

MINNESOTA AS SEEN BY TRAVELERS

Two years hence Minnesota will have an opportunity to celebrate the two-hundredth anniversary of the first occupation of its soil by white men. That this bicentennial will be impressively observed is certain, for not only do these beginnings of occupation form an important chapter in Minnesota history, but they make a story of exceptional intrinsic interest. The event to which general public attention will be drawn in 1927 is the establishment in 1727 of a military post on the Minnesota shore of Lake Pepin by a French force under the leadership of René Boucher, sieur de la Perrière.

La Perrière's project was a result of a decision by the French government to set up in the Sioux country a post to serve as a point of departure for an expedition to the Pacific.¹ Acting upon the recommendation of Charlevoix, the French authorities had authorized an expedition with this object in view as early as 1723 and had requested the Jesuits to send two priests to act as missionaries among the Sioux, with headquarters at the proposed fort. A second object was to detach the Sioux Indians from an alliance with the Foxes. The hostility of the latter was a principal cause for the delay in carrying out the French plans. When at length the enterprise was launched in 1727, the "officers and missionaries were carefully chosen, the equipment being furnished by a mercantile company formed to exploit the trans-Mississippi."² The expedition reached Lake Pepin on September 17, 1727, and a fort — named Beauharnois — was erected. The two Jesuit fathers who accompanied the expedition were Michel Guignas and Nicolas de Gonnor. They estab-

¹ A brief account of the expedition of La Perrière, with detailed references to the sources, is in William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1: 45 (St. Paul, 1921).

² *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 17: xiii.

lished the first Christian mission on Minnesota soil and named it the Mission of St. Michael the Archangel. La Perrière and De Gonnor returned to Montreal in the summer of 1728 and the post was left in charge of a nephew of the former, Pierre Boucher, sieur de Boucherville. In October, 1728, owing to the hostility of the Fox Indians and the difficulty of securing provisions, the commander, with Father Guignas and the ten members of the garrison, abandoned the post.

In 1731 the fort and the mission were reëstablished by René Godefroy, sieur de Linctot, on the higher ground of a bluff near the old site. Dr. Edward D. Neill believed that the site of the second fort was the same as that now occupied by the Ursuline convent and academy of Villa Maria of Frontenac, located about a mile east of the station of Frontenac.³ The earlier fort appears to have been situated on Sandy Point directly below the elevation upon which the convent now stands. For various reasons the Pacific expedition was never prosecuted and neither the fort nor the mission was long-lived. The post was maintained in desultory fashion for a number of years but was probably never occupied after 1755.

The most important and interesting record of the first expedition is a letter by Father Guignas, dated at the Mission of St. Michael the Archangel, Fort Beauharnois, on May 29, 1728. The French original of this account is printed in Pierre Margry's *Découvertes et établissements des Français dans l'ouest*, and an English translation was brought out some years ago by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. The document that follows is a reprint of this translation. By way of commentary upon the scientific interests of the Jesuit missionaries it may be noted that on April 30, 1727, the French governor, Marquis de Beauharnois, addressed a letter to the French minister asking for a case of mathematical instruments for

³ Edward D. Neill, *The Last French Post in the Valley of the Upper Mississippi, Near Frontenac, Minn.; With Notices of Its Commandants*, 21 (St. Paul, 1887).

Guignas and De Gonnor. The instruments specified were "a dial plate of universal astronomy, a graduated semi-circle with the degrees indicated, a spirit level, a chain with stakes, and a telescope six or seven feet long."⁴

WITH LA PERRIERE TO MINNESOTA IN 1727

[Father Michel Guignas to Marquis de Beauharnois, May 29, 1728, in *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 17: 22-28.]⁵

The convoy for the Sioux departed from the end of Montreal Island, last year, on the 16th of the month of June, toward eleven o'clock in the morning, and reached Michilimakinac on the 22nd of the month of July. This post is 251 leagues from Montreal, almost directly west, in 45° 46' North latitude. We spent the rest of the month at this post, hoping from day to day to receive some news from Montreal, and for the purpose of strengthening ourselves against the pretended extreme difficulties of securing free passage through the country of the Renards. Finally, as nothing was seen, our journey was resumed on the first of the month of August; and, after 73 leagues of prosperous navigation along the Northern shore of lake Michigan, running towards the Southwest, we reached la Baye on the 8th of the same month, at half past 5 o'clock in the evening.

