

When Iowa Was Young

Two hundred years ago most of North America belonged to France. From his seat of authority in old Quebec the personal representative of King Louis XV sent his agents — the explorers, soldiers, and traders — far into the wilderness surrounding the Great Lakes, while Louisiana — the vast, unmeasured region west of the Mississippi — was ruled from New Orleans. At strategic points along main-travelled routes, little settlements of Frenchmen flourished. Impregnable Quebec stood at the doorway of the continent. Farther up the broad St. Lawrence, Three Rivers and Montreal prospered in none too friendly rivalry, while distant Mackinac and Detroit were the chief outposts on the Lakes. In the Illinois country — the very heart of New France — Cahokia and Kaskaskia, stimulated by John Law's fantastic "Mississippi Bubble", were thriving villages of several hundred *habitants*, and Fort Chartres, thirty or forty miles below the mouth of the muddy Missouri, was known as "the centre of life and fashion in the West." But throughout the whole country the population consisted mainly of Indians.

For a century and a quarter French soldiers, bold explorers, black-robed priests, and venturesome traders had been penetrating toward the interior —

each intent upon his own mission. Conquest, exploration, missionary zeal, and the fur trade were the interests that had driven the pioneers of France into the wilderness of the new world, seeking their heart's desire in the face of untold danger and hardship. Hither and thither on the lakes and rivers they had plied their birch canoes. Forts had been built, lonely trading posts established, and heathen savages converted to the white men's faith. But the Indians as a whole had clung tenaciously to their customary habits of life — hunting their food along the streams and on the prairie, making "medicine" against disease and famine, moving their abode where circumstance directed, and raising the tomahawk against their foes.

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, however, the red men had lost their economic independence. Trained in the ways of French traders, the savages of the "Upper Country" had developed new tastes. Silver and copper ornaments from Paris seemed far preferable to their former wampum belts and colored feathers; spears and arrows lost their potency in comparison with thunderbelching firearms; and they wanted whisky with a passion that would not be denied.

In return for the goods of civilization, the French traders demanded peltries. The greed of the Europeans seemed inexorable. No longer were the Indians free to go on the hunt when they pleased. They were compelled to range farther and farther

into the forest in search of game, and their catch was never sufficient. They abandoned their former villages and clustered their tepees around the trading posts at Green Bay, La Point, Mackinac, Miami, and Detroit. There they were fed and clothed by the French, while Jesuit and Sulpician missionaries baptized their papooses, counselled the wayward, and buried their dead.

The French and Indians might have continued to live together in harmony had it not been for the recalcitrant Foxes who refused to submit to white paternalism. The Foxes lived in a strategic location along the Wisconsin River and consequently were in a position to cut off communication by way of the famous old Fox-Wisconsin route to the Upper Mississippi and the rich fur-bearing lake region of Minnesota. No Frenchman passed that way except at the risk of his life. Moreover, the Foxes, by means of an alliance with the warlike Sioux to the west, were able to contend with the French on somewhat even terms. They made war incessantly upon the Illinois and other faithful tribes, until at last the scalping knife became so busy there was no time or place for gathering peltries. The fur trade was on the verge of ruin. Trappers and traders were no longer safe, and energy that would have been used in tracking the beaver was employed in hunting human Foxes.

The story of the warfare which followed during the next half century of conflict presents a repulsive

succession of cruel deeds and bloody scenes. At one time two hundred Fox warriors were put to death without mercy at Detroit. Neighboring tribes continually harrassed the hated Foxes. In 1730, after a season of fierce fighting, the fleeing Renards, as the French called the Foxes, were overtaken and almost exterminated. This terrible blow seemed to have so completely destroyed all possibility of further resistance that the French decided to reëstablish their post at Green Bay and to resume their former sway.

In 1733, however, an incident occurred which led to renewed hostilities. A French officer, Nicolas Coulon de Villiers, was shot by the Indians while imprudently visiting a Sauk village without a guard. The Sauks, conscious of their inability to atone for the death of such a prominent Frenchman, cast their lot with the remnant of the Foxes and sought refuge beyond the Mississippi in the land of the Ioways. There the combined Sauk and Fox tribes continued to prey upon French traders and to pursue the timid Illinois.

