A SKETCH OF JOSEPH RENVILLE.

A "BOIS BRULE," AND EARLY TRADER OF MINNESOTA.

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The opening of the fur trade of the North-West, under the patronage of LOUIS THE FOURTEENTH, tended to bring into existence a peculiar race of men, called "coureurs des bois." * Many of the wild and adventurous spirits of sunny France, tired of the "ancient regime," tempted by the dangers incident to the employment of collecting furs and the freedom from all restraint, hastened in frail birch canoes down rapids, and over lakes to the haunts of the bison and beaver. The unbridled zeal of the trader has ever made him the pioneer of the ecclesiastic.

As early as 1660,† two traders had penetrated the "incognita terra" beyond Lake Superior, and were the first Europeans that ever saw the Dakotas. It was a trader, and the noble-hearted LA SALLE, who sent HENNEPIN and his comrades on an exploring tour upon the Mississippi,‡ and they had been but a short time among

* This name was applied because they were employed in the transportation of merchandize into the interior. By means of portage collars, some of them could carry a keg of pork, or a bag of grain, up bluffs forming an angle of 45 degrees.

† See CHARLEVOIX, quarto edition, Paris, 1744.

‡ Two voyageurs accompanied HENNEPIN. He thus describes their outfit: "LA SALLE expecting now that I would depart without delay, he embraced me and gave me a calumet of peace, with two men to manage the canoe, to whom he gave goods to the value of 1,000 livres, to trade with the savages or make presents. He gave to me for my own use, ten knives, twelve shoemakers' awls or bodkins, a small roll of Martinico tobacco, two pounds of rassade or strings of colored glass to make bracelets of, and a small parcel of needles."—*Nouveau Voyage. Amsterdam Edition*, 1704.

the Dakotas, who dwelt upon the shores of Mille Lac, and the streams which flow therefrom, before SIEUR DU LUTH and other voyageurs arrived with a trading outfit from Lake Superior.

Previous to the year 1695, the canoe laden with trinkets, tobacco and knives, had entered the Minnesota, or "sky-tinted" river,* and in 1705, trading houses were erected on the banks of the Mankato or Blue Earth, and on an island below the St. Croix; and about that time, the enterprising PERROT had built a fort at the entrance of Lake Pepin. The father of him whom we purpose to sketch, was, in all probability, born before some of the first explorers of this Territory had entered "that bourne from whence no traveler returns."

As age began to stiffen the joints of the once supple voyageur, he naturally felt the want of some resting place, and companion, to cheer him in his declining years. Estranged from early associations, he did not hesitate to conform to the customs of the cinnamon colored race, and purchase a wife to hoe his corn, to mend his moccasins, to tend the lodge-fire, and to cook the game which he would bring home at night. The offspring of this alliance have become a numerous and interesting class in America, and have often exercised more sway in Indian affairs than chiefs.

JOSEPH RENVILLE was of mixed descent, and his history forms a link between the past and the present history of Minnesota. His father was a French trader of much repu-

*Minisota (Miunesota) in the Dakota, means water tinted like the sky, bluish rather than whitish. Minixoxe, (Minneshoshe) the name of the Missouri, signifies muddy water. The signification of Sota is given upon the authority of GIDEON H. POND. The Dakotas apply the word to the variegated or whitish blue appearance of the clouds. The Dakota Lexicon defines Sota as smoke; but calls Clear Lake, thirty-five miles from Traverse des Sioux on the road to Lac-qui-Parle,' "M'deminisota," (Medayminnesota) and the Minnesota, whitish water. Sky-tinted appears quite as accurate as the definitions of the Lexicon, and is certainly more beautiful.

tation. His mother was a Dakota, connected with some of the principal men of the Kaposia band. He was born below the town of St. Paul,* about the year 1779, during the war of the American revolution. At that time, there were probably not more than six white families residing in the whole of that vast territory that now comprises Northern Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa and Minnesota.

Accustomed to see no European countenance but that of his father, in sports, habits and feelings, he was a full Dakota youth. As often happens, his mother deserted her husband, and went to live with one of her own blood. The father noticing the activity of his son's mind took him to Canada before he was ten years of age, and placed him under the tuition of a priest of Rome. His instructor appears to have been both a kind and good man, and from him, he obtained a slight knowledge of the French language, and the elements of the christian religion. Before he attained to manhood, he was brought back to the Dakota land, and was called to mourn the death of his father.

