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Perrot's Mines

Seventeen years after the voyage of Joliet and Marquette, a band of forty scantily-clad but elaborately tattooed Miami Indians made their way from the banks of the Mississippi River to Green Bay. They sought a Frenchman, Nicolas Perrot, a sturdy, well-knit trader of whom they had heard stirring tales. Besides their regular equipment of guns, blankets, knives, and tomahawks, each warrior carried four beaver skins. It was sometime in 1690 that they met Perrot at the Jesuit Mission. After exchanging greetings the chief stepped forward and ordered his braves to pile the one hundred and sixty beaver skins in two heaps before Perrot. The chief himself presented the wondering Frenchman with a piece of ore which came from a very rich lead mine that he had found on the bank of a stream which emptied into the Mississippi.

Having given these tokens of friendship, the Miami begged Perrot to locate a trading post near their vil-

lage so that they could barter their peltries with him for knives, guns, powder, blankets, beads, and trinkets of all kinds. Their village stood on the eastern bank of the Mississippi about twenty-four leagues below the mouth of the Wisconsin River. Perrot promised that he would establish a post among them within twenty days and the Miami departed rejoicing.

Ever alert for new wealth and power, Perrot lost no time in repairing to the Miami village. Born in 1644, the intrepid Frenchman had begun his life among the Indian tribes of the Great Lakes region as early as 1665. During the next forty years or more he served as *engagé* to the Jesuit missionaries, *coureur de bois* and fur trader, explorer, and agent of the French government at Quebec. He had been with Daumont de Saint Luson at Sault Ste. Marie on June 14, 1671, when that colorful soldier, with a piece of sod in one hand and a drawn sword in the other, took possession of all the "countries, rivers, lakes, and streams contiguous and adjacent" to that spot in the name of "the most high, mighty and redoubted Monarch, Louis XIV". His faithful service had won for him the title "Commander of the West" in 1685, whereupon he had begun the construction of Fort St. Nicolas at the mouth of the Wisconsin River and Fort Perrot and Fort St. Antoine on Lake Pepin. In emulation of Luson, Perrot had taken possession of the land drained by the Mississippi on May 8, 1689, amid the chanting

of Latin hymns, shouts of "vive le roi", and salvos of musketry. Staring savages had viewed these strange performances with wonder and amazement.

Perrot located his post among the Miami Indians opposite some lead mines on the bank of the Mississippi "below the Ouiskonche [Wisconsin River], in a place very advantageously situated for security from attacks by the neighboring tribes". The lead mines of the Upper Mississippi were located in the region which now comprises northwestern Illinois, southwestern Wisconsin, and in that portion of eastern Iowa immediately adjoining the other two States. More precisely, deposits of lead were found in what are now Jo Daviess and Carroll counties, Illinois; Grant, Iowa, and Lafayette counties, Wisconsin; and Dubuque County, Iowa. It is possible that the lead mines of the Miami Indians were in the neighborhood of Galena: if so, the fort was built on the bluff at Têtes des Morts Creek in Iowa, ten miles below Dubuque. It is more likely, however, that these mines were located at the mouth of Catfish Creek just below Dubuque, which means that the post, according to the ambiguous record, was established in Illinois on the bluff overlooking present-day Dunleith.

The mine proved to be a rich vein, but one of Perrot's associates, Bacqueville de la Potherie, declared it was "difficult to obtain the ore, since the mine lies between two masses of rock — which can,

however, be cut away. The ore is almost free from impurities, and melts easily; it diminishes by a half, when placed over the fire, but, if put into a furnace, the slag would be only one-fourth." Perrot taught the Indians some crude mining methods but neither he nor the Miami remained long in that vicinity.

Later, other Indians learned to work deep mines by carrying down wood, building fires, pouring water on the heated rocks, and digging the mineral out with curiously improvised tools such as "buck horns, hoes, old gun-barrels and the like. Most of the labor was performed by the squaws, who drew out the ore thus extracted in birch-bark 'mocoeks', and then placed it in a crude furnace built of logs, set fire to the whole, and as the lead melted and ran down, scraped out a place large enough for it to settle and form the large flat pieces, known as 'plats', in which it was transported. Each of these bars weighed from thirty to seventy pounds, and hundreds of tons of lead were made by these crude methods."

During the short time that he remained at his post in the lead region, the crafty and energetic Perrot gained a powerful influence over the Indians. On one occasion, for example, he persuaded the incensed Miami chief to go buffalo hunting in the Iowa country instead of making war against the Sioux. Their method of hunting the shaggy monarch was unique. Having set fire to the grass in a wide circle around the

animals, they posted themselves with their bows and arrows opposite an open passage. The buffalo, in attempting to escape the flames, were compelled to pass the Miami, who killed large numbers of them.