In order to maintain its prestige, the government at Quebec decided to avenge the death of De Villiers and at the same time destroy the new alliance of the Sauks and Foxes. Accordingly, in the summer of 1734, Governor Beauharnois selected Nicolas Joseph de Noyelles, one of the best-known French Canadian officers, to lead a punitive expedition against the Indians in Iowa. Captain de Noyelles was said to be "greatly loved by the Savages" and to be capable

of enduring the fatigues of an arduous campaign and the hardships of inclement weather.

Reports from Jesuits and traders seemed to agree that the Sauks and Foxes had established themselves on the Wapsipinicon River, "two or three days' journey below" the Wisconsin. The two tribes occupied separate villages and it was thought that the Sauks were so anxious to obtain pardon that they could easily be induced to desert their allies. With that in view, De Noyelles was instructed to grant peace to the Sauks "if they consent to give up the Renards", but if they should refuse he was ordered to "destroy both nations" and let the "Savages eat them up".

Eighty-four Frenchmen eagerly volunteered to go on the expedition. The force consisted of seven officers, fifty or sixty cadets, sergeants, and soldiers, and "some settlers". Approximately two hundred Iroquois, Hurons, and Pottawattamies also "expressed the greatest willingness" to join the party. On August 14, 1734, this motley throng set out from Montreal on their long and perilous journey to Iowa.

At Detroit more Indians joined the expedition, impatient to taste the blood of the hated Foxes and the traitorous Sauks, but a large party of Ottawas and Algonquins failed to arrive. They sent word that they wished to live in peace and had decided that the French should forgive the Sauks.

On January 2, 1735, Captain de Noyelles marched away from Detroit at the head of his nondescript

army, and the overland journey of hundreds of miles in the dead of winter began. The route lay around the southern end of Lake Michigan, through the country of the Ouatans where the French had a post on the Wabash River about four miles from the modern city of Lafayette, Indiana. There the Indians began to cause trouble. They had discovered six lodges of Sauks not far away and wanted to put on their war paint. In spite of the captain's explanation that the lives of the Sauks should be spared if they consented to desert the Foxes and that the murder of these Indians who had sought refuge among the French would destroy the confidence of other tribes in their white friends, eighty Hurons and Pottawattamies left to "eat up those six cabins". The Iroquois remained with the expedition but took no pains to conceal their disaffection.

Some Kickapoos told Captain de Noyelles that if he went to their principal village on the Rock River near Rock Island he could find out where the Renards were dwelling. After holding a council with his men and the savages, he decided not to proceed to the Illinois villages as he had planned, but to take a more direct northwesterly course. The expedition had already "been detained by the ice" for twenty-two days and provisions were scarce. On snow-shoes and suffering from the cold of mid-winter, the company of approximately two hundred and fifty men made their way across northern Illinois to the Mississippi. There they were joined

by about forty Kickapoos who, being friendly with the Foxes, led the expedition astray and greatly lengthened the journey. Some captive Sauks reported that the Foxes were no longer living on the Wapsipinicon but "had withdrawn to the Rivière sans fourche", the Des Moines. The Sauks were told that if they did not lead "straight to the Renards" they would be "tied to the Stake to be burned".

On the twelfth of March, De Noyelles and his band reached the old Fox village on the Wapsipinicon but "found Nobody". There they remained two days on account of "the intense cold" and "without any food". Provisions were completely exhausted, "the Buffalo were moving away", and a long fast seemed to be in prospect. The savages had refused to "load themselves with dried meat so that they might advance better, for they thought that they were close to the Enemy." As the invaders moved westward, they had to be content with one "very inferior" meal a day.

Meanwhile, a scouting party which had been sent out reported the discovery of four recent camping grounds. Two days later they saw smoke. The little army moved forward stealthily by night, crossing "several Rivers" with water up to the men's waists. Finally, they halted behind a hill and the Frenchmen, "greatly fatigued, wet through, and very hungry", wrapped up in their robes to await daylight. In the morning they "reached a Wood

bordering on a River." The Indians, "who wished to have the glory of arriving first", thinking that the goal was at hand and that the hostile camp numbered only "four cabins", ran on ahead about twelve miles with the Frenchmen following as best they could. The race ended abruptly on the bank of the "very wide and rapid" Des Moines River which was full of floating ice. On the opposite side was the Fox village that they had come so far to find, but instead of four lodges there were fifty-five. The place was probably not far from the present site of the capital of Iowa.

