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HENNEPIN AT THE FALLS OF ST. ANTHONY.

N. H. Winchell, Minneapolis.

[Read June 2, 1908.]

In order to appreciate the personal circumstances which characterized the historic scene of Hennepin's discovery of the falls of St. Anthony, it will be necessary to recall briefly the events that led up to the discovery.

It will be remembered that he was a Franciscan priest, somewhat of an adventurer, who had formerly been a soldier, and who had volunteered to accompany La Salle on his perilous exploration of the Mississippi river. With two traveling companions he had been dispatched by La Salle in the spring of 1680 from his fort on the Illinois river, to ascend the Mississippi and inaugurate friendly relations with the Indian tribes and incidentally to begin a trade in beaver skins, for which latter purpose he was furnished with a supply of goods and trinkets such as are desired by the natives. At the same time, geographical knowledge of the unknown regions which would serve to extend the domains of the king of France, and the conversion and baptism of the savages, which would extend the influence of the Roman Catholic church, were subsidiary objects which were to be always borne in mind.

This party was surprised and captured, and robbed, by a roving party of Sioux Indians at some point not far above the mouth of the Wisconsin river. They were conducted, as captives, across the country from some point near Dayton's bluff, in St. Paul, to Mille Lacs in Mille Lacs county, the source of the Rum river. During this arduous trip the Indians quarreled amongst themselves as to the division of the spoils which they had won, and which they laboriously carried along with them. Hennepin became sick and exhausted, but was treated by the Indians, on their arrival at the end of their journey, with a hot steam bath, for which they specially constructed a suitable hut, and after which repeated three times a week, he regained his health and his usual strength.

Hennepin remained several months amongst the Sioux at Mille Laes, where according to his account of his captivity, he was held as a captive and as a slave. It will be well to enumerate some of the deprivations which he suffered:

(a) His canoe had been broken to pieces when they left the Mississippi at St. Paul.

(b) His goods had been pillaged and divided amongst three of the Sioux bands.

(c) He was adopted by Aquipaguetin as his son, and was consigned to the care of his wives, with instructions to regard him as one of their children, as a substitute for one that had been killed by the Miami.

(e) His sacred articles were taken away from him, and in order to perform baptism on a dying child he wrested a half of a linen altar

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cloth from the hands of an Indian who had stolen it from him, and put it on the body of the baptised child.

(f) His chasuble had been desecrated by the son of Aquipaguetin, who had used it to wrap up some of the bones of his deceased relatives, and swinging the bundle over his shoulders had paraded through the village. It had then been presented to some of their allies, situated about 500 leagues to the west.

(g) Hennepin was required to serve as barber for the heads of Indian children, and as surgeon for bleeding persons afflicted with asthma, and he also administered a never-failing drug (orvietan) to others who were sick.

It appears therefore that his life with the Sioux at Mille Lacs was one of deprivation and of hunger; and when the Indians were preparing to take him on their annual buffalo hunt his fellow countrymen heaped upon him the crowning act of ingratitude and insult. The three Frenchmen were given a canoe for their joint use in descending the Mississippi; but Accault and Du Gay refused to give him passage in it, and paddled off without taking him, one of them shouting out to him that he had paddled the Franciscan far enough already. He was afterward taken in however by two Indans. It is evident that in this emergency Hennepin was reduced to the lowest pittance of earthly possessions. In this condition he was compassionately conveyed by the Indians as far as the mouth of Rum river where the whole party halted for some time for the purpose of replenishing their stock of canoes.

Events which took place here, united with what precedes, have an important bearing on the personal appearance of Hennepin at the falls of St. Anthony. At the Indian camp Hennepin remembered that La Salle had promised to send him additional supplies and messages from the Illinois, to meet him at the mouth of the Wisconsin river. This delay, at the place which is now known as Champlin, opposite the mouth of Rum river, was galling to him, and he solicited permission from the chief of the Sioux to descend in advance of meet these dispatches at the mouth of the Wisconsin. This was granted and Du Gay was also permitted to accompany him, Accault preferring to remain with the Indians. These two forlorn and adventurous Frenchmen set out in a small, leaking, birch canoe. They were given an earthen pot, and a gun and a knife. They had a single robe made of beaver skins which was to serve them together. They had no guide nor assistants. *This is the party that discovered the falls of St. Anthony.* It consisted of two, ragged and hungry Frenchmen hastening to an appointed place to get supplies and news from La Salle.

The particulars of this discovery are given briefly by Hennepin in the following words:

"This cataract is forty or fifty feet high, divided in the middle of its fall by a rocky island of pyramidal form. * * * As we were making the portage of our canoe at the falls of St. Anthony of Padua we perceived five or six of our Indians who had taken the start, one of whom had climbed an oak opposite the great fall, where he was weeping bitterly, with a well-dressed beaver-robe, whitened inside and

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trimmed with porcupine quills, which this savage was offering as a sacrifice to the falls, which is in itself admirable and frightful. I heard him, while shedding copious tears, say, addressing this great cataract: 'Thou who art a spirit, grant that the men of our nation may pass here quietly without accident, that we may kill buffalo in abundance, conquer our enemies, and bring slaves here, some of whom we will put to death before thee; the Messenecqz (Sauks and Foxes) have killed our kindred, grant that we may avenge them.'"

