the precocity and sweetness of her first-born.

The first diary records the events of Ely's journey from Albany to the Indian country in the summer of 1833. At Mackinac he learned that the traders to Fond du Lac, at the extreme western end of Lake Superior, had departed and with them the missionaries with whom he had expected to journey inland. Good fortune, in the form of a trader bound for the Sault, aided Ely, however, and shortly he overtook his co-workers and proceeded toward Sandy Lake, his mission post for the winter. An interesting description of La Pointe is given under the date of their arrival there, as well as an account of the formation of a church there on August 20, 1833. Of the latter event Ely writes, "This is 350 Miles N. W. farther than any other Protestant Church to my knowledge."

The Reverend William T. Boutwell and Ely, leaving the others at La Pointe, pressed on to Sandy Lake. As this was Ely's first experience in traveling Indian-wise, he naturally gives a detailed description of all that he saw and underwent. For that reason, this journal is of especial interest to those

studying the geography of the region from La Pointe to Sandy Lake, methods and routes of traveling, and the like.

At Sandy Lake Boutwell continued his journey to spend the winter at Leech Lake and Ely, despite his inability to speak the Chippewa tongue, began at once to give instruction, his pupils including men and women as well as children. "Another week has rolled away. The first week of my labours as Teacher," he wrote on September 28, 1833, soon after his arrival. "It has been delightfully spent. I love to see improvement — & feel encouraged when I see but little. It distresses me to be — 'dumb' — my lips can utter very few words intelligible to my scholars — but am gaining slowly."

The winter passed with less monotony than one might expect. Ambrose Davenport, a trader for the American Fur Company, and his family were stationed at Sandy Lake for the season, and so Ely had a companion of his own race. Teaching, singing, and preaching filled the larger part of his hours, but he found time for other duties and some pleasures. Almost immediately he began to study the Chippewa language: "This evening, commenced transcribing the Ojibue Declensions of Nouns," he records on September 30, 1833. "The word '*O-si-ma*' — (Father) has twelve forms of declension — sing & plu to ea[ch] & is very beautiful. The most complicated use of the word is expressed with great brevity & exactness." Again and again, in fact, Ely expresses his admiration for this Indian tongue, so exact, so capable of fine shades of meaning, and, withal, so euphonious.

Davenport's assistants were white men and half-breeds, eager to learn to read and to receive religious instruction. Many of Ely's evenings were spent in their company. Some of these men left their children in the mission while they were away on their hunting trips. Toward one of these, little Roger Aitken, Ely seems to have been especially drawn, keeping him in his house, instructing, and feeding him. "Have just seen little Roger into his Bed," he wrote on October 12, 1833, "& repeated with him in Indian The Prayer of our

Saviour 'Our Father' — at the same time entreating God to make this interesting Boy — a Herald of Salvation to his brethren in the flesh."

Now and again, as on November 5, 1833, he relates something of that picturesque folk, the *voyageurs*: "This evening, the Frenchmen & Indian Girls, have had a dance in Mr. Aitken's Room. Mr. Davenport played the Violin for them. Their feet are happily well inured to hardships — or Else, one would suppose, from the Modus operandi, that they would raise some blisters — not to mention the consequences to the floor on which they Jump."

On November 13, 1833, Ely records the famous meteoric display which caused much discussion elsewhere. As in many other respects, the Indians were very superstitious about this phenomenon until Ely gave them the scientific explanation of it. At other times he recounts his method of explaining to them the causes of day and night, the alternation of seasons, and other common phenomena about which they were ignorant.

"Today Mr. A. started off — 2 Horse trains for Fondulac & is to follow in the Morning with a Dog train." This entry of January 8, 1834, and others like it afford clues to the modes of transportation about Sandy Lake. At nearly the same time he mentions how William A. Aitken crossed the lake with "his Horse & Cutter." On another day he tells of his enjoyment of a ride on horseback. Thus the canoe was clearly not the only means of conveyance in use about the upper stretches of the Mississippi in 1834.

"The Indian Cotanse is this Evening beating his *Medicine Drum*, & his wild Song echoes through the forest. He is preparing for a hunt." With such deft strokes as this Ely often paints the Indian; in fact, scarcely another writer who has left pen portraits of the Chippewa equals him for giving local color. More than that, even, he makes his Indians real persons, writing of them exactly as he wrote of his white acquaintances. On February 26, 1834, he records: "Was

much amused, this evening, in the wigiwam, to hear a *Child* 3 Yrs old, sing several of Our Indian Hymns — in tunes whh the Children have learned from me. This family left here last fall & went down the river. The Child has learned them of its Br. & Sister.” Music, Ely found, was the simplest method of attracting an Indian audience, for young and old had an unusual taste for it: “As I walked past,” he reports on February 8, 1834, “some cried out ‘*Nogomota*’ — (let us sing). I went into the room & Commenced Singing, when all flocked in & joined in the hymn. spent some time thus — read a short chapter . . . & concluded with prayer.”

