

## Louis Joliet

The story begins on Thursday the twenty-first of September in the year 1645. It was on that day that Jean Joliet, a poor wagon-maker in the service of the great fur-trading company of the Hundred Associates which then controlled Canada, might have been seen by some of the inhabitants of Quebec as he and his wife, Marie, climbed slowly up the heights with their infant son and made their way to the church of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Mary. There, in the presence of parents and godparents, the curé baptized and christened the child Louis. Afterward the little family returned to their humble home in the old Lower Town at the foot of the towering rock of Quebec beside the mighty St. Lawrence.

During the years that followed, while the little French trading post with its two or three hundred colonists, adventurers, priests, and nuns was just beginning to assume the dignity becoming to the capital of New France, the sturdy youngster outgrew his infancy and thrived in the midst of hardship and privation after the manner of the hardy race from which he sprang. The winters were long and cold, and the summers were filled with dread of the Indians. Yet the cheerful French folk faced impending calamity with a laugh or a *bon mot* and

society in the Upper Town, where the *seigneurs* brought their families to spend the winter months, reproduced the gaiety of the salons of Old France.

Louis Joliet developed into an alert and active boy. Before he was old enough to remember distinctly his father died. He attended the Jesuit school with the other children of Quebec, most of whom lived in the Lower Town near the landing. Proximity to the St. Lawrence no doubt inspired the boy with a fancy for voyages, while the arrival and departure of missionaries, traders, and Indians gave rise to dreams of adventure and manly ambition. One of the youthful amusements was to play in the brook that came down from Cape Diamond in a succession of little cascades. Often, as a boy, Louis Joliet may have climbed the steep and narrow ascent from Wolfe's Cove to the Plains of Abraham, just as a century later the British stealthily gained the same impregnable heights and wrested an empire from the French.

Joliet seems to have been none the less a student for all of his boyish activities. In the Department of Marine in Paris there is a remarkable map of the island of Anticosti and the Gulf of St. Lawrence, drawn by him when he was only thirteen. The work is carefully executed and the notes and legends indicate maturity and accurate observation. In 1662 he decided to become a Jesuit priest and took his minor orders in August of that year. He cultivated his talent for music and continued his classical course

by a study of philosophy. Four years later he is mentioned with special honor for his participation in a public debate in philosophy, at which the dignitaries of the colony were present and in which the Intendant, Talon himself, took part. The arguments were made in Latin and the disputants were confined to the syllogistic method.

During the following year Joliet, who had then reached his majority, was "clerk of the church" in the seminary. Father Jacques Marquette came to Quebec in September, 1666, and during the three weeks he tarried before going on to Three Rivers the two young men must have become well acquainted. Joliet, however, gave up his training for the priesthood about the time that Marquette entered upon his chosen field as a forest missionary, and in the summer of 1667, probably at the instigation of Talon and for the purpose of pursuing special studies in the Old World, he sailed for France.

After a happy year in the land of his fathers, Joliet returned to Quebec and began his career as explorer. Only the most resourceful, intrepid, and sturdy young men ventured upon that arduous calling. The successful *coureur de bois* had to know the craft of the wilderness — how to find his way in the depths of the forest; how to fashion shelter huts, weapons, and canoes; how to survive alone far from the base of supplies. He had to live with the Indians, interpret their moods, and speak their dialects. Above all, he had to be tactful, brave, and alert.