At that time, there was a British officer by the name of DICKSON who lived in what is now Minnesota, and was in the employ of an English Fur Company. Knowing that young RENVILLE was energetic, he employed him as a "coureur des bois." While a mere stripling, he had guided his canoe from the Falls of Pokeguma to the Falls of St. Anthony, and followed the trails from Mendota to the Missouri. He knew by heart the legends of WINONA, and AMPATO SAPAWIN, and HOGAN-WANKE-KIN. He had distinguished himself as a brave, and also become identified with the Dakotas more fully by following in the footsteps of his father and purchasing a wife of that nation.

In 1797, he wintered in company with a Mr. PERLIER near Sauk Rapids. The late General PIKE was introduced

*The Kaposia band then lived on the east bank of the river.

to him at Prairie du Chien, and was conducted by him to the Falls of St. Anthony. This officer was pleased with him, and recommended him for the post U. S. Interpreter. In a letter to General WILKINSON, written at Mendota, Sept. 9, 1805, he says: "I beg leave to recommend for that appointment, a Mr. JOSEPH RENVILLE, who has served as interpreter for the Sioux last spring at the Illinois, and who has gratuitously and willingly served as my interpreter in all my conferences with the Sioux. He is a man respected by the Indians, and I believe an honest one."

At the breaking out of the last war with Great Britain, Col. DICKSON was employed by that Government to hire the warlike tribes of the North-West to fight against the United States. RENVILLE received from him the appointment and rank of Captain in the British army, and with warriors from the Wabasha, Kaposia, and other bands of Dakotas, marched to the American frontier. In 1813, he was present at the siege of Fort Meigs. One afternoon, while he was seated with WABASHA and the renowned PETIT CORBEAU, the grandfather of the present chief of the Kaposia band, an Indian presented himself and told the chiefs that they were wanted by the head men of the other nations that were there congregated. When they arrived at the rendezvous, they were surprised to find that the Winnebagoes had taken an American captive, and after roasting him, had apportioned his body in as many dishes as there were nations, and had invited them to participate in the feast. Both the chiefs and RENVILLE were indignant at this inhumanity, and Col. DICKSON being informed of the fact, the Winnebago who was the author of the outrage was turned out of the camp.

In 1815, he accompanied the Kaposia chief to Drummond's Island, who had been invited by the commandant of that post, to make him a visit. On their arrival, they were

informed by the officer, that he had sent for them to thank them in the name of his Majesty for the aid they had rendered during the war. He concluded by pointing to a large pile of goods, which he said were presents from Great Britain. PETIT CORBEAU replied that his people had been prevailed upon by the British to make war upon a people they scarcely knew and who had never done them any harm. "Now," continued the brave Kaposia chief, "after we have fought for you, under many hardships, lost some of our people and awakened the vengeance of our neighbors, you make peace for yourselves, and leave us to get such terms as we can, but no; we will not take them. We hold them and yourselves in equal contempt."

For a short period after the war, the subject of this memoir resided in Canada, and received the half pay of a British captain. He next entered the service of the Hudson's Bay Company, or North-West Company, whose posts extended to the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers. In winter, he resided with his family among the Dakotas; in summer, he visited his trading posts, which extended as far as the sources of the Red river.

In 1819, Col. SNELLING commenced the erection of the massive stone Fort at the junction of the Mississippi and Minnesota. From this time, RENVILLE became more acquainted with the people of the United States, and some of his posts being within the limits of the Republic, and there being great commotion in the Hudson's Bay Company, he with several other experienced trappers, established a new company in 1822, which they called the Columbia Fur Company. Of this new organization he was the presiding genius. When Major LONG arrived at Fort St. Anthony, as Snelling was then called, in the year 1823, he became acquainted with RENVILLE, and engaged him as the interpreter of the expedition to explore the Minnesota and Red River

of the North. The historian of the expedition, Professor KEATING, gave to the world one of the most interesting accounts of the Dakota nation that has ever been published, and he states that for most of the information he is indebted to the subject of this sketch.