In March, 1834, Ely left Sandy Lake and joined Boutwell at Leech Lake, reaching that post in two and one-half days. When one considers that the distance was about one hundred and twenty miles, one can realize the speed with which the dog trains were accustomed to traverse the northern forests. At Leech Lake starvation faced the missionaries; “I have never before been placed in such close quarters,” wrote Ely on March 28. Fortunately, the ice gave way before extreme need was felt, and thereafter fish could be caught to relieve hunger. Again and again, as one reads these diaries, one is impressed with the reliance of the Indians upon this article of food. Even wild rice was not so essential to them.

Some indications of trading methods with the Indians may be found scattered here and there through the entries. “Two Indians, who arrived from their hunt last night — made it [*the traverse*] this P. M. in a very Small Canoe,” Ely observes in his entry for April 23, 1834. “These men brought in 3 or \$400 worth of furs, the result of the Spring Hunt.” On April 26 he continues, “This afternoon, an Indian came to the House (who had previously given to Mr. [William] Davenport’s man, the result of his hunt —) who had taken a credit last fall, — & instead of paying his credit, wanted to *trade* the amo^t of his *Pack*. Mr. D. told him he must pay his credit — the Indian refused.” Trouble developed at once and the Indian “raised himself up his knife in his hand. Mr. D.

caught a *lance*, which was at hand, & told the Ind. to be peaceable, or consequences might follow. The Ind. was intimidated, & put by his knife. after waiting an hour or more, & seeing that Mr. D. was not to be moved, the Ind. settled his business & — went off. It is a common thing — for some Stubborn Ind^s to endeavor to intimidate the traders [by] drawing their knives, & the only way is, for the trader to show them, that he is not afraid of him. . . . let an Indian see that you are perfectly calm & determined, & he will quail before you.”

The chief at Leech Lake was rather a unique character and one who aroused the interest and admiration of traders and missionaries. Ely in an entry for April 28, 1834, describes him thus: “He is a man of about 50 or 55 Years of age — of somewhat downcast look, but behaves with much gravity & propriety. He is the most influential man in the Band. After I returned, he came to see Mr. Davenport — & took Supper with us, sitting at table & using *knife & fork*.”

In May Ely returned by canoe to Sandy Lake, and thence went on to Fond du Lac. His account of the country and of the perils of the journey is very vivid. Several times he was in danger of drowning and once he lost his way. A surprising number of persons traversed this trail in a season. Probably at least twenty persons accompanied Ely, for he speaks of four brigades, not to mention individual traders.

Ely's home now was to be at Fond du Lac for several years. Much of the interest of the diaries covering this period centers about the intense rivalry between Pierre Cotté, an ardent Catholic, and the Protestant missionary. Despite some displays of rancor and jealousy occasioned by the proselytizing tendencies of each, however, the two men appear to have remained reasonably good friends. An older man might have been more tolerant of the childlike faith of the untutored half-breed, but it must be remembered that Ely was only twenty-five at this time and had much to learn about respecting the religious beliefs of others. His response to the well-bred and

scholarly Frederick Baraga, the Catholic missionary, however, was immediate, despite the latter's religion.

During the years at Fond du Lac Ely made many trips in the region between La Pointe, Fond du Lac, and Fort Snelling, and his diaries kept on these journeys are especially valuable for a study of canoe routes and of trails. Here, too, are the most detailed descriptions of Indians and their modes of living. Whenever the time comes to draw a map giving Indian names and trails in eastern Minnesota and western Wisconsin, one of the principal sources of information without doubt will be these diaries kept by Ely. In fact, Alfred J. Hill, the skilled geographer whose interest in Indian names and routes of the Northwest is too well known to be more than mentioned, once gathered data for just such a map, and during his quest he was in constant touch with Ely.

A schoolhouse was soon built at Fond du Lac, and also a house for the missionary. The number of pupils varied greatly according to the season of the year. Fishing for the American Fur Company was the chief industry here, and the children accompanied their parents to the fishing grounds as well as on their hunts. This fact accounts for the great fluctuations in the number of pupils from time to time throughout the year. The question of discipline was a Herculean one in a room filled with Indian children who had not the remotest idea of obedience and who had never before been asked to sit quiet and to refrain from talking. All travelers among these Indians comment on the almost total absence of any parental control over children, and so it is not strange that Ely found his ingenuity sorely taxed at times when trying to instill in his students the proper schoolroom attitude.

