

Tesson's Apple Orchard

When the first settlers began to filter into southeastern Iowa during the early thirties of the last century, they were struck with wonder and amazement on finding, in the primeval forests skirting the banks of the Mississippi River, evidence of an earlier habitation of the white man. Near the head of the Des Moines Rapids in the Mississippi was an old apple orchard. Already the trees had reached maturity and many of them had fallen into decay; some had been toppled over by storms and second growth saplings were springing up about their roots.

Whence came these apple trees? Whose hand had planted and protected them against the encroachments of the more hardy varieties of native timber with which they were promiscuously intermingled? It was thought improbable that the Indians, owing to their roving and shiftless disposition, had ever engaged in horticultural pursuits. Evidently some white men must have preceded the early settlers in a futile attempt at colonization and permanent settlement in that locality.

The apple trees marked the site of the second Spanish Land Grant made to Louis Honoré Tesson, the son of a French-Canadian tailor who lived

in St. Louis. Like so many of his race, Tesson seems to have responded to the lure of the wild. He voyaged up and down the Mississippi, traded with the Indians, and made the acquaintance of other hardy adventurers engaged in the same occupation. Perhaps he knew Julien Dubuque and learned of land grants from him. In the course of his travels, Tesson probably spent some time at the large Sac Indian village at the head of the Des Moines Rapids on the Iowa side. Here he seems to have made friends among the Indians for if they did not prevail upon him to come and establish a trading post near by, they at least were not hostile to the project.

This site, situated on a beautiful level terrace of second bottom land, fertile and picturesque, probably appealed to Tesson. A high prominence at the rear afforded a magnificent view of the river for miles in either direction, while below was an excellent landing for boats. Being about midway between the Spanish mines (Dubuque) and the seat of government at St. Louis, the place gave abundant promise of being a splendid location for a trading post, both from the standpoint of the Indians and those who plied the river. Moreover, the position at the head of the rapids was strategic as the beginning and end of a long portage.

With these considerations in mind, Tesson approached the Spanish government where his proposal to establish a trading post was favorably

received. In the past, Spanish traders had not been particularly successful in competition with the British, and it may have been for this reason that the officials at St. Louis were willing to foster any enterprise that gave promise of promoting the interests of Spain in the New World. On March 30, 1799, Louis Honoré Tesson received permission from Zenon Trudeau, Lieutenant Governor of the province of Upper Louisiana, to make a settlement upon 7056 arpents of land. According to the terms of this permit, "Mr. Louis Honoré [Tesson] is permitted to settle" at the head of the Des Moines Rapids, "and having effected his establishment he will write to the Governor General to obtain the concession of a suitable area in order to validate said establishment, and at the same time to make him useful in the trade in peltries in that country, to watch the savages and to keep them in the fealty which they owe His Majesty." He was also placed under obligations to plant trees and sow seeds, to instruct the Indians in the art of agriculture, and to spread the tenets of the Catholic faith. His conduct in these respects was to "serve him as a recommendation to be favored by the Government in such a way as to let him have the benefit of whatever he may do to contribute to the increase of the commerce in which he is to participate."

In order to secure a clear title to his land through confirmation by the Governor General,

Tesson set about fulfilling the terms of the grant. Having purchased some supplies in St. Louis, largely on credit, and obtained about a hundred seedling apple trees of several varieties at St. Charles, he proceeded on his northward journey, transporting the small apple trees, it is said, on pack mules. His family may have accompanied him upon this trip, for it is recorded that he married Theresa Creely in 1788 and that a son bearing the name of Louis Honoré was born in St. Louis about 1790. Sometime in 1799 Tesson reached the site of his land grant. There he erected buildings, built some fences, cultivated a small patch, and planted his apple trees.

For a number of years he lived at the head of the rapids, fraternizing with the Indians, and trading in liquor, pelts, and baubles. Life on the very outskirts of civilization was probably not altogether monotonous. Julien Dubuque and other itinerant traders must have stopped on their way to St. Louis. There was plenty of excitement when the ice went out of the river, when the flood waters rose, and when the Indians went on the warpath. Living was easy. The river teemed with delectable fish, while game was abundant. Quail, prairie chickens, turkeys, and deer were commonplace. Wild strawberries, blackberries, and grapes varied the menu — the apple trees were probably too young to bear.

All of the circumstances pertaining to Tesson's

undertakings were not so rosy. He seems to have been lacking in tact and general business ability. At all events he incurred the enmity of some of the Indians and was no match for the shrewd British traders. His trading operations failed, and he fell deeper and deeper into debt at St. Louis. After four years of patience and forbearance on the part of his creditors, all of his property was attached. According to Spanish law and upon the authority of an order from the Lieutenant Governor of Upper Louisiana, P. A. Tablaux, acting as attorney for Joseph Robidoux, appeared unexpectedly before the door of Tesson's house on March 27, 1803, and there, accompanied by two witnesses and in the presence of Tesson, seized the property and gave notice that it would be sold in public at the door of the parish church in St. Louis for the benefit of the creditors. The auction occurred in customary form at "the conclusion of high mass, the people coming out in great number, after due notice given by the public crier of the town in a high and intelligible voice, on three successive Sundays, May 1, 8, 15, 1803." On the first Sunday only "twenty-five dollars was bid; on the second, thirty dollars; on the third, the last adjudication, one hundred dollars; and subsequently, one hundred and fifty dollars by Joseph Robidoux," Tesson's chief creditor. This offer was "repeated until twelve o'clock at noon; and the public retiring, the said Robidoux demanded a deed of his

bid. It was cried at one o'clock, at two o'clock, and at three o'clock, and no other persons presenting themselves, the said land and appurtenances were adjudged to him for the mentioned price of one hundred and fifty dollars, and having to receive this sum himself, he gave no security."

