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The Journey of Jean Nicolet, 1634

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INTRODUCTION

THAT the French explored the heart of the North American continent while the English occupied only the Atlantic coast plain during the seventeenth century was chiefly due to the lure of the St. Lawrence River. The year after Champlain had founded his colony at the site of Quebec (1608) he had followed the great river to the Richelieu and, ascending that, had discovered the lake that bears his name. By 1615 he had penetrated to Lake Huron, explored its eastern border, and heard of the great fresh-water seas beyond, whose coasts he was not destined to see, but whose discovery was due to the zeal for exploration that he inspired. Choosing adventurous and promising youths, he sent them into the Indian villages to acquire the native languages, and the skill in woodcraft and voyaging that helped to plant the lilies of France on the farther margin of the Great Lakes. Such a disciple and agent of Champlain was Jean Nicolet.

Born in the Norman port of Cherbourg, Nicolet arrived in New France in the summer of 1618, and immediately began his novitiate among the Algonkin Indians on the upper Ottawa. His career of adventure was interrupted by the English capture of the St. Lawrence colony in 1629, whereupon Nicolet retired farther into the continent among the Huron Indians and returned to Quebec only after the Treaty of St. Germain (1632) had brought back Champlain as governor of the restored French dependency. Flushed with triumph at his return, Champlain planned to enlarge the domain of his beloved France and arranged for Nicolet to penetrate to the remotest peoples of whom rumor had reached Quebec. Thus, fourteen years after the Pilgrim fathers

landed on the Massachusetts coast, a French discoverer had advanced (1634) a thousand miles west, passed the straits of Mackinac, skirted the shores of Green Bay, and made his landfall in the present State of Wisconsin.

Both Champlain and his envoy supposed that the "People of the Sea," whom they sought, were dwellers in Asia, or on the shores of the western ocean; hence the provision of the damask robe, and the disappointment at finding savages instead of Moguls, fresh-water lakes instead of southern seas. During his thirteen months of absence from Quebec Nicolet may have wandered farther than we know. The Jesuit letter of 1640 says: "Sieur Nicolet, who has advanced farthest into these so distant countries, has assured me that if he had sailed three days' journey farther upon a great river which issues from this lake he would have found the sea." Does this imply the discovery of the Mississippi? We think it probable that the "great river which issues from this lake [Michigan]" was the Fox, whence in three days he might have reached a westward-flowing stream that would ultimately lead to the sea. This was his interpretation of the information from the Winnebago, whose language he but imperfectly understood. After a winter's sojourn among them, he returned to Quebec and reported the discoveries he had made.

This was his last westward journey. Settling at Three Rivers, he founded a Canadian family, among whose descendants were those who carried the flag of New France far out upon the plains of the Saskatchewan, though they never saw the western ocean. In going to Quebec in 1642 on an errand of mercy for an Indian captive, Nicolet's boat was capsized by a treacherous breeze, and he was lost in the stormy waters. His eulogist says: "This was not the first time that this man had exposed himself to death for the salvation and weal of the Savages."

We owe our knowledge of Nicolet's explorations to the

series of reports of missionary operations in North America under the auspices of the Jesuit order, that are known as the *Jesuit Relations*. After the return of the French to the shores of the St. Lawrence in 1632 all missionary enterprises in Canada were placed under the control of the Society of Jesus. Each year Jesuit missionaries wrote from their remote stations throughout the continent reports of their work, which were arranged by the superior into a continuous narrative and published at Paris in an annual volume. These small yearly volumes issued by the Parisian house of Sébastien Cramoisy were eagerly read by the pious supporters of French missions and had a wide circulation. In 1673 their issue was stopped, and later these *Relations* became exceedingly rare, accessible only in the collections of bibliophiles or in the larger libraries. Their importance for the study of Canadian history caused the Canadian Government in 1858 to issue a reprint of the entire series. No complete English edition, however, appeared until 1896, when under the editorial supervision of Dr. Reuben G. Thwaites the *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, 1610–1791, began to be published by Burrows Brothers, of Cleveland, Ohio. The series was completed in 1903 and comprises seventy-three volumes. These are bilingual in form, the French (sometimes Latin) text appearing on the left-hand page, the English translation on the right. Besides a reprint of the original *Jesuit Relations*, this series contains much hitherto unpublished material from original manuscripts of Jesuit missionaries. Full bibliographical indications and illustrative material add to the value of the edition.