Ely's diary for every winter for which he kept a record gives much space to the starving condition of the Indians; such was the case in the winters at Fond du Lac. The Indian had small thought for the morrow. Though he might kill an abundance of game, within a short time he would be starving again, having gorged himself and feasted his friends till all

was gone. Ely gives an example of this Indian failing drawn from personal knowledge in his entry for March 7, 1835.

As an example of Indian providence — I will note a statement just made me by Osana Amik. Two or three lodges hunted — together. There were 5 Men — 6 Women & 6 Children (mostly small). Between the 15th Nov. & 15th Jan^y, they have Killed 13 Moose 9 Bears & 2 Deer — not Counting Hedge Hogs — Rabbits & pheasants & furred Game.

13 Moose	—	Equal to	13 Common horses
9 Bears	“	“	9 Small-Hogs
2 Deers	—	“	“—1 large do

when I passed them (to Yellow Lake) I bot some meat at one lodge — but at another of the lodges found them hungry & gave them part of my Meat, & other things. on my return I bot more meat. They came in from their hunt hungry & are now at the Lake depending on the fishing.

Of course the missionary was also the doctor, however slight his knowledge of medicine and experience in surgery might be. Many entries in Ely's diaries tell of his attempts to lighten suffering and to cure disease. In March, 1835, he was attending an infant suffering with swollen joints and in an extremely critical condition. In dressing its sores one day he accidentally discovered that one arm was broken and had been so for twenty days. That such an accident could have occurred without the knowledge of its mother shows how similar was the upbringing of Chippewa children to that of the bears and deer which their parents hunted. Of course the baby died despite Ely's attempts to succor it. The mature Indians who came under his care or observation seem, from his rather detailed diagnoses, to have been suffering in the main from tuberculosis or from venereal diseases contracted from the traders.

Ely, like Boutwell, Frederick Ayer, Sherman Hall, and many of the other missionaries, was deeply interested in preparing books in the Chippewa language. During the winter of 1835 he was preparing school books and in March he traveled afoot to La Pointe to accomplish some of this work with the

assistance of Ayer and Hall. He arrived on March 16, 1835, and the entry for April 8 in his diary reads, in part: "From the time of my arrival we have been continually busy in copying & preparing Manuscripts for the press. Intend to Make out a Spelling, Reading & Hymn Book (in Ojibue)." Between April 8 and May 12 he remained at La Pointe studying the Indian language with Hall, who had been longer among the Indians and had made a careful study of the tongue.

Not often in Ely's earlier diaries does one run across mention of hostilities between the Chippewa and their mortal enemies, the Sioux, but his entry for June 27, 1835, is as follows: "7 Indians have left to-day, on a War Party — against the Sioux. They Came & danced before the Houses. . . . accompanied by a Song. the words used were 'Uegonea geonji Shaguenimoian' — 'Why should I be afraid.'"

On August 30, 1835, with no previous hint except the occasional expression of a desire to be at La Pointe frequently, Ely wrote in his diary, "This P. M. I was married to Miss Catharine Bissell, of the Mackinaw Mission Ceremonies in Church — by Br. Boutwell." This entry is the more interesting because Ely himself later in life, and other persons, have asserted that Mrs. Ely's maiden name was Goulais. Possibly, as she was a mixed-blood, one name may have been her mother's and the other her father's. She became a true help-mate to Ely, aiding him especially through her ability to speak both Chippewa and English. Their life together seems to have been singularly happy, and is another justification for the hypothesis frequently found in travelers' books that the half-breed inherits the best qualities of both races.

Now and again one runs across an account of the Indians' reaction to Ely's attempts to Christianize them. Thus, on November 3, 1835, Ely relates that "At Supper, a man came in and remained at Evening worship. As I began to read the Scriptures, he drew near to me, & his continual exclamations showed the attention he paid to the Subject. I told him that there was one God & one Bible & that was sent to all, — that

C[hrist] came on earth to save all — Ind^s & whites — that God had given a Law to all, & read it to him — read of a day of Judgment &c &c. Sung & prayed. after we Concluded he said it was '*Mamokotakomik*' wonderful."