Robidoux, finding himself possessed of property for which he had no immediate need, permitted Tesson to remain on the tract for some time thereafter. It is not known whether Tesson was finally ejected from the land, or whether he left of his own accord. He was still in the vicinity in 1805 when Lieutenant Zebulon M. Pike explored the Mississippi River from St. Louis to its source. Pike began the ascent of the Des Moines Rapids in the Mississippi on the morning of August 20th. After passing the first shoal, they met Mr. Ewing who had come to assist in negotiating the rapids. He was accompanied by "a French interpreter, four chiefs and 15 men of the Sac nation, in their canoes, bearing a flag of the United States." The interpreter, Lieutenant Pike explained, was "Monsieur Louis Tisson," who had "calculated on going with me as my interpreter," and who "appeared much disappointed when I told him I had no instructions to that effect." He also promised to discover mines, "which no person knew but himself; but, as I conceive him much of a hypocrite, and possessing great gasconism, I am happy he was not chosen for my voyage."

On the death of Joseph Robidoux in 1809, the Tesson land, including all buildings and appurtenances thereto, was acquired by Thomas F. Riddick at an auction held on April 9, 1810. Riddick paid sixty-three dollars for the property — the highest and last bid. Nearly thirty years later the legality of this transaction was confirmed and Tesson's title acquired in 1799 was established by the United States government when a land patent was issued covering six hundred and forty acres of the tract. This was the first patent to Iowa land and established a title record that dates back to 1799 — the oldest in the State.

From the time when the property passed into the hands of Riddick in 1810, the thread of the story is lost until eleven years later, when Isaac R. Campbell explored the southern portion of the Iowa country and later mentioned in his memoirs that at that date Chief Cut Nose lived in a village at the head of the Des Moines Rapids, near the site of the old establishment of Louis Tesson. "Below the creek running into the river," he writes, "on the lower side of the Indian town, were the remains of a deserted trading house, around which was growing a number of apple trees." Tesson himself had dropped from sight altogether. At what time he forsook the environs of his hapless undertaking, where he went, what he did, and where he died are unknown facts.

J. P. Cruikshank says that his father, Alexander

Cruikshank, visited the old orchard in the summer of 1832. At that time about fifteen trees were bearing, though the fruit was of a very inferior quality. That the apples should be poor was not surprising, as it was obvious that the trees had been neglected for many, many years.

In the year 1834 the original Fort Des Moines was established by the United States government on the Tesson grant. The buildings of the fort were immediately adjacent to and north of the old apple orchard. At that time there were "many traces of a former settlement around the camp, the most prominent of which was the old orchard of apple-trees a short distance below. The orchard at that time contained some ten or fifteen trees in bearing condition. The fruit was very ordinary, being a common seedling. The Indians were in the habit of visiting the orchard, and gathering the fruit in its green state" so that none of it ever matured. There were also "remains of dirt, or adobe, chimneys visible in the same locality; which goes to prove that a settlement had existed there at some former period."

During the three years that the old fort was maintained, a number of men illustrious in the history of Iowa and the nation were there. The three companies of United States Dragoons, which constituted the garrison, were commanded by Stephen W. Kearny, famous western explorer. Albert M. Lea, in command of one of the companies that

made a thousand-mile march across the prairies of Iowa and Minnesota in 1835, published the first popular description of the Iowa country. Zachary Taylor and Jefferson Davis were stationed at Fort Crawford at the time Fort Des Moines was established and may have visited the dragoons down the river. In 1837 Lieutenant Robert E. Lee was sent by the War Department to survey the Des Moines Rapids of the Mississippi for the purpose of making recommendations toward the improvement of the navigation of the river.

During the same year, 1837, when Fort Des Moines was abandoned, the town of Montrose was laid out by D. W. Kilbourne on the site of the old apple orchard. Unfortunately for Kilbourne, however, he failed to secure a perfect title to the land before beginning his operations, and the heirs of Thomas F. Riddick brought suit against him for possession. During the trial Kilbourne attempted to discredit Tesson and his activities altogether, bringing as a witness, Red Bird, who claimed that he himself had planted the apple trees and that Tesson was an impostor and a "che-wal-is-ki" (a rascal), who had never bought an acre of land. Red Bird's story was in part substantiated by Black Hawk but the court upheld the Tesson title to the land, giving the Riddick heirs possession. The case eventually found its way to the Supreme Court of the United States which affirmed the decisions of the lower courts.

As the town of Montrose developed, the Rid-dick heirs disposed of their inheritance to various people. The old orchard site at last came into the possession of George B. Dennison who, in 1874, conveyed the plot to the town of Montrose, to be held in trust for the Old Settlers' Association. The intention at that time was to erect an ornamental iron fence around the premises and otherwise improve the appearance of the grounds, but these well-meant plans did not materialize, and only spasmodic efforts have since been made. None of the trees survive. The last one, according to the memory of the older residents of Montrose, died or disappeared nearly half a century ago.

In 1912 J. P. Cruikshank earnestly endeavored to rally sufficient interest to save the old orchard site from inundation by Lake Cooper, soon to be created by the completion of the Keokuk dam. It was impossible to inspire sufficient enthusiasm in the project, however, and during the second week of June, 1913, when the flood gates of the great dam were closed, the bleak, swirling waters of the Mississippi were transformed into a placid lake which slowly enveloped the greater portion of the historic spot.

BEN HUR WILSON