Shortly after the Columbia Fur Company commenced its operations, the American Fur Company of New York, of which JOHN JACOB ASTOR was one of the Directors, not wishing any rivals in the trade, purchased their posts, and good will, and retained the "coureurs des bois." Under this new arrangement, RENVILLE removed to Lac-qui-Parle and erected a trading house, and here he resided until the end of his days.

Living as he had done for more than a half century among the Dakotas, over whom he exercised the most unbounded control, it is not surprising that in his advanced age he sometimes exhibited a domineering disposition. As long as Minnesota exists he should be known as one given to hospitality. He invariably showed himself to be a friend to the Indian, the traveler, and the missionary. Aware of the improvidence of his mother's race, he used his influence towards the raising of grain. He was instrumental in having the first seed corn planted on the Upper Minnesota. An Indian never left his house hungry, and they delighted to do him honor. He was a friend to the traveler. His conversation was intelligent, and he constantly communicated facts that were worthy of record. His post obtained a reputation among explorers, and their last day's journey to it was generally a quick march, for they felt sure of a warm welcome. His son was the interpreter of NICOLLET, that worthy man of science who explored this country in connection with FREMONT. This gentleman in his report to Congress pays the following tribute to the father and son:

"I may stop a while to say, that the residence of the

RENVILLE family, for a number of years back, has afforded the only retreat to travelers to be found between St. Peter's and the British posts, a distance of 700 miles. The liberal and untiring hospitality dispensed by this respectable family, the great influence exercised by it over the Indians of this country in the maintainance of peace and the protection of travelers, would demand, besides our gratitude, some especial acknowledgment of the United States, and also from the Hudson's Bay Company."

The only traveler that has ever given any testimony opposed to this, is FEATHERSTONHAUGH, a dyspeptic and growling Englishman, whose book, published in London in 1847, and styled a "Canoe Voyage up the Minnay Sotor," betrays a filthy imagination. He remarks:

"On reaching the Fort, RENVILLE advanced and saluted me, but not cordially. He was a dark, Indian-looking person, showing no white blood, short in his stature, with strong features and coarse, black hair. * * * * * I learnt that RENVILLE entertained a company of stout Indians to the number of fifty, in a skin lodge behind his house, of extraordinary dimensions, whom he calls his braves, or soldiers. To these men he confided various trusts, and occasionally sent them to distant points to transact his business. No doubt he was a very intriguing person and uncertain in his attachments. Those who knew him intimately, supposed him inclined to the British allegiance, although he professes great attachment to the American Government, a circumstance, however, which did not prevent him from being under the surveillance of the garrison at Fort Snelling."

He was also a friend to the Missionary of the Cross. Until the year 1834, no minister of the Church made arrangements to devote his life to the spiritual and temporal welfare of the Dakotas.

In the year 1687 and 1689, Father MAREST and another Jesuit made excursions among them, and one of them told the historian, CHARLEVOIX, that he regretted he did not succeed in establishing a mission. He described them as docile, gentle and intelligent. A very

few years after, the opinion of MAREST was entirely changed. In a letter dated Nov. 11, 1712, while he was a missionary among the Kaskaskias, he says: "We found a canoe of the Scioux, broken in some places, * * * * We were greatly alarmed. * * * * These Scioux are the most cruel of all the Indians, and we should have been lost had we fallen into their hands." During the French dominion, ecclesiastics never had permanent missions except in the vicinity of fortified trading posts.

The Rev. T. S. WILLIAMSON, of the Presbytery of Chillicothe, arrived at Fort Snelling in 1834; then returned to the East, and in 1835 came back with assistant missionaries. RENVILLE warmly welcomed him, and rendered invaluable assistance in the establishment of the missions. Upon the arrival of the missionaries at Lacqui-Parle, he provided them with a temporary home. He acted as interpreter, he assisted in translating the scriptures, and removed many of the prejudices of the Indians against the teachers of the white man's religion. His name appears in connection with several Dakota books. Dr. WATTS' second catechism for children, published in Boston in 1837, by CROCKER & BREWSTER, was partly translated by him.

