

# THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN C. PARISH

ASSOCIATE EDITOR OF THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

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## Michel Aco—Squaw-Man

The history of white men in the Upper Mississippi Valley runs back approximately two hundred and fifty years; and even in the first distant quarter century of that long period there are figures which stand out clear and distinct against the background of prairie and stream and forest. High lights rest upon the black gown of Marquette and upon the energetic explorer Jolliet, upon the restless La Salle, full of visions, and upon Henri de Tonty with his iron hand. The Jesuit Allouez passes from village to village, and the mendacious Friar Hennepin moves about in the foreground.

The background of the picture is indistinct. One gets glimpses, among the dusky Indian camps, of bearded Frenchmen bartering for the peltry of the region. One sees them again packing canoes over portages or joining the Indians in the hunt or occasionally on the war path. One even sees, now and



then, among the more southern tribes, a man naked and tattooed who once was a Frenchman but has reverted to the life of the wilds.

They are the lesser breed who follow their leaders into the West, or make their way apart. Some are faithful and fine representatives of the land of the lilies, and some are only knaves, but though as individuals their ways may be checkered and their paths almost lost in the Valley, nevertheless they deserve more than obscurity for they are France itself on the far edge of the New World.

The record of those early times, a hundred years before the Revolutionary War, is voluminous. The wandering priests made long reports to their superiors; the explorers wrote many and detailed letters to their patrons and friends, and beguiled numerous hours telling of the lands and peoples they visited, the hardships they endured, and the adventures of themselves and their comrades. So out of these thousands of pages of records one can often piece together into a somewhat connected whole the story of an obscure but persistent priest, or the adventures of a French fur trader — little known to fame — who trailed the woods and prairies and paddled along the streams of the Upper Mississippi Valley back in the time when Peter Stuyvesant with his wooden leg was still stumping about the streets of the little village of New York.

Michel Aco — writers variously spell his name Accault, Accau, and Ako, but Aco he himself signed



it — came into the Valley in the employ of La Salle. A vigorous and adventurous fur trader and explorer, he appears again and again for nearly a quarter of a century. And his experiences in the Valley and his associations with its people were so vital and intimate that they reflect vividly the life of both white and red inhabitants.

When La Salle and Tonty made their memorable trip into the Illinois country in the winter of 1679–1680 they brought with them a motley group of men. There were priests and artisans, courageous woodsmen and arrant cowards. Early in January, the party landed at the village of the Peoria Indians. La Salle was on his way to the sea, but he must make haste slowly. He commenced the building of a fort below the Peoria village and beside it on the shore of the Illinois River his men began the construction of a ship with a forty-two foot keel and a twelve foot beam. With this he hoped ultimately to reach the ocean at the mouth of the Mississippi River.

In the meantime there were preliminary trips to be made. La Salle determined to reconnoitre the upper Mississippi, and on the last day of February, under his directions, three men embarked in a canoe loaded with provisions and trading goods and started down the Illinois River. He had chosen Aco as leader of the expedition and with him were Antoine Auguel, called by his comrades “the Picard” because of his home in Picardy, and Friar Louis Hennepin, grey-robed brother of the Recollect order.



Hennepin was a man of big frame and high pretensions, and time was to show that his boastfulness ran easily into mendacity. His account is almost the only source of information about the important voyage upon which he was embarking and as he chose to represent himself as the leader of the expedition and to refer to his companions as "my two men", the real position of Aco has been much misunderstood.

But La Salle has been sufficiently explicit in his writings as to Aco's leadership and the reasons for his selection. He chose Aco to ascend the Mississippi, he said, because he was versed in the languages and customs of the tribes which lay in that direction. He knew not only the tongues of the Iroquois and the Illinois tribes but he could talk with the Iowa, the Oto, the Chippewa, and the Kickapoo. He had visited these Indians on La Salle's orders and had been successful in his mission and well received by the villagers. "Furthermore", said La Salle, "he is prudent, courageous and cool."

In another letter La Salle remarked that Aco had spent two winters and a summer among these tribes. On the basis of these comments it is not hard to identify Aco's experience. In the fall of 1678 La Salle had sent out from Fort Frontenac — his post at the east end of Lake Ontario — an advance party of fifteen men with supplies and orders to proceed to the Illinois country, trade for furs, and collect provisions. A year later when La Salle him-



self arrived at Mackinac in the Griffon — the first ship on the upper lakes — he found that his advance party had been sadly demoralized. Some of the men were at Mackinac; some had deserted and he sent Tonty to round them up at Sault Ste. Marie; and some he found at the entrance to Green Bay. These last had been doing some real trading and had collected a quantity of furs which La Salle loaded upon the Griffon and despatched on an unlucky voyage to Quebec. The ship and its crew were never again heard from.