That post is in 44° 41' north latitude; a halt of two days was made there, and on the morning of the 11th we embarked, as we were very impatient to arrive among the Renards.

On the third day after the departure from la Baye, very late in the evening, even somewhat far into the night, the chiefs of the Puants came out three leagues from their village to meet the French, with their peace calumets and with refreshments of bear's meat.⁶ On the next day, the French were received by this nation, now very small in numbers, to the sound of several discharges of musketry, and amid great demonstrations of joy. They asked us with so good grace to do them the honor of

⁴ *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 17: 9.

⁵ Charles de la Boische, Marquis de Beauharnois, was the governor of New France from 1726 to 1747.

⁶ The "Puants" were the Winnebago Indians.

spending some time among them, that the rest of the day was granted them, from noon until the following night. There may be in this village 60 or 80 men in all; but all, both men and women, are very tall and well-built. They are upon the borders of a very pretty little lake, in quite an agreeable place, both for situation and for the good quality of the soil, at 14 leagues from la Baye and 8 leagues from the Renards.

Early the next morning, the 15th of the month of August, the convoy set out in fairly good weather to continue on its way, but a storm having arisen in the afternoon, we arrived quite wet and while the rain was still falling, at the cabins of the Renards, a nation so dreaded and really very little to be dreaded, to judge from all appearances. It is composed of 200 men at the most; but there is a nursery-garden of children, especially of boys between ten and fourteen years old, well made and sturdy.⁷

Their cabins are upon a little eminence on the banks of a small river which bears their name, very winding or sinuous, so much so that one is continually making the entire turn of the wheel of the compass there. It is, however, quite broad in appearance, lying between a chain of hills upon each side; but there is only one miserable little channel amid this apparent extent of bed, which is a kind of swamp filled with rushes and wild rice of an almost impenetrable density. They have only simple cabins of bark without any sort of palisade or other fortification. When the French canoes touched their shores, they ran down with their peace calumets lighted in spite of the rain, and everybody smoked.

We sojourned among them the rest of this day and all the next, to learn their intentions and sentiments regarding the French establishing themselves among the Sioux. Sieur Reaume, interpreter of the languages of the Indians at la Baye, acted with zeal and devotion to the King's service.⁸ Even if my testimony, Monsieur, should not be deemed impartial, I must have the honor of telling you that the Reverend Father Chardon, an old missionary, was of very great service there; and the presence of

⁷ This Fox Indian village was probably located in Waupaca County, Wisconsin, "somewhere on the Little Wolf river." *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 16: 39.

⁸ The interpreter's name was Pierre Reaume. A brief sketch of this man appears in the *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 16: 377.

the three missionaries, who were there, reassured these cut-throats and assassins of the French more than all the discourses of the best orators would have done.⁹ A general council was called together in one of their cabins; we spoke to them civilly and amicably. On their part they gave us some rather fine sides of dried meat.

Early in the morning of the following Sunday, the 17th of the month of August, Father Chardon departed with Sieur Reaume to return to la Baye, and the company of the Sioux, greatly rejoicing at having passed with so much ease over this obstacle that had been everywhere represented as so formidable, got under way to try and reach their destination.

Never was there a more tiresome voyage made than this that followed on account of the uncertainty regarding the route. No one knew it, and we were continually going astray both by water and by land for lack of guides and pilots. We continued to grope our way, as it were, for a week; for we did not arrive until the ninth, towards three o'clock in the afternoon, by pure chance (believing ourselves still far away) at the portage of the Ouisconsin, which is forty-five leagues from the Renards, counting the length of the turnings and windings of this wretched river. This portage is half a league long, the half of it being only a sort of swamp full of mud. The Ouisconsin is quite a pretty river, but far inferior to what has been said of it; probably those who gave a description of it in Canada had only seen it at high water in spring. It is a shallow river upon a bed of shifting sand which forms banks almost everywhere, which often change place. The shores are either bare and rugged mountains or low points with a foundation of sand. Its course from the portage is from North East to South West. To its discharge into the Mississippi I have estimated the distance at thirty-eight leagues. The portage is in $43^{\circ} 24'$ North latitude. The Mississippi from the mouth of the Ouisconsin upwards flows from the North West. This beautiful river is spread out between two chains of high mountains, barren and very sterile, regularly distant from each other one league, three quarters of a league, or

⁹ Jean B. Chardon was a Jesuit missionary who came to Canada in 1699 and labored chiefly at Green Bay. *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 16: 206.

half a league where it is the narrowest. Its centre is occupied by a chain of islands well wooded, so that in looking at it from the top of the heights, one would imagine that one was looking at an endless valley watered on right and left by two immense rivers. Sometimes also one does not see any river, for these islands are overflowed every year and are suitable for raising rice. At 58 leagues according to my estimate, from the mouth of the Oüisconsin, in going up the Mississipi, is lake Pepin, which is nothing else than this river itself stripped of islands in this place, where it may be half a league wide. The part of this river that I have traveled over is not very deep, and has shallow water in several places, because its bed is of shifting sand like that of the Oüisconsin.