In 1839, a volume of extracts from the Old Testament, and a volume containing the Gospel of MARK, was published by KENDALL & HENRY, Cincinnati, the translation of which was given orally by Mr. RENVILLE, and penned by Dr. WILLIAMSON. CROCKER & BREWSTER in 1842 published DAKOTA DOWANPI KIN, or Dakota Hymns, many of which were composed by the subject of this sketch. The following tribute to his ability as a translator, appeared in the Missionary Herald of 1846, published at Boston:

"Mr. RENVILLE was a remarkable man, and he was

remarkable for the energy with which he pursued such objects as he deemed of primary importance. His power of observing and remembering facts, and also words expressive of simple ideas was extraordinary. Though in his latter years he could read a little, yet in translating he seldom took a book in his hand, choosing to depend on hearing rather than sight, and I have often had occasion to observe, that after hearing a long and unfamiliar verse read from the scriptures, he would immediately render it from the French into Dakota, two languages extremely unlike in their idioms and idea of the words, and repeat it over two or three words at a time, so as to give full opportunity to write it down. He also had a remarkable tact in discovering the aim of a speaker, and conveying the intended impression, when many of the ideas and words were such as had nothing corresponding to them in the minds and language of the addressed. These qualities fitted him for an interpreter, and it was generally admitted he had no equal."

It would be improper to conclude this article without some remarks upon the religious character of RENVILLE. Years before there was a clergyman in Minnesota he took his Indian wife to Prairie du Chien and was married in accordance with Christian rites, by a minister of the Roman Church. Before he became acquainted with missionaries, he sent to New York for a large folio Bible in the French language, and requested those connected with him in the fur trade to procure for him a clerk who could read it. After the commencement of the Mission at Lac-qui-Parle, his wife was the first full Dakota that joined the Church of CHRIST, of whom we have any record. She was also the first Dakota that died in the Christian faith. Before she had ever seen a teacher of the religion of CHRIST, through the instruction

of her husband, she had renounced the gods of the Dakotas. The following is an extract from a translation of Mr. RENVILLE'S account of his wife's death: "Now, to-day, you seem very much exhausted, and she said 'yes; this day, now God invites me. I am remembering JESUS CHRIST who suffered for me, and depending on him alone. To-day I shall stand before God, and will ask him for mercy for you and all my children, and all my kinsfolk.'"

Afterwards, when all her children and relatives sat round her weeping, she said "it is holy day, sing and pray." From early in the morning, she was speaking of God, and telling her husband what to do. Thus she died "when the clock struck two."

Like NICODEMUS, one of the rulers of Israel, he loved to inquire in relation to spiritual things. Of independent mind, he claimed and exercised the right of private judgment in matters of faith.

In 1841, he was chosen and ordained a ruling Elder, and from that time, till his death, discharged the duties of his office in a manner acceptable and profitable both to the native members of the Church and the mission.

After a sickness of some days, in March, 1846, his strong frame began to give evidence of speedy decay. He was aware he was soon to take "his chamber in the silent halls of death," but he knew "in whom he had believed," and went,

> "Not like a quarry-slave, at night,
> Scourged to his dungeon; but sustained and soothed,
> Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
> About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams!"

Dr. WILLIAMSON thus narrates the death scene: "The evening before his decease, he asked me what became of the soul immediately after death. I reminded him of our Saviour's words to the thief on the cross, and PAUL'S

desire to depart and be with CHRIST. He said, 'That is sufficient,' and presently added, I have great hope I shall be saved through grace.' Next morning (Sunday) about eight o'clock, I was called to see him. He was so evidently in the agonies of death; I did not think of attempting to do anything for him. After some time, his breathing becoming easier, he was asked if he wished to hear a hymn. He replied, 'Yes.' After it was sung he said, 'It is very good.' As he reclined on the bed, I saw a sweet serenity settling on his countenance, and I thought that his severest struggle was probably past, and so it proved. The clock striking ten, he looked at it and intimated that it was time for us to go to church As we were about to leave, he extended his withered hand. After we left, he spoke some words of exhortation to his family, then prayed and before noon calmly and quietly yielded up his spirit."

Sixty-seven years passed by, before he closed his eyes upon the world. The citizens of Kentucky delight in the memory of DANIEL BOONE; let the citizens of Minnesota not forget JOSEPH RENVILLE, though he was a "bois brule."

SAINT PAUL, 1853.