

## Julien Dubuque

A light canoe skimmed swiftly down the Mississippi from Prairie du Chien. In it sat a lone French Canadian, skillfully plying his paddle. He was not a large man, but had the appearance of being able-bodied and alert. Neatly tucked away in the bow of his tiny craft was a bundle containing many presents of blankets, brilliantly colored cloth, combs, broaches, armbands, wristbands, earbobs, and many other trinkets. Some guns and scalping knives might also have been seen. Under his steady, powerful stroke, the light craft darted by the Turkey and Little Maquoketa rivers and on to the mouth of Catfish Creek. There stood the Fox Indian village of Kettle Chief with smoke curling lazily upward from the many lodges.

By the treaty of September 3, 1783, the victorious American colonies had acquired the land east of the Mississippi while Spain retained the lead mines and the territory west of the great river. Most of the Indians, who had been sent to guard the mines during the American Revolution, had returned to their homes. Only the Foxes remained under their leader Kettle Chief. Delighted with their surroundings and stimulated by the discovery of a rich lead mine, they determined to settle permanently on Catfish Creek. They

laid absolute claim to the entire mineral region west of the Mississippi and steadfastly refused to permit any white man to work the mines.

Still the Foxes did not feel unfriendly to this gay young Frenchman who had beached his canoe at their very door. The happy Indian children, tumbling about with their pets or imitating their elders in the hunt or at war, paused in their play to greet him. Even the busy squaws looked up from their work and smiled while the old men cast an approving eye after the friendly Frenchman as he entered Kettle Chief's lodge and deposited his presents. The Foxes called him *La Petite Nuit*, or *Little Night*, because of his swarthy complexion. His real name was Julien Dubuque.

Dubuque was born on the banks of the majestic St. Lawrence River on January 10, 1762. Of Norman descent, he sprang from several generations of hardy Canadian pioneers. Jean Dubuque, the first of his line to settle in New France, married Marie Hotot at Quebec in 1668. Their son Romain married Anne Pinel in 1693 and became the father of a boy, Augustin, in 1707. Julien Dubuque was the youngest of a family of thirteen who blessed the union of Augustin Dubuque and Marie Maillot. He was born at St. Pierre-les-Becquets, Nicolet County, in the district of Three Rivers.

Little is known of the early life of Julien Dubuque. It is said he was well educated as a youth, having at-

tended the parish school as well as classes at Sorel. Following his father's death in 1783, he settled at Prairie du Chien and soon made the acquaintance of Kettle Chief's band. Spurred by the possibility of wealth hidden in the hills about their village and possibly encouraged by Marie Anne Cardinal, Dubuque made "many voyages" to the Fox village on Catfish Creek. He lavished presents upon the Indians and appeared ever eager to serve them. Legend also associates his frequent visits to the village with a pretty Indian maiden, Potosa, shy but evidently responsive to the young man's wooing. The beautiful Potosa, it is said, finally became his wife. Little Night himself was adopted by the tribe.

Dubuque steadily ingratiated himself into the good will of the Foxes and on September 22, 1788, they granted him possession of the mines. The contract permitted Julien Dubuque "to work at the mine as long as he shall please, and to withdraw from it, without specifying any term to him; moreover, that they sell and abandon to him all the coast and the contents of the mine discovered by the wife of Peosta, so that no white man or Indian shall make any pretension to it without the consent of Mr. Julien Dubuque; and in case he shall find nothing within, he shall be free to search wherever he may think proper to do so, and to work peaceably without any one hurting him, or doing him any prejudice in his labors. Thus we, chiefs

and braves, by the voice of all our villages, have agreed with Julien Dubuque, selling and delivering to him" the privileges cited in the contract.

Jubilant over his success, Dubuque hastened to the lead mines with ten white laborers. He improved the land, cleared an extensive farm, and constructed upon it houses and a horse mill; he raised crops; he dug lead ore and smelted it in a furnace constructed for that purpose. His activity and enterprise were said to be varied and amazing. Moreover, he exercised such influence over the Indians on both sides of the Mississippi River that not only the Foxes but the Winnebagos as well habitually consulted him on matters of importance.

His ten white companions served as teamsters, smelters, storekeepers, woodsmen, boatmen, and overseers of the mines. The work was done entirely by the old Indians and squaws, the warriors and young men considering such labor to be beneath their dignity. The methods used at the diggings were of a primitive nature: the shovel and the hoe, the pickaxe and the crowbar were used, but no blasting was done. No shafts were sunk and the windlass and bucket were unknown. Drifts were run into the hills as far as possible and the mineral was then dragged out in baskets to the smelter where it was reduced to bars or pigs.

Not content with confining his activities to what

is now Iowa, Dubuque appears to have sent his prospectors to the east side of the Mississippi in the Fever River country. Indians were also employed in this capacity, and as soon as a discovery was reported Dubuque would send a Canadian or half-breed to prove the claim and sometimes work it. Usually, however, the Indians were allowed to dig out the ore and drag it to his trading house on the west side of the river. They piled their ore at the bottom of the shaft into tough deer-skins. These were hoisted to the surface or dragged up inclined planes by long thongs of hide. When mining became too complex for their simple tools the Indians abandoned their leads which were afterward worked by white men with improved appliances and found to be the best in the region.