Perrot left his post at the lead mines in 1692 but in the few years he resided in or near the Iowa country he left his name indelibly associated with the region. When Pierre Charles le Sueur passed by the lead district in 1700 his journalist, Penicaut, observed Perrot's lead mines on both sides of the river. Three years later, in 1703, William de l'Isle's map of New France noted the location of the same mines. Subsequent cartographers, enlightened by the journals of explorers, missionaries, and traders, added detailed information to their maps.

Although Perrot was the first white man known to have worked the lead mines, others had prior knowledge of the region. Radisson and Groseilliers were apparently aware of their existence as early as 1658, while Baron de Lahontan spoke of the mineral wealth of the Upper Mississippi thirty years later. Henry Joutel observed in 1687 that travellers who had visited the "upper part of the Mississippi affirm that they have found mines of very good lead there." Moreover, French traders on the Illinois River had purchased lead in 1690 from Indian mines on what afterwards came to be known as the Galena River.

Dazzled by news of untold wealth, France entered

into an era of speculation in which the lead mines played no small rôle. On the eve of his departure from France following his appointment as Governor of New France, La Mothe Cadillac painted in brilliant colors the commercial possibilities of Louisiana for Antoine Crozat, a wealthy and influential capitalist. Cadillac succeeded in securing a charter for Crozat, valid for fifteen years, which granted exclusive trading rights in Lower Louisiana below the mouth of the Ohio. While the grant did not include the lead mines in the Iowa country it served as a stepping stone to a project which became not only a vital concern of France but attracted the attention of the entire financial world of Europe.

Crozat, after sustaining a loss of a million and a quarter livres, voluntarily gave up his charter. But in August, 1717, a new organization was chartered under the name "Company of the West", but better known as the Mississippi Company. Devised by the ingenious John Law, a Scotchman, gambler, and adventurer, this get-rich-quick scheme was in reality a complete trade monopoly of Louisiana. The company had sole ownership of all the mines that it developed, free disposal of forts, ports, and depots, besides innumerable other benefits and privileges. When the "Mississippi Bubble" burst it shook the very foundations of France. But in the three years of its existence, while frenzied speculation and fantastic hopes of enormous fortune were

rampant, Perrot's lead mines served as a tempting bait that ensnared many a hapless investor.

The sudden debacle of John Law's "Mississippi Bubble" served to curtail interest in the lead mines. Nevertheless, they continued to be worked intermittently by phantom white men and their no less shadowy red brothers. Concerning the wasteful methods of "eighteen or twenty" miners who were operating in the lead region in 1743, Major de Gruis, a French officer stationed at Kaskaskia, declared: "They cut down two or three big trees and divide them in logs five feet long; then they dig a small basin in the ground and pile three or four of these logs on top of each other over this basin: then they cover it with the same wood, and put three more logs, shorter than the first, on top, and one at each end crossways. This makes a kind of box, in which they put the mineral, then they pile as much wood as they can on top and around it. When this is done, they set fire to it from under; the logs burn up and partly melt the mineral. They are sometimes obliged to repeat the same operation three times in order to extract all the matter." The residue, after falling into the basin, formed a lump which was afterward melted into bars weighing from sixty to eighty pounds to facilitate its transportation to Kaskaskia. "This is done with horses, who are quite vigorous in the country", the observant French officer wrote. "One horse carries generally

four or five of these bars." Despite the wasteful methods of mining and the archaic means of transportation which existed in the lead region, some of the mines were said to have yielded over 2000 bars a year. Moreover, the men worked only four or five months each year.

The lead from Perrot's mines did not remain at Kaskaskia. By the close of the French régime considerable activity was noted on the west side of the Mississippi. "The French have large boats of 20 tons, rowed with 20 oars, which will go in *seventy odd days* from New Orleans to the Illinois", wrote Captain Henry Gordon in his journal in 1766. "These boats go to the Illinois twice a year, and are not half loaded on their return". If there had been "any produce worth sending to market," they could have carried it "at no great expence. They, however, carry lead, the produce of a mine on the French side of the river, which yields but a small quantity, as they have not hands to work it. These boats, in times of the floods, which happen only in May and June, go down to New Orleans from the Illinois in 14 and 16 days." Even though Captain Gordon may have been referring to the mines in Missouri, a great quantity of lead from the Upper Mississippi region must have found its way to the outside world through the port of New Orleans.

France retained possession of both sides of the Mississippi until 1762 when impending defeat by the

English in the French and Indian wars caused Louis XV to cede the land west of the Mississippi secretly to Spain. England acquired the territory east of the Mississippi from France but did not take possession until April 21, 1764. Thus the substance of French colonial dreams was lost. An empire whose limits were marked by Quebec and New Orleans — the mighty stage which, during a century and a half of exploration, had felt the tread of soldiers, traders, miners, and priests; whose wealth was the object of exploitation by the Hundred Associates, Antoine Crozat, and John Law and his "Company of the West" — this vast domain had melted away. Even Perrot's Mines were divided at a stroke of the pen to become the possession of both Spain and England.

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