As a result of the reawakened interest in the *Jesuit Relations* during the latter half of the nineteenth century, the name of Jean Nicolet began to appear in our histories. John Gilmary Shea, in his *History of the Discovery of the Mississippi* (1853), cited a passage from the *Relation* of 1642 describing

Nicolet's voyage. The following year, in an article on "Indian Tribes in Wisconsin," appearing in *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, III. 125–129, Shea again called attention to Nicolet's remarkable voyage, placing it in the year 1639. This date was adopted by historians until 1876, when Benjamin Sulte, a careful student of Canadian origins, proved from church registers and other contemporary documents that Nicolet visited Wisconsin in 1634. Sulte's article was published in *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, VIII. 188–194, and his conclusions regarding the date are generally accepted. Two other articles resulting from investigations into Nicolet's life and antecedents appeared in volume XI. of the same series, pp. 1–25. Consul W. Butterfield, in his *History of the Discovery of the Northwest by Jean Nicolet in* 1634 (Cincinnati, 1881), embodied the results of careful study of all the known data on Nicolet's career.

The *Jesuit Relations* make several references to Nicolet's explorations. The selection we publish is from the *Relation* of 1642, which was written by Father Vimont, a personal friend and admirer of the great explorer. It is found in the Thwaites edition in volume XXIII., pp. 275–279.

THE JOURNEY OF JEAN NICOLET, 1634

I WILL now speak of the life and death of Monsieur Nicollet, interpreter and agent for the Gentlemen of the Company of New France. He died ten days after the Father,[1] and had lived in this region twenty-five years. What I shall say of him will aid to a better understanding of the country. He came to New France in the year 1618; and forasmuch as his nature and excellent memory inspired good hopes of him, he was sent to winter with the Island Algonquins, in order to learn their language.[2] He tarried with them two years, alone of the French, and always joined the barbarians in their excursions and journeys, undergoing such fatigues as none but eyewitnesses can conceive; he often passed seven or eight days without food, and once, full seven weeks with no other nourishment than a little bark from the trees. He accompanied four hundred Algonquins, who went during that time to make peace with the Hyroquois,[3] which he successfully accomplished; and would to God that it had never been broken, for then we should not now be suffering the calamities which move us to groans, and which must be an extraordinary impediment in the way of converting these tribes. After this treaty of peace, he went to live eight or nine years with the Algonquin Nipissiriniens,[4] where he passed for one of that nation, taking part in the very frequent councils of those tribes, having his own separate cabin and

[1] Father Charles Raymbault, for whom see the succeeding document.

[2] The "Island Algonquins" were the tribe occupying a large island in Ottawa River, known as Allumettes, ruled by a chief called Le Borgne (the one-eyed). This chieftain exacted tribute of all voyagers up or down the Ottawa, and was well known to the early French explorers.

[3] Hyroquois or Iroquois, a powerful confederation of five Indian tribes dwelling south of Lake Ontario. Nothing is known of this specific peace (or truce) save what is here narrated. The colony of New France struggled against the Iroquois during the whole first century of its existence.

[4] The Nipissing Indians were a tribe of Algonquian stock dwelling north of the lake (in the present province of Ontario) to which they gave their name.

household, and fishing and trading for himself. He was finally recalled, and appointed agent and interpreter. While in the exercise of this office, he was delegated to make a journey to the nation called People of the Sea,[1] and arrange peace between them and the Hurons, from whom they are distant about three hundred leagues westward. He embarked in the Huron country,[2] with seven savages; and they passed by many small nations, both going and returning. When they arrived at their destination, they fastened two sticks in the earth, and hung gifts thereon, so as to relieve these tribes from the notion of mistaking them for enemies to be massacred. When he was two days' journey from that nation, he sent one of those savages to bear tidings of the peace, which word was especially well received when they heard that it was a European who carried the message; they despatched several young men to meet the Manitouiriniou—that is to say, "the wonderful man." They meet him; they escort him, and carry all his baggage. He wore a grand robe of China damask, all strewn with flowers and birds of many colors. No sooner did they perceive him than the women and children fled, at the sight of a man who carried thunder in both hands—for thus they called the two pistols that he held. The news of his coming quickly spread to the places round about, and there assembled four or five thousand men. Each of the chief men made a feast for him, and at one of these banquets they served at least sixscore beavers. The peace was concluded; he returned to the Hurons, and some time later to the Three Rivers,[3] where he continued his employment as agent and interpreter, to the great satisfaction of both the French and the savages, by whom he was equally and singularly loved.

[1] The Winnebago Indians dwelling on the shore of Green Bay. The French called them "Puants," a translation of their aboriginal name, which signified "ill-smelling or dirty water," a variation of the word applied to the sea. The Winnebago were of Dakotan stock, and before Nicolet's day had occupied all of southern Wisconsin and northern Illinois.

[2] The Huron, of Iroquoian origin, occupied the peninsula between Lake Erie and the southern end of Georgian Bay. The earliest French missions were founded in their villages and were familiar to early westward explorers.

[3] Three Rivers (Trois Rivières), on the St. Lawrence, at the mouth of St. Maurice River, was the third post of importance in the colony of New France.