In the spring and fall Dubuque went to St. Louis with his lead and exchanged it for goods for his Indian trade. Two or three boats were required to convey the heavy freight and several of his Canadians were needed to man them. His arrival at St. Louis was the occasion of genuine rejoicing in that frontier community and he was cordially received by the leading citizens of the town.

Julien Dubuque was a man of striking appearance. According to James G. Soulard of Galena, who knew and conversed with him at St. Louis, Dubuque was a "man below the usual stature, of black hair and eyes, wiry and well built, capable of great endurance, and

remarkably courteous and polite, with all the suavity and grace of the typical Frenchman. To the ladies he was always the essence of politeness." His popularity and versatility was demonstrated at a ball given in his honor and attended by leading citizens of St. Louis. "At one point of the festivities," an eye witness observed, "Dubuque took a violin from one of the performers, and executed a dance to the strains of his own music, which was considered a great accomplishment, and was received with tremendous applause."

A significant characteristic of the enterprising Frenchman was his extreme caution in fortifying his claims to the mines that the Foxes had granted him permission to exploit. Late in September, 1788, he secured permission to erect markers or monuments at the confluence of the Little Maquoketa and the Têtes des Morts with the Mississippi. These were to serve as concrete evidence of the upper and lower boundaries of his domain. Eight years later he humbly petitioned Governor-General Carondelet for the confirmation of his title to the land:

Your excellency's very humble petitioner, named Julien Dubuque, having made a settlement on the frontiers of your government, in the midst of the Indian nations, who are the inhabitants of the country, has bought a tract of land from these Indians, with the mines it contains, and by his perseverance has surmounted all the obstacles, as expensive as they were dangerous, and, after many voyages, has come to

be the peaceable possessor of a tract of land on the western bank of the Mississippi, to which [tract] he has given the name of the "Mines of Spain," in memory of the government to which he belonged. As the place of settlement is but a point, and the different mines which he works are apart, and at a distance of more than three leagues from each other, the very humble petitioner prays your Excellency to have the goodness to assure him the quiet enjoyment of the mines and lands, that is to say, from the margin of the waters of the little river Maquanquitois [Maquoketa] to the margin of the Mesquabysnonques [Tetes des Morts], which forms about seven leagues on the west bank of the Mississippi, by three leagues in depth, and to grant him the full proprietorship ["peaceable possession" is the proper translation of the original] thereof, which the very humble petitioner ventures to hope that your goodness will be pleased to grant him his request. I beseech that same goodness which makes the happiness of so many subjects, to pardon me my style, and be pleased to accept the pure simplicity of my heart in default of my eloquence. I pray Heaven, with all my power, that it preserve you, and that it load you with all its benefits; and I am, and shall be all my life, your Excellency's very humble, and very obedient, and very submissive servant.

J. Dubuque.

What a consummate plea by the adroit Frenchman! Small wonder that Baron Carondelet, after being assured that affirmation did not entail any encroachment on the exclusive trading privileges which a robust young Irishman named Don Andrew Todd had in the Upper Mississippi Valley, granted the petition of this hard-working owner of the Mines of Spain. It was

a princely tract which Julien Dubuque had gained. Even the trading restrictions were of small consequence, for Todd fell a victim of yellow fever and died late in 1796.

Dubuque quickly became familiar with all the superstitions and beliefs of the Fox Indians and apparently did not hesitate to practice weird tricks of magic and incantations upon them. It is said the Indians idolized him, placing greater faith in Little Night than in their own sorcerers and medicine men. The wily Frenchman claimed to be immune from the bite of poisonous snakes and handled them with perfect impunity.

One local tradition relates that on a certain occasion Dubuque got into a quarrel with the Indians who were not inclined to grant a request. Incensed at their stubborn refusal, Dubuque threatened to set Catfish Creek on fire. Still the Foxes remained obdurate. Little Night was nonplused and went to his cabin to find a way out of this quandary. That evening under cover of darkness a couple of Dubuque's white companions carried a dark object up Catfish Creek. Just above the bend that hid their actions from the village they halted and poured the contents of the barrel into the water. Dubuque, now in perfect control of himself, again called the Indians into council and repeated his demand. Still the Foxes sullenly refused. For a moment Little Night and his red brothers glared defiantly at each other. Then the Frenchman stooped, snatched



a firebrand from the fire, and hurled it into Catfish Creek. In a twinkling the entire creek burst into flames as the brand struck the surface of the stream and ignited the oil that floated by. Terrified at Little Night's cool announcement that he would burn their villages and even the Mississippi, the Indians capitulated and granted every request.