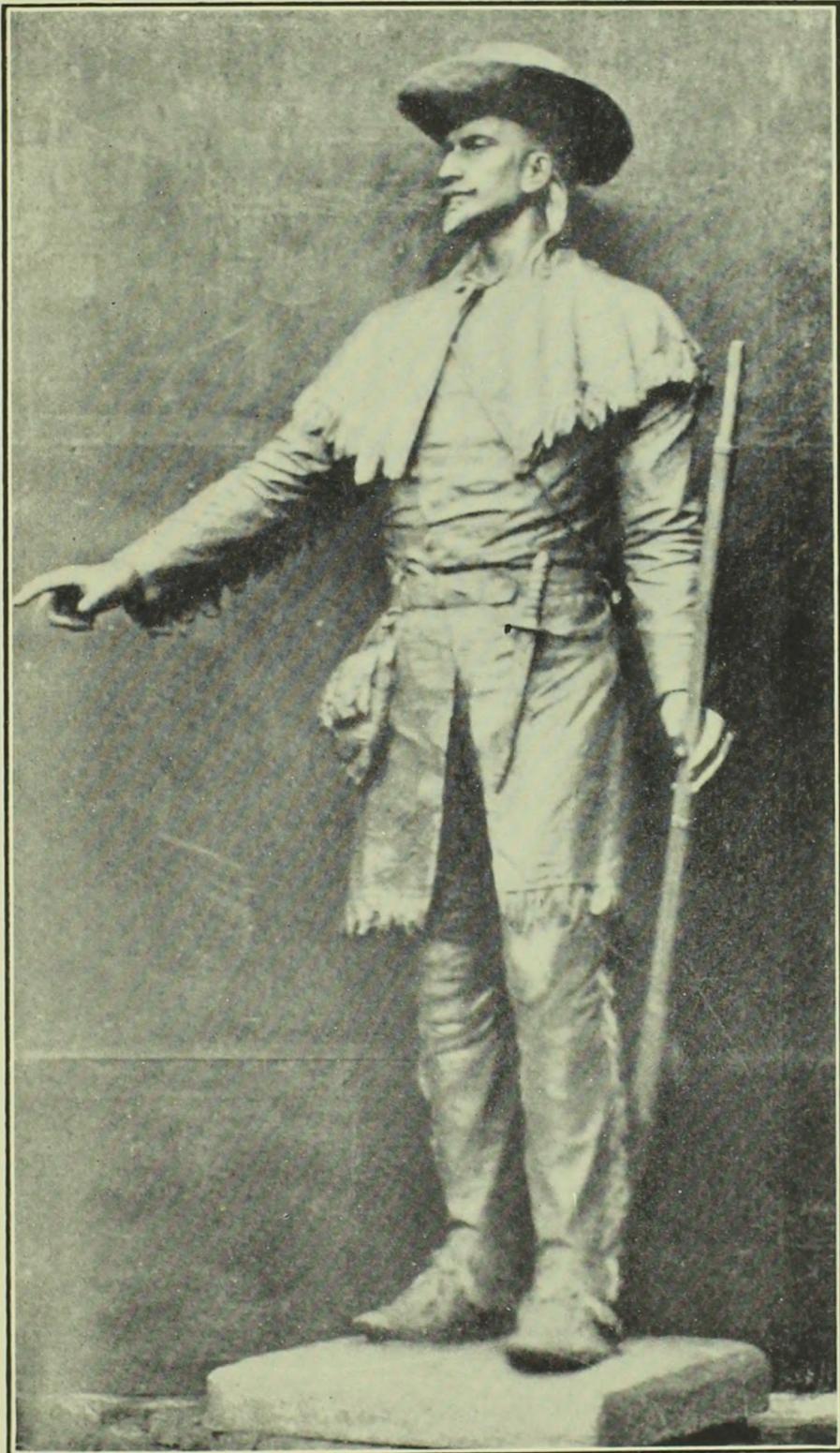
Commissioned by the Governor of New France to accompany Jean Péré on an expedition in search of fabulous boulders of pure copper on the shores of Lake Superior, Joliet plunged into the wilderness early in the spring of 1669 and was not heard of again until the following autumn. One day in September the Sieur de La Salle with his party of explorers and Sulpitian missionaries in search of a new route to the South Sea were amazed to hear of another Frenchman in a neighboring Indian village near the western end of Lake Ontario. It was Joliet on his way back to Quebec. He had failed to find the copper mines, but he had obtained precious knowledge of the region of the Great Lakes, had visited Green Bay, had won the friendship of the Indians, had made peace between the Iroquois and the Ottawas, and had discovered a new and less difficult route to the West by way of the Grand River and Lake Erie. For these services he was paid four hundred livres — not quite eighty dollars.

Late in the following year Joliet returned to the Great Lakes as a member of Saint-Lusson's pretentious expedition, and the early summer of 1671 found him at Sault Ste. Marie where a great concourse of Indians, priests, and soldiers had assembled to witness an imposing ceremony. There, on the fourteenth of June, he stood with a little group of Europeans surrounded by hundreds of dusky savages, their eyes wide with wonder, while Father Claude Dablon invoked a blessing upon the huge

wooden cross erected as a token of spiritual dominion. Saint-Lusson, lifting a sod and holding forth his sword, in the name of His Most Christian Majesty, Louis XIV of France, then took formal possession of all the territory from Hudson Bay to the South Sea and westward to the ocean — a realm of which none of them knew the extent. “*Vive le Roi!*” shouted the Frenchmen, and the Indians howled in concert.

One of the most alluring mysteries of the continent still remained unsolved. What was the “great water” to the west of which the Indians had told the explorers and missionaries, and whither did it flow? When Talon received instructions in 1672 to direct his attention to the exploration of the Mississippi as the most important project that could be undertaken in behalf of New France, his choice of a person to entrust with such a mission naturally fell to Louis Joliet, the brilliant young scholar whom he had sent to Europe six years before and who had since distinguished himself as a zealous and trustworthy explorer.