With his force increased by the reassembled advance party La Salle had come down into the Illinois country. It seems exceedingly probable that the years of experience with Indian tribes which La Salle credits to Aco came to him as one of the more faithful members of the advance party of 1678. Even in Hennepin's biased account there may be found indications of a sturdiness and independence in Aco's character, but in what the friar says of the Picard there is no evidence of such qualities. One only gets the impression that the Picard was a timorous soul.

Such then were the three men who embarked in the spring of 1680 on an expedition into a largely unexplored country. They found adventures almost at once. As they neared the mouth of the Illinois River they spoke with a band of Tamaroas who shortly afterward sought to ambush them from a jutting point of land. But the smoke of the Indian



camp fire gave them away and the French were able to elude them.

Soon they were pushing their canoe with difficulty up the current of the Mississippi River. They were the first white travellers who are known to have ascended the Mississippi River above the mouth of the Illinois — for Marquette and Jolliet seven years before had turned aside into the Illinois River on their return trip; and above the mouth of the Wisconsin they passed shores which no French voyageur before them had seen and described.

As they paddled northward they feasted on the fat of the land. There were wild turkeys to be had in abundance and they varied their diet with fish and with the meat of buffalo and deer and even with the flesh of a bear which they killed while it was swimming across the river. It is impossible to tell just what spots they visited on the Iowa and Illinois shores, but they must have made many camps — by night to sleep and by day to hunt and cook their food — for they were weeks upon the way.

One afternoon the three men were on shore, somewhere between the mouth of the Wisconsin and Lake Pepin. Aco and the Picard were cooking a wild turkey over a camp fire. Beside the water's edge Hennepin was busy repairing the canoe, when he looked up to see a fleet of thirty-three canoes full of Indians coming rapidly down the stream. The Indians began to let fly their arrows while they were some distance off, but soon they caught sight of the



upraised calumet in the hands of Hennepin. Surrounding the Frenchmen, however, they took them captives and after some parleying turned back up the river with them toward their own country.

They were Sioux, and Aco could not speak their language. La Salle had counted on there being always an intermediary through whom Aco could talk if he came upon an unfamiliar tongue, for the prevalence among all Indian tribes of slaves or adopted members of other tribes made it seem likely that Aco could find one whose tongue he knew. But these warriors were all Sioux. The sign language must serve, therefore, for the present, but it was not long before Aco had added another Indian language to his repertoire.

Up the Mississippi for nearly three weeks the Indians and their captives paddled with few rests. For many days the French constantly expected death at the hands of the Sioux, and the stores of cloth and nails and pocket knives with which they had hoped to buy furs were doled out in increasing quantities to save their own skins. Not far from the Falls of St. Anthony they left the river and struck out across country to the Sioux villages in the Mille Lac region. They travelled rapidly, too rapidly for the friar in spite of his big frame, and he relates that to keep him going they set fire to the grass behind him and then taking him by the hands hurried him along in front of the flames. He was forced to wade and swim the streams and break the



thin ice sometimes with his priestly shins, while Aco and the Picard being smaller and unable to swim were carried over on the backs of the Indians. One day they painted the face and hair of the frightened Picard and forced him to sing and rattle a gourd full of pebbles to keep time to his music.

As they neared the villages, the bands prepared to separate; and the three captives were parcelled out each to a different village. The Picard came to Hennepin for a last confession before they parted, but Aco would have none of the friar's religious offices. He apparently had not fared badly at the hands of the Sioux and probably preferred their company to that of the boastful friar.

The adventures of Aco while apart from the friar have not been related. It was not many weeks before the various bands came together again and Hennepin found the Picard somewhat friendly but Aco still surly and aloof. The friar secured permission to go down the Mississippi to the mouth of the Wisconsin to look for messengers whom he said La Salle had promised to send him at that point. The Picard accompanied him, but Aco stayed with his new Indian friends who were then just starting out upon a buffalo hunt.

No word came from La Salle, but in the meantime another Frenchman — the famous *coureur de bois* Du Lhut — who with four companions had come into the Sioux country from the region of Lake Superior, had heard with astonishment reports from the In-



dians as to the friar and his two companions. He came to investigate and late in the summer of 1680 he found the three Frenchmen returning with their captors to the Sioux villages.

Du Lhut was a man of much influence with the Sioux and made vigorous and wrathful protest when he learned how the three men had been held during the summer. In fact he seems to have ransomed them from their captivity; and together the eight Frenchmen set out down the river bound for Canada. They ascended the Wisconsin, crossed the portage into the Fox, and made their way to the Mission of St. Ignace at Mackinac where they spent the winter. In the spring, Aco and the Picard, together with the friar, passed on eastward through the lakes. At Fort Frontenac Hennepin was able to refute the story that the Indians had hanged him with his own priestly cord. When they approached Montreal, Aco and the Picard, having valuable furs with them, took leave of the friar who entered the town alone to recount his many adventures to Frontenac, the Governor of New France.