Despite his energy, perseverance, and chicanery, Dubuque did not prosper. In some way he became heavily indebted to Auguste Chouteau, a wealthy merchant of St. Louis. Unable to meet his obligations Dubuque sold seven undivided sixteenths of all the Mines of Spain for \$10,848.60. This embraced a tract containing 72,324 arpents taken from the southern part of Dubuque's estate. Dubuque was to retain complete possession of the land during his lifetime when all the "works, furnaces, buildings, improvements", made by him were to come into the full and peaceful possession of Chouteau, his heirs and assigns. Following the transfer, a statement dated November 12, 1804, showed a balance of \$4,855.82 due to Dubuque, half of which was to be payable the following year in deer-skins, merchandise, taffeta, and the country's productions. The remainder was due in 1806 — four hundred dollars in deer-skins and the balance in "merchandise, taffetas, whiskey, etc."

A fortnight after Chouteau gained this concession, on November 3, 1804, William Henry Harrison, then

Governor of the Territory of Indiana, signed a treaty with the Sauks and Foxes whereby the Indians agreed to give up all lands east of the Mississippi and south of the Wisconsin. Appended to this treaty was an additional article declaring it must not be construed to "affect the claim of any individual or individuals who may have obtained grants of land from the Spanish government, and which are not included within the general boundary line laid down in this treaty, provided that such grant have at any time been made known to the said tribes and recognized by them."

Dubuque apparently enjoyed the peaceful possession of his claim throughout the remainder of the Spanish régime in Iowa. The retrocession of Louisiana to France in October, 1800, together with its sale by Napoleon to the United States in April, 1803, gave the Americans jurisdiction over the entire region west of the Mississippi.

Ever affable and polite, Dubuque was none the less adroitly evasive when silence was demanded. Thus, when Lieutenant Zebulon M. Pike arrived at the lead mines on September 1, 1805, he was "saluted with a field-piece, and received every mark of attention". But Dubuque was suspicious. Noticing that Pike was apparently ill, he persuaded the young lieutenant not to inspect the mines, since they were six miles distant and no horses could be provided. Pike reluctantly agreed and proposed instead a series of questions.

Dubuque's answers, however, seemed "to carry with them the semblance of equivocation".

1. What is the date of your grant of the mines from the savages?

Ans. The copy of the grant is in Mr. Soulard's office at St. Louis.

2. What is the date of the confirmation by the Spaniards?

Ans. The same as to query first.

3. What is the extent of your grant?

Ans. The same as above.

4. What is the extent of the mines?

Ans. Twenty-eight or twenty-seven leagues long, and from one to three broad.

5. Lead made per annum?

Ans. From 20,000 to 40,000 pounds.

6. Quantity of lead per cwt. of mineral?

Ans. Seventy-five per cent.

7. Quantity of lead in pigs?

Ans. All we make, as we neither manufacture bar, sheet-lead, nor shot.

8. If mixed with any other mineral?

Ans. We have seen some copper, but having no person sufficiently acquainted with chemistry to make the experiment properly, cannot say as to the proportion it bears to the lead.

Fortune no longer seemed to smile on Julien Dubuque. Each year he encountered financial reverses and sank more deeply in debt. On June 3, 1807, he penned a letter from Prairie du Chien to the firm of Rochebleve and Porlier, two enterprising merchants

at Mackinac, apologizing for the meager invoice of thirty-two packs of furs he was enclosing.

“Probably you will be astonished at so small returns this year”, he wrote. “It is true, but consider the circumstances which have caused this small result. For seeing the fine appearance of last autumn I arranged with 8 men to trap beaver on the Missouri. I had sent them An Outfit to make their entrance into the village and entrench it etc. When they had gone ten days journey or had camped ten times they met the Sioux of Des Moines river, and had a little Broil with them They all gave up the enterprize and came to pass the winter opposite their village eating up their maize since they had no meat to eat. This spring they came to return to me what remained, their guns, traps and Kettles, and I refused to accept them only replying that the loss was total. I told them that these credits remained for another year, which they must make up. But this Misfortune makes me wish to give up trading and I will really quit it when affairs have become settled up.

“I pray you not to be apprehensive for the Balance that remains against me — it is true that I am on the wrong side of the account. But when I die I have funds that belong to me that will more than equal the balance that is owing you. For all the small debts that I owe you I would much prefer to pay in peltry than to draw on you for money.”

But Dubuque's efforts to retrieve his fortune seemed to be hopeless. Already deeply involved with Auguste Chouteau, he found it increasingly difficult to meet his obligations. At the time of his death in 1810, the proud owner of the Mines of Spain was pronounced bankrupt.

When the Indians learned of the death of Little Night they were thunderstruck. For years he had been a brother to them. They sought his advice in time of danger and had implicit faith in him as a great medicine man. They exhibited the deepest grief at his loss. Indians came for miles around to attend his funeral, while chiefs and warriors vied with each other for the honor of carrying his remains to the grave. Tradition has pictured a sorrowful procession filing its way to the top of the high bluff on the north bank of Catfish Creek overlooking the mighty Mississippi. After a number of brilliant funeral orations the Indians chanted the death-song of a brave and returned mournfully to their village. Soon afterward his faithful French Canadians placed a cedar cross over his grave. On it they inscribed in French: "Julien Du Buque, Mineur de la mine d'Espagne, morait le 24 Mars, 1810 — age de 45½ annees."

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