The Story of Joliet and Marquette

by Reuben Gold Thwaites

In history there are two "discoveries of the Mississippi"; the lower waters were discovered by the Spanish explorer, De Soto (April, 1541); and the upper waters, by Frenchmen from Canada or New France. Nothing came of De Soto's discovery for over a hundred years, for the Spaniards had no love for exploration that gave no promise of mines of precious metals, and it is to the French that we give chief credit for finding the Mississippi; for their discovery immediately led the way to a general knowledge of the geography and the savages of the great valley, and to settlements there by whites.

It is seldom safe to say who was the first man to discover anything, be it in geography, in science, or in the arts; generally, we can tell only who it was that made the first record of the discovery. Now it is quite possible that Frenchmen may have wandered into the Upper Mississippi valley before Radisson and Groseilliers appeared in Wisconsin (1654); but, if they did, we do not know of it. It is still a matter of dispute whether the "great river" described in Radisson's journal was the Mississippi; some writers think that it was, and that to him and to Groseilliers belongs the honor of the first-recorded discovery. Then, again, there are some who think that in 1670 the famous fur trader La Salle was upon the Mississippi; but that is a mere guess, and honors cannot be awarded upon guesswork. We do know, however, that in 1673 Joliet and Marquette set out for the very purpose of finding the Mississippi, and succeeded; and that upon their return they wrote reports of their trip and made maps of the country. Having thus opened the door, as it were, white men were thereafter frequent travelers on the broad waterway. Hence it is idle to discuss possible previous visits; to Joliet and Marquette are due the credit of regular, premeditated discovery.

Louis Joliet, who led this celebrated expedition, was at the time but twenty-eight years old. He was born in Quebec, had been educated at the Jesuit college there, and early in life became a fur trader. He learned several Indian languages, and made numerous long journeys into the wilderness, and, like Jean Nicolet before him, was regarded by the officers and the missionaries at Quebec as a man well fitted for the life of an explorer. In 1671 he went with Saint Lusson, one of the officials of New France, to Sault Ste. Marie. St. Lusson made peace with the Indians of the Northwest, and, in the name of the king of France, took possession of all the country bordering on the upper Great Lakes.

Upon returning to Quebec, Joliet met the famous Count Frontenac, but recently arrived from Paris, where he had been appointed as governor of New France. Frontenac was curious to know more about the Mississippi River, especially whether it flowed into the Pacific Ocean, or the "Southern Sea" as it was then called in Europe. In looking about for a man to head an expedition to the great river, he could hear of no one better prepared for such service than Joliet.

In those early days, no exploring party was complete without a priest; the conversion of the savages to Christianity was quite as important, in the eyes of the king, as the development of the fur trade. Father Jacques Marquette, then thirty-six years of age, was the Jesuit missionary at Point St. Ignace, on the Straits of Mackinac. When Joliet reached that outpost, after a long and weary canoe voyage up the now familiar Ottawa River and Georgian Bay route, he delivered orders to Marquette to join his party. Joliet was a favorite with his old instructors, the Jesuits, so that the two young men were well pleased with being united upon this project, Joliet to attend to the worldly affairs of the expedition, and Marquette to the religious. Both of them had had long training in the hard life of the wilderness, and understood Indian character and habits as well as any men in New France.

It was upon the 17th of May, 1673, that the two explorers, in high spirits, set forth from Marquette's little mission at Point Ignace. Five French boatmen paddled their two canoes, and did most of the heavy work of the journey, carrying the boats and cargoes around rapids, or along portage trails from one river to another. Marquette says in his journal: "Our joy at being chosen for this expedition roused our courage, and sweetened the labor of paddling from morning to night."

The course they took was, no doubt, that followed through nearly two hundred years thereafter by persons journeying in canoes from Mackinac to Green Bay. They paddled along the northern shores of Lake Michigan and Green Bay, until they could cross over through the stormy water known as "Death's Door," to the islands beyond the Door county peninsula; and then crept down the east shore of Green Bay, under the lee of the high banks.

They seem to have made good time, for on the 7th of June they reached the village of the Mascoutins, on the south shore of Fox River, near where Berlin now is, the same village, it will be remembered, where Nicolet, Radisson, and Allouez had already been entertained. We do not know upon what day our two explorers had reached De Pere, where the Jesuit mission was established, but they probably stayed among their friends there for some days, before going up the Fox.

In his journal, the good missionary described nearly everything he saw, with much detail. The Menominee Indians interested him greatly; he calls them "the People of the Wild Oats," and tells how they gather the grain of these wild oats (or wild rice), by "shaking the ears, on their right and left, into the canoe as they advance" through the swamps. Then they take the grain to the land, strip it of much of the chaff, and "dry it in the smoke on a wooden lattice, under which they keep up a small fire for several days. When the oats are well dried, they put them in a skin of the form of a bag, which is then forced into a hole made on purpose in the ground; then they tread it out, so long and so well, that the grain being freed from the chaff is easily winnowed; after which they reduce it to meal." There are still to be seen, on the shores of Lake Koshkonong, and several other Wisconsin lakes and rivers, the shallow, bowl-like holes used by the Indians in threshing this grain, as described by Marquette two and a quarter centuries ago.