It was now the summer of 1681. For several years there appears no trace of Aco. He was not a member of the party which with La Salle in 1682 paddled down the Mississippi to the sea; nor was he with La Salle's unfortunate expedition by sea from France to the Gulf of Mexico. But the lure of the West brought him back to the Valley of the Upper Mississippi, and he joined Tonty's forces in the



Illinois region. By the year 1694 he had evidently been for some time in the Valley for he signed in that year a statement drawn up by Tonty and the Illinois Indians to the effect that since 1687 the Illinois had killed or made slaves of 334 men and boys and 111 women and girls of the Iroquois tribes.

But it was the preceding year which was perhaps the most important in Aco's life. By 1693 he had become more than a mere trader. He had apparently become a business associate of Tonty and La Forest. After the death of La Salle, his two faithful lieutenants, Tonty and La Forest, were granted by the King of France a trading monopoly in the Illinois region on the same conditions which had applied to their leader. Thereupon Tonty, who had been commanding Fort St. Louis on what was known later as Starved Rock, moved down the Illinois River and built a new fort near the outlet of Lake Peoria.

This fort — called also Fort St. Louis or Fort Pimitoui — was the center of a busy fur trade, and connected with this traffic was Michel Aco. That he was successful is apparent, for there is still in existence an ancient deed signed by La Forest and "M. Aco" by which the former ceded to Aco one-half of his part of the trade monopoly held by himself and Tonty. Aco was to pay for this concession the sum of "six thousand livres in current beaver".<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This manuscript is in the possession of the Chicago Historical Society.



The new Fort St. Louis was not only the center of fur trading interests. Like most of the frontier French posts it was also closely associated with Indian missionary enterprises, and this fact became one of great significance to Aco. In the same month of April that La Forest and Aco signed their deed of sale, Father Jacques Gravier, a Jesuit priest who had been long associated with Tonty, dedicated near the new fort a chapel and beside it a cross which rose nearly thirty-five feet in the air. The French garrison at the fort fired four volleys with their guns in honor of the occasion, and the Indian looked on with interest as the black-robed priest performed the ceremonies of sanctification.

The Indian village, near which the fort and chapel had been placed, was inhabited for the most part by the Peorias, but there were also a good many Kaskaskias under the chief Rouensa. The efforts of Gravier soon bore fruit. Rouensa was disinclined to accept the teachings of the Jesuit, but the chief had a daughter seventeen years old, who became a devout convert to the faith of the French. She took for herself the name of Mary, after the mother of the white men's Christ and in the work of Father Gravier she became an enthusiastic helper.

And it so happened that as she went about from chapel to village Michel Aco saw her and fell in love with her. He went to the Kaskaskia chief, Rouensa, and asked for the hand of his young daughter. Rouensa was delighted. What a fine son-in-law this



man would make. Here was no common Frenchman but a woodsman of great renown, for fifteen years a wilderness rover and a man after an Indian's own heart. Furthermore was he not now a great white chief associated with Tonty and La Forest in the control of the fur trade?

That Aco had led more or less of a wild and reckless life meant little to Rouensa. There was much of this recklessness among the French who spent their years so far from the refinements of civilization and Gravier at his chapel beside the Illinois found this a handicap to the success of his mission. He had not found encouraging response from the Indians in the village. Particularly did the medicine men fear and hate him and oppose his teachings. Every convert meant less power and influence for them. If this priest's teachings spread, there soon would be no call for them to suck from the body of the sick the tooth of the evil spirit that plagued him. Soon their incantations would be no more to the people of the tribe than so much whistling of the wind among the lodges.

And so they had questioned their people. "Why are not our traditions good enough for you," they asked. "Leave these myths to the people who come from afar." And to the women they said: "Do you not see how the white man's faith brings death to the Indian? Have not your children died after this black-robed priest has baptized them? Has this man better medicine than we, that we should adopt



his ways? His fables are good only for his own country. We have our own and they do not make us die.”

Many there were who listened. Their children fell ill. Gravier came to their cabins and sprinkled water upon them. Their children died. Was it not his doing? They began to fear his approach. One old woman whose grandchild was sick drove the priest violently from her lodge lest he be the cause of its death.

Slowly, however, Gravier made converts, and the medicine men increased their warnings. Did not the people know that the black-robed priest kept toads from which he compounded poison for the sick? He even poisoned them with the smell of toads whenever he approached. One of the old men went through the village calling out “All ye who have hitherto hearkened to what the black gown has said to you, come into my cabin. I shall likewise teach you what I learned from my grandfather and what we should believe.” So Gravier had much opposition and many discouragements.

