

Interview With a French Trapper

BY JOHN PATTEE*

[A diligent search has been made in the documents of the Iowa State Historical Library to find a trace of the voyage of M. Cardinal and his companions, but nothing definite can be found. The only reference is contained in a general statement that prior to about the beginning of the century, French traders made trips through Iowa in pursuit of adventure, furs and gain. This is probably the first authentic account of one of the first trips up the Des Moines river, in which mention is made of the first log cabin ever built on the future site of the city.—The Editor.]

Thirty years ago next month I met Peter Cardinal near Fort Randal, Dakota. He was a very polite Frenchman, and after asking where I and the troops with me were from, seemed to be quite pleased to learn we were from Iowa, and said that he and about twenty others started from Mackinac in the summer of 1797 in canoes and followed the west shore of Lake Michigan to Green Bay and up that bay and the Fox river to Lake Winnebago, from that lake they dragged their canoes across to the Wisconsin river, which they followed to its mouth. They then paddled down the Mississippi to the mouth of the Des Moines, then to Raccoon fork (as he invariably called it) where they soon had some log cabins up for their shelter during the winter.

"Ah!" exclaimed the old man with the genuine enthusiasm of an old hunter, "that was a fine place for game—deer, turkies, mink, otter, beaver, wolves, and foxes, and we caught a fine load of furs for our canoes, and the next summer we returned to Mackinac."

The old man was sent to some other point to hunt and trap until the fall of 1802, he was again sent to the "Raccoon Fork," and hunted and trapped through the

* From a letter written in February, 1892. The author was a brother-in-law of Iowa's Civil war governor, Samuel J. Kirkwood, and had served as auditor of the state from 1855 to 1859. He entered military service early in the Civil war, and in March, 1862, was an officer in the 7th Iowa Cavalry stationed in the Dakotas, where he chose to spend the remainder of his life.

winter following. In the spring of 1803 they again started for home. When near the mouth of the river he, with another man, was ordered to take a light canoe and paddle ahead a few miles and try to kill something for the party to eat.

The main party were to go on and camp near the mouth of the Des Moines on the right bank of the river. They succeeded in killing a deer and some wild turkey and followed on to find the camp, keeping close to the right bank. The moon was shining brightly but was well down towards the southwest, and part of the river was shaded by the trees, and they did not see the canoes until they were close by them. But just at that moment they heard a great outcry as from a thousand people, and knowing that it was Indians they slipped along past the camp for some distance and then crossed over to the north side of the river and secreted their canoe in the brush and made their way up along the bank until opposite the camp and saw a large number of Indians were dancing around a large fire and driving the party of trappers in advance of them. Supposing that their friends would be all killed when the dance was over, they returned to their canoe and moved down to the mouth of the Des Moines river and then up the Mississippi to where Keokuk now stands.

Hiding the canoe in some bushes, they went to the top of the bluff and secreted themselves where they could have a good view of the Mississippi down the river, they waited to see what might happen next.

About 9 o'clock the next day they saw the Indians together with their friends pop out from the Des Moines river and paddle down the Mississippi toward St. Louis.

These two men spent the rest of the day worrying over the sad fate of their friends and supposed they would never see them again, and thinking of the long and dreary days and nights it would take to reach Mackinac again if they should be fortunate enough to elude the Indians who lived in that dreary waste of wilderness that lay between them and their home.

When night came on they began their toilsome jour-

ney, deeming it unsafe for two men to travel by daylight, and thus they pursued their way, lying by during the daytime on some island and paddling up stream nights until somewhere near the mouth of Rock river, where one day as they were watching the river from their hiding place on a bushy island, they saw some canoes coming up the river. Secreting themselves at the lower end of the island where they could have a good view of the canoes as they approached, they waited. When they came near them they were surprised and delighted to find that it was their comrades, whom they supposed had all been killed.

Their friends had been carried to St. Louis and delivered up for trial for trespassing on the Louisiana territory by hunting and trapping. This was in the summer of the year 1803 just after our government had bought that territory. The court not only held that they were guiltless but made the Indians help to paddle their canoes back to the mouth of the Des Moines river, where they captured them.

The next year, 1804, Mr. Cardinal, with some of the same party, made their way up the Missouri and he remained there until I saw him and listened to his story as I have related it. He was a fine old man and I often listened with pleasure to his stories of travel while exploring that new country to the head of the Missouri river and to the mouth of the Columbia river.

Mr. Cardinal died at his home near Ft. Randall in the spring of 1864, just 60 years after he first ascended the Missouri river. What must have been his experience during that period of sixty years in the wilderness! To such as he we of the present day owe no small debt for his hard work in preparing the thousands on thousands of happy homes that now cover the land over which he traveled. He gave me much valuable information about the country, and I am still able to give the names of every river or creek from Sioux City to the head of the river in three languages, English, French and Indian as I learned it from him.

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