One wilderness custom which Ely and his fellow missionaries tried in vain to eliminate was that of traveling on the Sabbath. Again and again, especially in the earlier years, Ely would destroy the *esprit de corps* of a canoe brigade with which he was traveling by refusing to paddle on Sunday when the men insisted upon journeying rather than camping for the Sabbath in idleness in some desolate spot. To the modern reader, ninety years later, it seems almost unbelievable that these otherwise intelligent missionaries could interpret the fourth commandment in such a niggardly spirit. At times their determination to keep the Sabbath holy in their own blind way led to great inconvenience and suffering to others. In fact, it was one of the potent causes for the eventual failure of the missionary cause among the Indians.

In 1837 and increasingly in the spring of 1838 the diaries record a growing opposition of the Indians to the missionary. One of his oxen was lamed by a bullet, and shortly his bull was killed and divided by the Indians. Covert threats increased the uneasiness of the mission family. The unfriendliness of the agent of the American Fur Company, Dr. Charles W. Borup, also made Ely's situation embarrassing. In the spring of 1839, therefore, the mission at Fond du Lac was abandoned.

From 1839 to 1842 the diaries tell the story of mission life at Pokegama, near Mille Lacs, whither Ely repaired after leaving Fond du Lac. The din of battle echoes through the entries for 1841 and 1842. Probably the only strictly contemporary, detailed account of the battle of Pokegama is contained in Ely's diary under the date of May 24, 1841. "While I now write, the noise of *battle* rages without. Our settlement is attacked by a large party of Sioux. Nearly two hours since — the terrible scene commenced." Thus the narrative begins.

No details are missing and anyone interested in savage carnage can find his fill in these pages. A gap in the diaries breaks the continuity of the narrative shortly after the battle. During this period, however, one can learn from Ely's correspondence something of the story of constant fear on the part of the Chippewa, who apprehended another Sioux invasion; of petty discords breaking the harmony that one might expect among mission workers; and of Ely's determination to leave the field. When the narrative was resumed in 1847, Ely had made a new home at La Pointe, where he was teaching at the mission school.

The diary for 1847 and 1848, if such it can be termed, is a unique document. In substance it is a record of "rum-running" on Lake Superior. By changing dates one could publish it as an account of the efforts of federal agents in 1925 to thwart bootleggers' purposes. The following entry is typical: "On the last two days of the payment, Bottles of liquor were smuggled ashore in the pockets of dealers, & sold for \$1 pr bottle, or exchanged for blankets. Some bottles were found to contain only water. The trade in bottles was carried on, (it is believed) through the windows of the John Palmer. Capt. Wood, of the steamer was detected in the night, landing in his yawl, with bottles of Whiskey in possession. Some two or three Bbls, (in different sized Casks) were found & destroyed by Gov^t." Later Ely records that "In discharging some bbls. of Corn, from the Propeller, one bbl. burst, & revealed a number of bottles of Liquor secreted among the Corn. The bbls were carried back to the Sault."

In 1849 Ely severed his connections with the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions and returned temporarily to live at Pokegama. Shortly thereafter he went to St. Paul to live. The last diary covers the period of the founding of Oneota, — now a part of Duluth, — with which he was intimately connected. In fact, he had become deeply interested in land speculation and his letters for the years from 1854 to 1861 are full of interest for those who wish to study

the planning and settling of early Minnesota towns. Politics, too, especially the campaign of 1860, are the subject of many letters. After the middle sixties the correspondence grows fragmentary, though Ely's interest did not dim toward the town which he helped to found and where he lived from 1855 to 1862, and again, after eight years in St. Paul, from 1870 to 1873. In the latter year he removed to Santa Rosa, California, to spend the remainder of his life. There he died in 1882, two years after Mrs. Ely's death had broken the partnership of forty-five years' standing. Thirteen children blessed this union, of whom only seven reached maturity; a heavy toll the wilderness takes of its youth! Two were born at Fond du Lac; two at Pokegama; four at La Pointe; two at St. Paul, one during each period of residence there; one at Superior City, Wisconsin; and two at Oneota. Thus, as in the cases of many pioneers of the American West, the parents' wanderings may be traced by the birthplaces of their children.

Only by reading these Ely Papers themselves can one fully appreciate what a treasure trove was unearthed when their existence became known. Fortunately it is probable that in the not too distant future that privilege and pleasure will be available to the reading public; for the Minnesota Historical Society plans to publish all the diaries and a large proportion of the letters. The reader will then perceive what he may have doubted before, that the daily entries of a humble missionary to the Chippewa may prove in time the most valuable of all extant records for an understanding of an important but neglected chapter in Minnesota history.

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