By November, after Talon had been recalled to France and Joliet was far on his way, the new Governor, Frontenac, wrote to the prime minister that he had “deemed it expedient for the service to send Sieur Joliet to discover the south sea by way of the country of the Maskoutens and the great river called Mississippi, which is believed to empty into the California sea. He is a man of experience in this kind of



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discovery and has already been near the great river, of which he promises to see the mouth." To his friend Father Marquette, who was patiently waiting at the mission of St. Ignace for an opportunity to visit the Indians who lived along the great river, Joliet carried instructions to accompany him on the voyage.

Slowly and apparently alone, Sieur Joliet paddled his birch-bark canoe up the turbulent Ottawa and Mattawan, laboriously he traversed the portage to Lake Nipissing, and finally emerging from its forested islands, gay with autumnal foliage, he rapidly descended the French River and floated out into the isle-strewn expanse of Georgian Bay. Weeks must have passed while he threaded that gloomy archipelago, genial October was succeeded by chill November, each morning when the traveller awakened beneath his shelter of boughs he found the damp mosses crisp under foot, while fitful winds laden with snowflakes whistled mournfully in the tree tops. To reach Mackinac before the ice blocked his passage the bold explorer must have taken many risks, for it was the eighth of December and floes were already forming in the straits when he beached his canoe at Point St. Ignace, embraced his priestly friend, and placed within his eager hands the fateful message which was to link their names upon a page of history.

All through the long winter Joliet and Marquette made careful preparations for their momentous ex-

ploration. On the seventeenth of May, 1673, the little party set out, and it was late in the autumn before Joliet, weary and travel-worn, pulled his canoe onto the beach at St. Ignace. Cold weather was at hand, so he spent the winter at the Mackinac settlement, writing his report to the Governor, drafting a map of the Illinois country, and preparing his journal of the voyage.

When spring came and the ice went out of the strait, he embarked upon the long trip back to Quebec. Week after week Joliet and his companions paddled homeward. At last they approached the town of Montreal and entered the troubled waters of La Chine Rapids — the last ordeal of the perilous journey. Many a time Joliet had passed those foam-covered rocks before, but the fates that day were capricious and overturned the light canoe. The men were thrown into the swift current and the box containing Joliet's precious map and his journal was deposited at the bottom of the river. Frantically, Joliet struggled against the tugging whirlpools until his strength was gone and he lost consciousness. Four hours his body tossed in the water when at last some fishermen pulled him out and brought him back to life. His French companions and the Indian lad, gift of the Indians in Iowa, were drowned.

The news of Joliet's discovery and the accident in the rapids preceded him to Quebec. When he finally entered his native town the church bells were rung and he was enthusiastically welcomed. After em-

bracing his mother and visiting a little with friends and relatives he hastened to make a verbal report to Governor Frontenac. Later he wrote a brief account of his voyage, the country he had explored, and the ease of establishing communication between the Great Lakes and the Gulf of Mexico. Accompanying this letter was a map of the region drawn from memory.

For several years the young explorer was haunted with the memory of the beautiful prairies, the luxuriant vegetation, the abundance of game, and the innumerable herds of bison which he had seen in the fertile valley of the great river. In 1676, the year following his marriage, he proposed to establish an agricultural colony in Illinois, believing that was the best method of maintaining the French claim to that region, but Paris officialdom vetoed it. Thereafter, for a time, he seems to have fallen into disfavor, perhaps because he was outspoken in opposition to the policy of supplying the Indians with liquor.

So ended the period of greatest accomplishment in the life of Louis Joliet, though for a quarter of a century longer he continued to occupy an important place in Canadian history. A man of scholarship and versatility (he played the cathedral organ between voyages), his whole career is one of remarkable achievement. In the Jesuit and official records of that time he is always referred to as a man of discretion, bravery, and unusual ability who might be trusted to do difficult work.

In 1679 Sieur Joliet was granted the *seigneurie* of the Mingan Islands, and later in the same year he made a survey of the region between the Saguenay River and James Bay, where he found the British firmly established. In return for his services he was given the island of Anticosti in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. There he went to live with his family and was growing wealthy when Sir William Phips appeared with his British fleet in 1690 and destroyed his establishment. A few years later he explored the coast of Labrador, made numerous maps, and studied the Eskimos and the resources of that country. In 1695 he went to France where he was received with honor and respect. When he returned to Quebec he was appointed royal professor of navigation and was given another *seigneurie* which bore his own name and which his descendants possess to this day.

Louis Joliet died sometime in the summer of 1700 — nobody knows just when or where or how. It is probable that the illustrious explorer met his end some place in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, where so often he had guided his boat on adventurous voyages. Perhaps his body rests on one of those rugged islands which the fogs envelop with a white shroud and whose shores reverberate incessantly with the cry of gulls and the thunder of billows.

JOHN ELY BRIGGS