

Comment by the Editor

HISTORICAL MEMOIRS

The facts of local history are usually more elusive than the circumstances of great events. Episodes of general interest have obvious effects, leave definite records, and serve as subjects of written description or comment; while the affairs of every-day life leave little specific evidence for the historian. Most people attach no significance to the daily routine, yet the common customs, foibles, and fancies are the substance of the times. Not once in a generation does a Samuel Pepys record his rising betimes, his very merry dining out, the purchase of a new "coat of the fashion" which pleased him well, his stint at the office — "and so early to bed, to-morrow being washing day."

In a new, sparsely inhabited country historical materials are apt to be scarce. Pioneers have little time or inclination to keep diaries. There are few or no newspapers to chronicle events; letters written to friends are usually lost or inaccessible; while public records are confined to a few subjects such as office holding, taxes, and the ownership of land. For these reasons the memory of the people who have seen and heard is often the only source for the facts of local history.

Reminiscences are sometimes unreliable; but inaccuracy is not an inherent characteristic of personal memoirs. Recollections can usually be verified, and they have the additional merit of vividness and first-hand information. It was a simple task, for example, to find in the weather reports that the winter of 1880-1881 was unusually severe, that the snow fall was very heavy, and that the velocity of the wind was sixty miles an hour on October 16th — the day of the blizzard in northwestern Iowa.

PROBABILITY OF TRUTH IN TRADITION

There is danger of placing too much faith in reminiscence, especially if it departs from the field of personal observation and invades the realm of tradition. Take an account of the disposal of Louis Tesson's old Spanish land grant in 1803. It has been alleged that the transaction was conducted in strict observance of the ancient Civil Law of Rome — that a twig of a tree and a clod of the earth were actually passed from the hand of the owner to the garment of the purchaser, who held up the corner of his cloak to receive the evidences of his new possessions. No one can positively prove that such a performance did not occur, yet no evidence can be found to substantiate the tale. The tradition is possible, but highly improbable.

Some stories of early days, which have not been completely confirmed, are not only within the range of possibility but are probable as well. The conclu-

sion that Tesson set out the old apple orchard which bears his name is based almost entirely on probability. It can not be asserted beyond the shadow of a doubt that he actually planted the trees which were later found upon his land. No record of that fact has yet been found.

There are at least three other possible explanations of the origin of the old orchard, none of which, however, are as plausible as the Tesson version. It is conceivable that the Indians set out the trees; but that is incompatible with Indian character. William Ewing, who was stationed across the river by the United States government as an Indian sub-agent, may have been responsible, for one of his duties was to teach the arts of agriculture to the Indians who lived at the head of the Des Moines Rapids on the Iowa side of the Mississippi. In 1806 Nicolas Boilvin was appointed Indian agent with headquarters at this same Sac village. He also was ordered to teach agriculture to the Indians by precept and example. "You should early procure Garden seeds, peach and other fruit stones, and apple seeds", advised the Secretary of War. "A Garden should be established for the most useful vegetables, and nurseries planted with fruit trees; for the purpose of distributing the most useful seeds and trees among such of the Chiefs as will take care to cultivate them."

It is unlikely that either Ewing or Boilvin would have located the orchard on the only piece of pri-

vately owned land in the vicinity. And so, in the absence of positive proof to the contrary, the most probable explanation may still be accepted and the credit for the first horticultural endeavor in Iowa may still be ascribed to Louis Tesson.

WHO WAS TESSON

If events are sometimes difficult to ascertain, how much more frequently are the names and identity of people lost to subsequent generations. Rare indeed is the man who can name his eight great grandparents. Of the millions who have lived and died only a few are known to the world.

Who was this Louis Honoré Tesson, whose surname is spelled in various ways and appears as Honoré almost as often as Tesson? For a few years he came upon the stage of Iowa history as a conspicuous land owner, associated with merchants and public officials, and then made his exit. No one cared whence he came, and no one knows where he went. He was only a minor actor in one of the scenes of the tremendous drama of the Great Valley.

Elliott Coues says that three Tessons lived in the Mississippi Valley in 1805. "Louis Tesson Honoré 1st, b. Canada, 1734, d. St. Louis, 1807, aged 73; married Magdalena Peterson, b. 1739, d. St. Louis, 1812. The family came to St. Louis from Kaskaskia. Among 8 children was — Louis Tesson Honoré 2d, eldest son; he married (1) Marie Duchouquette, (2) Theresa Creely, in 1788; by the latter he had Louis

Tesson Honoré 3d, b. St. Louis about 1790; married Amaranthe Dumoulin; d. there Aug. 20th, 1827."

Since the days of Pike and the fur traders, the Tessons have passed into the obscurity of commonalty whence they came. The later history of Iowa affords only occasional glimpses of men bearing the name of Tesson, and there is no assurance that they are related to the owner of the old Spanish land grant in Lee County.

When the Indians ceded the Half-breed Tract to the United States in 1824, a Louis Tesson witnessed the signing of the treaty. The names of Michael, Francis, and Edward Tesson appear in subsequent records of the Half-breed Tract. For many years a Joseph Tesson, born in Iowa in 1841 of part French parentage, resided with the Meskwaki Indians near Tama and served in the capacity of tribal interpreter. No doubt there are others, and hither and yon the descendants of Louis Tesson are living to-day though perchance they have never heard of their forefather who lived in Iowa under the reign of King Charles IV of Spain.

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