The Mascoutin village also claims much attention in the missionary's diary. The Mascoutins themselves are rude, he says; so also are the Kickapoos, many of whom live with them. At this village are also many Miami Indians, who had fled from their homes in Indiana and Ohio, through fear of the fierce Iroquois of New York. These Miamis are, Marquette tells us, superior to the Wisconsin Indians, being "more civil, liberal, and better made; they wear two long earlocks, which give them a good appearance," and are brave, docile, and devout, listening carefully to the missionaries who have visited them. The Father also describes the site of the village: "I felt no little pleasure in beholding the position of this town; the view is beautiful and very picturesque, for from the eminence on which it is perched, the eye discovers on every side prairies spreading away beyond its reach, interspersed with thickets or groves of lofty trees. The soil is very good, producing much corn; the Indians gather also quantities of plums and grapes, from which good wine could be made, if they chose. As bark for cabins is rare in this country, they use rushes, which serve them for walls and roof, but which are no great shelter against the wind, and still less against the rain when it falls in torrents. The advantage of this kind of cabins is that they can roll them up, and carry them easily where they like in hunting-time."

Above the Mascoutin village, the Fox begins to narrow, being hemmed in, and often choked, by broad swamps of reeds and wild oats. The canoe traveler who does not know the channel, is sometimes in danger of missing it, and getting entangled in the maze of bayous. Two Miami guides were therefore

obtained from their hosts, and on the 10th of June the travelers set off for the southwest, "in the sight of a great crowd, who could not wonder enough to see seven Frenchmen alone in two canoes, dare to undertake so strange and so hazardous an expedition." The guides safely conducted them to the place where is now situated the city of Portage, helped them over the swampy plain of a mile and a half in width, and, after seeing them embarked upon the broad waters of the Wisconsin River, left them "alone in an unknown country, in the hands of Providence."

The broad valley of the Wisconsin presents a far different appearance from that of the peacefully flowing Upper Fox, with its outlying marshes of reeds, and its numerous lakes. The Wisconsin, or Meskousing, as Marquette writes it, is flanked by ranges of bold, heavily wooded bluffs, which are furrowed with romantic ravines, while the channel is, at low water, studded with islands and sand bars, and in times of flood spreads to a great width. Marquette himself describes it thus: "It is very broad, with a sandy bottom, forming many shallows, which render navigation very difficult. It is full of vine-clad islets. On the banks appear fertile lands diversified with wood, prairie, and hill. Here you find oaks, walnut, whitewood, and another kind of tree with branches armed with long thorns. We saw no small game or fish, but deer and moose in considerable numbers." About ninety miles below Portage, they thought that they discovered an iron mine.

At last, on the 17th of June, they swiftly glided through the picturesque delta of the Wisconsin, near Prairie du Chien, and found themselves upon the Mississippi, grateful that after so long and tiresome a journey they had found the object of their search. Joliet's instructions were, however, to ascertain whether the great stream flowed into the "Southern Sea"; so they journeyed as far down as the mouth of the Arkansas. There they gathered information from the Indians which led them to believe that the river emptied into the Gulf of Mexico; thus the old riddle of the supposed waterway through the heart of the North American continent was left unsolved.

In returning, Joliet and Marquette came up the Illinois River, and reached Lake Michigan by portaging over to the Chicago River. They were back at the Jesuit mission at De Pere, in September. Marquette having fallen ill, Joliet was obliged to return to Quebec alone, leaving the missionary to spend the winter with his Wisconsin friends. When almost within sight of the French settlement at Montreal, at the mouth of the Ottawa River, poor Joliet lost all his papers in the dangerous Lachine rapids, and could make only a verbal report to the government. He later prepared a map of his route, with great care, and forwarded that to France; it is one of the best maps of the interior parts of North America made in the seventeenth century. Joliet, as the leader of the expedition, had hoped to receive, either in office or lands, substantial rewards for his great discoveries; but there were now new officials at Quebec, with whom he had little influence, and the recompense of this brave spirit was small. Others reaped what advantages there were in the opening of the Mississippi valley to the fur trade.

On the other hand, the unworldly priest who was his friend and companion, and who neither desired nor needed special recognition for what he had done, has, all unconsciously, won most of the glory of this brilliant enterprise. Under the rules of the Jesuit order, each missionary in New France was obliged to forward to his superior at Quebec, once each year, a written journal of his doings. Marquette prepared his report at leisure during the winter, while at De Pere, and in the spring sent it down to Quebec, by an Indian who was going thither to trade with the whites. Accompanying it was a crudely drawn but fairly accurate map of the Mississippi basin. The journal and map arrived safely, but for some reason neither was then printed; indeed, they remained almost unknown to the world for a hundred and seventy-nine years, being at last published in 1852. Marquette never learned the fate of either Joliet's elaborate records or his own simple story of the expedition, for he died in May, 1675, on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan, worn out by disease and by excessive labors in behalf of the

Indians.

By the time Marquette's journal was finally published, Joliet had been well-nigh forgotten; and to Marquette, because his journal was the only one printed, is given the chief credit in nearly every American history. The legislature of Wisconsin has placed a beautiful marble statue of the gentle Marquette, as the discoverer of the Mississippi, in the capitol in Washington; whereas the name of his sturdy chief is perpetuated only in the principal prison city of Illinois.

Source:

Thwaites, Reuben Gold. "The Story of Joliet and Marquette." *Stories of The Badger State*. New York: American Book Company. 42 – 50. Electronic.