

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

VOL. XLI

ISSUED IN JULY 1960

No. 7

Copyright 1960 by The State Historical Society of Iowa



Nicolet and the Winnebagoes

Jean Nicolet was about to set out on a dangerous mission. This was nothing new for Nicolet since danger seemed to have accompanied the intrepid Frenchman from the moment he set foot in Quebec. Born in Cherbourg, France, in 1598, Nicolet had so impressed Champlain that he took the adventurous lad with him to New France where he quickly exhibited rare qualities of courage, steadfastness and determination.

Upon their arrival in New France in 1618 Champlain sent young Nicolet to live among the Algonkin Indians on Allumette Island to learn their language, customs, and the art of woodcraft. Nicolet proved to be an apt student and speedily won the respect and admiration of the Algonkins. As a result, he was appointed to serve as interpreter at the famous peace conference between the Algonquian tribes and the Iroquois in 1624.

Nicolet was next assigned the position of official interpreter among the Nipissing Indians who dwelt upon the water route to Lake Huron. His

eight years with the Nipissing were extremely successful — he adopted the virtues but not the vices of the Indians; he took a part in their frequent councils; and he was recognized as a chief of the tribe. In 1632 the enthusiastic Champlain appointed Nicolet "Agent and Interpreter" which placed him largely in charge of Indian affairs in New France.

With such a rich background it is not surprising that Champlain should single out Nicolet to execute the most important albeit dangerous mission facing the French in New France: the search for the Western Sea and the route to China.

Officially, Nicolet was sent out to organize new sources of fur-trading but privately he was told to push on until, if possible, he found the way to the "China Sea." The idea of a passage across America to China had not yet lost its allure. Indeed, Nicolet carried with him, carefully sewn in an oil-skin bag, a handsomely embroidered Chinese mandarin's coat so that, when he came to pay his respects to the Emperor of China, he would be properly dressed.

At this time the Jesuits were re-establishing a missionary outpost at the head of Georgian Bay, from which the Franciscans had been summarily recalled, and had arranged for three of their priests and six laymen to go west with the Huron Indians. It was the custom of the Huron fur-traders to set out from Georgian Bay each sum-

mer with the previous winter's catch for trade with the French at Quebec. Nicolet was ordered by Champlain to accompany the Jesuits and the Huron fur-traders on their return to Georgian Bay.

The journey up the Ottawa River was difficult and dangerous and if Nicolet had little love for his black-robed companions, as was likely, he must have enjoyed their discomfort. Pere Brebeuf wrote of the trip:

Now when these rapids or torrents are reached, it is necessary to land, and carry on the shoulder through woods or over high and troublesome rocks, all the baggage and the canoes themselves . . . I kept count of the number of portages, and found that we carried our canoes thirty-five times, and dragged them (through white water) at least fifty.

The party finally won its way up the Ottawa and glided over the smooth waters of Lake Nipissing and thence down the French River to Georgian Bay, where the Jesuits at once went to work in the place where the Franciscans had labored.

Nicolet promptly obtained seven Huron guides and set out westward. Doubtless he had memorized his commission carefully and knew that his orders were to visit the "People of the Sea," whom the French believed were Chinese; to make a treaty between them and the French and Hurons; to investigate the possibility of the fur trade; and to discover, if possible, the "Sea to China"

and the way to India. The intrepid Frenchman paddled through Georgian Bay, hugging the northern shore of Lake Huron until he reached the waters leading to Sault Ste. Marie. He did not venture into these waters and thus missed the opportunity of discovering Lake Superior, the mightiest of the Great Lakes. Instead he proceeded to the Strait of Mackinac, glided through that historic passageway, and continued paddling west along the northern shore of Lake Michigan.

Nicolet had heard from tribes all along the way of a strange people without hair or beards who used huge wooden canoes instead of portable canoes of birch bark. Surely, he thought, these must be Chinese or Japanese, who came to this region in ships. As he continued westward he left gifts along the shore of the lake which disappeared during the night but the people themselves were too timid or frightened to appear. Nicolet entered Green Bay and soon was moving along the shore of what is now present-day Wisconsin.

One day Nicolet saw some people lurking in the shadows of the heavily wooded shore. He promptly landed and donned "a grand robe of China damask, all strewn with flowers and birds of many colors," but instead of the Chinese he encountered some filthy Winnebago Indians whose "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."

Nicolet was the first white man to set foot on present-day Wisconsin soil. The dramatic episode has been recorded by artists and is referred to as the landfall of the white man in Wisconsin.

The news of Nicolet's coming quickly spread to the places round about, and there assembled four or five thousand Winnebago. Each of the chiefs made a feast for him, and at one of these banquets they "served at least six score beavers." Well might these dusky Winnebago celebrate the coming of the first white man in their midst; a new era was opening for them in the fur trade.

Thinking civilized China was just a little more to the West, Nicolet went up the Fox River and, after traversing Lake Winnebago, found himself still among Algonquian Indians, whose language he understood. They told him of a great water just a three-days' portage ahead. Had Nicolet taken this three-day trip he would have eventually come into the Mississippi at Prairie du Chien, opposite McGregor in what is now Clayton County, Iowa. The way to Iowa had been found but it was not to be followed for another forty years. Instead, Nicolet turned south, established friendly relations with the Illinois Indians and then returned home, reaching Three Rivers, Quebec, in July of 1635.

Nicolet kept no journal and his explorations were of no immediate value. What his contemporaries thought is found in the *Jesuit Relations*:

Sieur Nicolet, who has advanced farthest into these so distant countries, has assured me that, if he had sailed three days' journey farther [west] upon a great river which issues from this lake, he would have found the sea. Now I have strong suspicions that this is the sea which answers to that north of New Mexico, and that from this sea there would be an outlet towards Japan and China. Nevertheless, as we do not know whither this great lake tends, or this fresh-water sea, it would be a bold undertaking to go and explore those countries.

The exploits of Nicolet were not capitalized upon because Champlain died and his administration was followed by a series of incompetent governors. The unforgiving Iroquois took advantage of the situation by destroying the remnants of the Huron nation and killing by torture such missionaries as did not escape. Even the French settlements on the St. Lawrence were menaced by the vengeful Iroquois. The fur trade came to a halt.

Although Nicolet had learned many things during his life among the Indians he had failed to master one thing — to swim. In 1642, while on his way down the St. Lawrence to Quebec, his canoe was swamped and Nicolet was drowned.

Nicolet played a two-fold role in Iowa history. First of all, he was the first white man to visit and describe the Winnebago — a tribe intimately associated with Iowa's colorful early days. Secondly, he pointed the way for Joliet and Marquette.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN