

NICOLAS PERROT,
THE FIRST COMMERCIAL TRAVELER ON THE UPPER MISSISSIPPI

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Among the explorers and traders in the country of the Upper Lakes and of the Upper Mississippi Nicolas Perrot was one of the earliest and most adventurous. Born in France in 1644, he came when eleven years old to Canada, as it was called by the Indians, or New France, as it was called by the French. At the age of twenty-one he embarked in trade among the Indians, and made himself familiar with their languages and manners and customs. He was a man of some education, of enterprise and courage, and of fine address. Possessed of religious fervor, he affiliated with the Jesuit Fathers and supported their missions. A silver ostensorium which he presented to the St. Francis Xavier mission at Green Bay is treasured among the curios of the Wisconsin Historical Society.

From his acquaintance with the tribes of the Upper Lakes he was employed by Talon, the Intendant of New France, to assemble their chiefs at the Falls of St. Mary, where the French standards were set up and formal possession taken of the country in the name of Louis XIV with pomp and ceremony on the 14th of June, 1671. Next to the Jesuit Fathers who were present on that occasion, his name as "His Majesty's Interpreter in these parts" is affixed to the Proces-verbal. The next name is that of Joliet. It was Perrot's report of what the Indians told of a great river running south that impressed Talon, and was the immediate occasion of his dispatching Joliet at once with Marquette to make the discovery of the Mississippi.

Perrot was the first commercial traveler to engage in trade on the Mississippi. Joliet preceded him ten years, but only as a discoverer; he never returned to the Mississippi. Perrot made an "establishment" among the Sioux on the

west side of the river near the foot of Lake Pepin in 1683. It is marked "Fort Perrot" on early maps. Afterwards he established "Post St. Anthony" on the east side of the Mississippi. Meanwhile he built "Fort St. Nicholas," named for his patron saint, at the mouth of the Wisconsin. The site of this "Fort" has been a matter of much discussion. "An Indian tradition places it on the west side of the Mississippi in what is now the State of Iowa" (C. W. Butterfield). The learned antiquarians, J. D. Butler, E. D. Neill, L. C. Draper, place it at Prairie du Chien; one of them calls upon Wisconsin to "Hold the Fort." The subject is discussed *in extenso* in Wis. His. Coll. x. 54-63, 299, 300, 307-313, 321-372.

Meanwhile La Salle, in the name of Louis XIV, on the 9th of April, 1682, had taken possession at the mouth of the Mississippi of the country watered by it and its tributaries. By that act the soil of Iowa, as included in that country, fell under the authority of France. In exercise of that authority, "in order to make incontestable his Majesty's right to the countries discovered by his subjects," the Governor of New France ordered Perrot to take formal possession of the Upper Mississippi country.

Accordingly on the 8th of May, 1689, Perrot as Commandant at Post St. Anthony took formal possession of the country in the name of Louis XIV. His record of the act is in Wis. His. Coll. xi, 35-'6. Among the witnesses of the ceremony were De Bois Guillot, Commandant at Fort St. Nicholas, Father Gabriel Marest, afterwards missionary for many years at Kaskaskia, and Le Seuer, a hardy adventurer and mine-prospecter in the Sioux country. Le Seuer was a kinsman of Iberville, the first colonizer of Louisiana. His name is perpetuated in a county of Minnesota.

The following year, 1690, some Miami Indians, then living upon the Mississippi, brought Perrot a specimen of lead ore from a "ruisseau" (probably Catfish creek, Dubuque), and requested him to come and establish a trading-post

among them, which he shortly proceeded to do. Hence the region became known as "Perrot's Mines." Thomas Jeffreys, in "The Natural and Civil History of the French Dominions in North and South America," London, 1760, p. 135, says, "Ten leagues below the Wisconsin are the lead mines, formerly discovered by the Sieur Perrot, and still bearing his name." The site of that trading-post is undetermined. A commanding point at the mouth of Tete des Morts creek, ten miles below Catfish creek, has been suggested for it. "The fact that the village of the grand chief of the Miamis was but four leagues below, was a good reason for locating the trading-post at this place, where it would be convenient for him and his people to barter their furs." (L. C. Draper. Wis. His. Coll. x. 332).

At this period what was known in the English colonies as "King William's War" was raging in Europe and in America. Louis XIV had declared war upon William III as a usurper of the British throne. The Indians were entangled in the broil, mostly as allies of France. Hence it was known in the English colonies as a "French and Indian war," though the Iroquois and Fox Indians took the British side. In this state of things the French authorities revoked all traders' licenses among the Indians, ordered the western posts evacuated, and the return of traders and soldiers to the St. Lawrence. This was disastrous to the fortunes of Perrot. His trading posts were looted by the Indians. Vainly endeavoring to mediate between warring tribes, he suffered from their jealousy and treachery, was robbed of all he had, and at one time was tied to a stake to be burnt, when he was rescued by some Fox Indians who were his friends.

Perrot was never able to regain his fortunes. In his old age when the French wanted to exterminate the Foxes for despoiling the trade between Green Bay and the Mississippi, he offered to go and make terms with them without war; but his proposal was rejected. He prepared for the government a "Memoir of the Manners, Customs and Religion of the

'Savages of North America.'" Charlevoix mentions it in the list of authors which he consulted in composing his History of New France. The "Memoir" remained in manuscript until 1864, when it was printed in Paris. Some scant extracts were printed in the Minnesota Historical Collections, ii. 200-214. In these extracts there is a reference to "the river of the Ioways (Ayoës), twelve leagues from the Wisconsin, which was followed to its source; there was no wood but only prairies and level plains; and buffaloes and other animals were in abundance." The "Memoir" is quoted by Parkman, who, however, gives countenance to an unjust imputation upon Perrot with reference to La Salle.

PROVENDER is said to be so scarce in western Tennessee that the inhabitants have been obliged to cut down the trees to allow the cattle to eat the buds, and the circuit court at Jacksonborough has been obliged to adjourn from the impossibility of procuring feed of any description for the horses of those in attendance.

We learn from Mr. Billings, who recently arrived here from Blue Earth, Minn., that a like state of affairs exists in the northern counties of this State and those of southern Minnesota. He reports that for a hundred miles after leaving Blue Earth City, he was unable to get a mouthful of food for his horses, and but little for himself. A great many cattle have died from cold and starvation during the past winter, and much suffering has been experienced by the people from the same cause.—*The Quasqueton Guardian*, May 30, 1857.

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