One day Father Gravier received a visit from the chief Rouensa and his wife, who brought with them their daughter and Aco who had sued for her hand in marriage. The mission of the chief was soon told but the interview did not end as he wished for Mary had risen in revolt. She did not wish to marry. Her heart, she said, was so full of love for the God



of the white men, whose mother's name she bore that there was no room for love of anybody else.

Entreaties proved useless, threats only increased her determination. Rouensa appealed to the priest. Gravier replied that God did not command her not to marry, but that she could not be forced to do so. She alone must decide. Full of wrath the chief departed, convinced that Gravier had prevented Mary from agreeing to the marriage. And Aco, bitter in his disappointment, blamed the priest with no less vigor because he was a white man.

As was his custom Gravier walked over to the village later in the day and passed among the lodges calling the Indians to prayer at the chapel. As he passed the lodge of Rouensa the enraged chief came out and stopped him. "Inasmuch as you have prevented my daughter from obeying me", he said, "I will prevent her from going to chapel", and he continued to scold him and bar the way to those who followed the priest.

Gravier returned to the chapel and held his services. And there with the others, responding to all the prayers and chants, was Mary. At the close of the meeting she came to Gravier and said that her father had driven her in wrath from his lodge. That night Rouensa the Kaskaskia chief called together all the other chiefs and told them that the black gown prevented marriages between the French and the Indians; and he urged them to keep their women



and children from going to the chapel. Most of them were ready enough to agree.

In spite of their efforts there were fifty who gathered in the chapel the next day and Mary was among them. The chiefs redoubled their efforts and at the next service there were only about thirty who gathered with Mary at Gravier's altar. Hardly had the priest begun to chant the mass when a man entered armed with a club. Seizing one of the worshippers by the arm he said to the gathering:

“Have you not heard the chief's orders? Obey them and go out at once.”

The girl he seized stood fast. Gravier walked up to him.

“Go out, thyself”, he said, “and respect the house of God.”

“The chief forbids them to pray”, spoke the man with the club.

“And God commands them to do so”, replied the priest.

Finding his efforts in vain, the man finally withdrew and the chants and prayer continued. For two days Rouensa alternately wheedled and threatened his daughter, and Aco joined in maligning the priest.

“I hate him”, said Mary of her suitor, “because he always speaks ill of my father the black gown.”

But at the end of two days she came to Gravier. “I have an idea”, she said, “I think that if I consent to the marriage, my father will listen to your words and will induce others to do so.” And Gravier



agreed to her suggestion though he cautioned her to make it clear to her parents that it was not their threats which had brought about her consent.

She told her parents of her new determination. And they and Aco came to the chapel to find out from the priest if it were true. And so the arrangements were made; and sometime apparently in the late summer or early fall of 1693, the Indian maiden and the French fur trader were married by Father Gravier according to the rites and ceremonies of the Catholic church.

It might be easy to draw the curtain here and assume that they lived happily ever after. But Gravier's account in the *Jesuit Relations* is so full of details that one is able to add much to the account. The priest relates with great joy that Michel Aco, moved by the gentleness, the innocence, and the devotion of his wife, and ashamed that a young and almost uninstructed child of the woods could teach him so much that was good, gave up his evil ways. He hardly recognized himself, he told the priest.

And the chief Rouensa and his wife, persuaded by Mary and her husband, came asking to be baptized. It is true that not long afterwards Mary found her mother, armed and revengeful, setting out like an Amazon, in company with her husband, to take death vengeance upon her brother who in a spirit of anger had killed one of her slaves. "I shall go to the church", she said, "if I am revenged". But even in the face of this plain and evident call to the



duty of vengeance, the mother finally gave up to her daughter's entreaties, let her brother go in peace and came to the black gown to confess.

The chief gave a great feast and announced his allegiance to the priest and his teachings, and scores of his followers came to be baptized at the wilderness chapel beside the fort and the river. Mary helped the priest in teaching the children and the mission flourished.

A register of baptisms in the Kaskaskia mission completes the story of Aco and Mary. In the year 1695 there was born in the village a half-French papoose whom Father Gravier baptized on March 20, 1695, and to whom the proud parents gave the name Pierre Aco. The records show numerous entries in which Aco and Mary acted as godfather and godmother at the baptism of children, and in 1702 the records note the baptism of another child of Aco and Mary, a son born on the 22nd of February and given the name Michel after his father. With these records (which are themselves beginnings) comes to an end the known history of Michel Aco, Frenchman, and Mary Aramipinchicoue, Kaskaskia maiden.

JOHN C. PARISH