On the 17th of September, 1727, at noon, we reached this lake, which had been chosen as the end of our voyage. We established ourselves towards evening about the middle of the Northern shore upon a low point whose soil is excellent. The woods were very dense there, but they are already thinned on account of the rigor and length of the winter, which has been severe for the climate, for we are here in latitude $43^{\circ} 51'$.¹⁰ It is true that the difference in the winter is great compared with that of Quebec and Montreal, whatever certain poor judges may say of it. The day after landing axes were applied to the trees and four days later the fort was entirely finished. It is a plat of ground a hundred feet square surrounded by stakes twelve feet high with two good bastions. For such a small space there are large buildings, detached and not crowded, each 30, 38 and 25 feet long by 16 feet wide. All would go well there if the place was not subject to inundations; but this year, on the 15th of the month of April, we were obliged to go and camp outside and the water rose in the houses to the height of two feet eight inches; and it is useless to say that it was the quantity of snow that fell this year. The snow about the fort was melted a long time before; and there was certainly not more than a foot and a half from the 8th of February until the 15th of March; all the rest of the winter one could not have used snowshoes. I have good reason for believing that this place is inundated every year. I

¹⁰ The correct latitude is approximately $44^{\circ} 31'$.

always had the same opinion of it; but they were not obliged to believe me, because old people who said they had lived here fifteen or twenty years asserted that it was never inundated. We could not re-enter the rather dilapidated houses until the 30th of the same month of April, and even today the damages are hardly repaired.

Before the end of October all the houses were finished, and furnished; and everyone found himself lodged peacefully in his own home. Nothing was thought of then but to go and reconnoitre the neighboring districts and rivers, to see those herds of fallow-deer of all species of which they tell such tales in Canada. They must have disappeared or have greatly diminished since the time these former travelers left the country. They are no longer in such great numbers, and it is hard to kill any.

After having wandered about the country for some time everybody returned to the fort, and only thought of enjoying for a little the fruits of their labors. On the 4th of the month of November it was not forgotten that this was the fête day of Monsieur the General. Holy Mass was said for him in the morning, and we were much inclined to celebrate the holiday in the evening; but the slowness of the Pyrotechnist, and the changeableness of the weather caused the celebration to be postponed until the 14th of the same month, when some very fine rockets were fired off and the air was made to resound with a hundred shouts of "Long live the King," and "Long live Charles de Beauharnois." It was on this occasion that the wine of the Sioux was made to flow, and it was most excellent, although there are no finer vines here than in Canada. What contributed much to the amusement was the terror of some cabins of Indians who were then around the fort. When these poor people saw the fireworks in the air and the stars falling from heaven, women and children took to flight, and the most courageous of the men cried for mercy, and urgently asked that the astonishing play of this terrible medicine should be made to cease.

As soon as we had arrived among them they assembled in a very few days around the French fort to the number of 95 cabins, which would amount in all to 150 men, for there are at the most two men each in their portable cabins of dressed skins, and in many there is only one. These were all that we have seen,

except a band of about 60 men who came on the 26th of the month of February and were of those Nations that are called the Sioux of the Prairies. At the end of November the savages departed for their winter quarters. It is true that they did not go far away and that there were always some to be seen during the winter. But since the 2nd of last April, when several cabins of them repassed here to go to their spring hunting, none of them have been seen. One canoe of ten men, detailed to go and find them, looked for them in vain for a week even for more than sixty leagues up the Mississippi; it arrived yesterday without hearing any tidings of them.

Although I have said that the Sioux were alarmed at the rockets, which they took for new phenomena, it must not be supposed from that [that] they are less intelligent than other Indians we know.

They seem to me more so, at least they are apparently much gayer and more open and far more dexterous thieves, great dancers and great medicine men. The men are almost all large and well made; but the women are very ugly and disgusting, which does not however check debauchery among them, and is perhaps an effect of it.



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