An Iroquois chief proposed that the whole party should swim across and attack the enemy forthwith. To this suggestion De Noyelles prudently demurred. He pointed out that it was impossible to swim the river when the cold was so great, that many of the men might not be able to swim, that they would wet their arms and ammunition, that only sixty of the men had arrived, and that the enemy would be able to kill them as fast as they landed. He, in turn, proposed that the party should withdraw, move farther up stream, reassemble their full force, build rafts, and cross the river in a position to attack with some prospect of success. The Indian taunted De Noyelles for not being a man, to which the captain angrily retorted, "Dog, if thou art so brave, swim over and let us See what Thou wilt do." The chief did not avail himself of this opportunity to display his valor, but instead, accompanied by about forty

of his band and several Frenchmen, he departed into the forest.

Captain de Noyelles moved up the river about three miles in the hope of joining other parties of the expedition who had scattered in search of the enemy. Suddenly he heard death cries and came upon a wounded Indian who reported that the fighting had begun. Seven Frenchmen and twenty-three savages had crossed the river on a jam of driftwood and found themselves face to face with about two hundred and fifty Sauks and Foxes. Determined to sell their lives as dearly as possible, they fought so fiercely that the enemy took refuge in the woods. The victory was brief, however, for their adversaries soon pressed forward to surround them. De Noyelles, having crossed the river, dispatched all of the men who were with him as reinforcements. Half an hour later the captain himself deployed what forces had joined him in the meantime and advanced to the combat.

For several hours the battle raged savagely. One of the French officers was mortally wounded. Toward night the Foxes attempted to scalp some of the wounded Iroquois, whereupon De Noyelles ordered a retreat and divided his force into two bands — one to continue the fighting while the other constructed fortifications where they could protect the wounded and defend themselves. Meanwhile, the Kickapoos had quietly watched the struggle from an eminence, waiting to join the victorious side.

During the night the disgruntled Iroquois established communication with the Sauks, and on the following morning they sent for De Noyelles to come to a council of war. He went "without any hesitation". At the meeting he found some Sauks whom he tried to persuade to abandon the Foxes and return to Green Bay, but the Sauks hesitated to surrender for they feared the French would not be able to control their Iroquois allies who, when the friends of the Sauks were at a distance, would "put them in the Kettle". To this De Noyelles replied that the Sauks had nothing to fear because if the Iroquois wished to act treacherously he would oppose it and, though the French were few in number, the Iroquois "would not play" with them. But the Sauks were still skeptical, and well they might be. In truth, the Iroquois held the power of Captain de Noyelles in such utter contempt that they openly beat French soldiers in his presence and he, to maintain a semblance of authority, was compelled to pretend not to see it. Another obstacle prevented the Sauks from joining the French. The weather was too cold for their women and children to travel.

If the Sauks really had any desire to make peace with the French, the Foxes promptly suppressed it. The next day they sent word that their Renard allies had declared, "Dogs that ye are, if you abandon us, we will eat your women and children as soon as you have gone out. We will then fight against you and afterward against the French."

For four days the French in their temporary fortifications faced the Sauk and Fox village on the Des Moines River. Neither party made any move against the other. The invaders suffered severely from hunger, for during all that time they had nothing to eat but twelve dogs and a horse. Some of the soldiers ate their moccasins. When De Noyelles requested the Iroquois to send a party of braves to hunt, they blusteringly replied that the whole company must fast four or five days longer. A little later they asked to be allowed to go home. The soldiers begged their commander to lead them to the assault, for they preferred death in battle to the slow torture of starvation.

Convinced that his men could not hold out any longer, Captain de Noyelles sent a token of peace to the Sauks with the message that their father, the Governor of Quebec, would grant them their lives on condition that they terminate their alliance with the Foxes. This they agreed to do — as they had promised several times before. Obligated to be content with an empty promise that was never fulfilled, the French troops marched away down the river to old Fort Chartres and never again returned to the borders of Iowa.

JOHN ELY BRIGGS