The significance of this prayer is understood when we recall the statements of Rev. S. W. Pond, long a missionary amongst the Sioux. According to Mr. Pond the dwelling place of the god of the waters was beneath the falls of St. Anthony. He had the form of a monster ox, and his spirit permeated all streams and lakes. He was called Oanktehi, and as his bones wer occasionally found in bogs and swamps by the superstitious natives Mr. Pond says the Indians worshipped the mastodon (or the mammoth) whose skeletons are still found in such positions. Oanktehi was the evil god, and needed to be propitiated by gifts and sacrifices. He was always contending with the thunder-bird who was the good god and presided over everything. This conflict is brought out vividly by Huggins and by Gorden in their legendary poems "Winona," and "The Feast of the Virgins."

What a setting for some painter to put upon the canvas!

Two wandering, half-starved Frenchmen portaging an old canoe along the east bank of the river.

The falls of St. Anthony just above them to the right.

The foaming rapids just below them.

A superstitious savage offering a beautiful beaver robe to Oanktehi, displaying it on the branches of an overhanging oak tree.

The rising sun in the morning sky.

The scant-forestetd hills and undulating prairies stretching from both banks into the limitless distance.

That is the psychological moment that awaits some skilful artist to be portrayed on the canvas. That is the conjunction in one great scene of the most prophetic and momentous elements in the history of Minnesota.

There is native, original Minnesota in all its untrod magnificence, pregnant with all its potential promise. There is the wild man, its sole occupant, with his feeble energy and superstitious faith.

Conjoined to these in the same scene is the tread of the first European, with all that his civilization implies. In that footstep is the embodiment of geographic exploration prompted by commerce and Christianity, the intelligence and education of Hennepin contrasted with the degradation of the savage. All the art which has followed after that scene, all the manufactures, the science, all the education, all the improved methods of human livelihood are foreshadowed and concentered in the discovery of the falls of St. Anthony. No single individual scene, no event in all our history, carries with it so much of the natural and so much of the possibility of the artificial in our

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history as the portaging of that canoe round the falls of St. Anthony by Father Hennepin and his companion Du Gay.

It is lamentable that in the Capitol of the state, on the wall of the governor's room, is a travesty of this scene—a painting on which the youth of the state are expected to look and from which to draw impressions of the historic discovery of 1680. When I first glanced at that painting I turned my face away in a feeling akin to disgust, and for three years I did not look upon it again. I have recently examined it, in order that I may be able to render a truthful description. As a work of art and fiction it may be worthy of praise, as a historical picture it is a misrepresentation and an abortion.

The painting shows seven persons, of whom five are seated and two are standing. Of the former one is black-whiskered Du Gay. He has a flint-lock gun, a buffalo gunpowder horn, and a game pouch suspended from his shoulder resting at his right side. He is well clothed and capped. On either side of him are four Indian warriors seated, and apparently interested in the speech which is being made by Hennepin. A red pipestone calumet lies across the gunwale of the canoe. At the right of the picture is an Indian squaw just approaching, with a bundle of baggage suspended by a head-strap, lying across her shoulders. She has Caucasian features and a copper-colored skin. It is to be inferred that the bundle belongs to Hennepin, and the squaw is a slave in his service. The bundle is nicely wrapped and strapped in what appears to be a Mackinac blanket, although it may be meant to indicate a beaver skin robe, for it is hard to believe that such an anachronism as a Mackinac blanket would by any one be introduced into such a painting. A birch canoe is on the rocks in the midst of the group, the ostensible means of travel for the whole seven.

Standing boldly to the front, and facing the falls, appears Hennepin. The spot is apparently some distance below the falls on the east bank. The point of view enables one to overlook the falls and see a small part of the river above, and hence must be supposed to be located on the brink of the gorge. At the same time it is plain that the portage round the falls has already been made and that the arrival of the squaw carrying Hennepin's baggage is the last act in the "carry." Hence it has to be inferred that the scene is at the lower end of the portage line, and at the place where they can again push their canoe into the river. This inherent inconsistency cannot be explained by any one except the artist.

The most remarkable character in this fantastic group, as is natural and was to be expected, is Hennepin himself. His cowl is thrown back upon his chasuble, revealing a shaven face and a tonsured caput. He stretches forward and upward both arms, in the left holding a crucifix as if he were proclaiming the double dominion of St. Anthony of Padua and of the king of France. A robe covers him down to his ankles. His feet are lightly sandaled, and his shoulders and back are covered with a chasuble which tapers downward to a narrow strip, extending about to his hips. The sleeves of the gown are large and flowing, and the priest's waist is girted by a twisted (or braided) heavy cord, the ends of which hang down the right side and

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show several ornamental enlargements. From the laborious attitude of the squaw it is evident that the whole party have but just arrived, and that the appearance of Hennepin is designed to represent him in his ordinary traveling costume, leaving it open to imagination as to what part of Hennepin's baggage the squaw carried.

The divergencies of this remarkable picture from historic truth are so glaring that the merest tyro in state history can but discern them. To the novice in state history, and to the multitudes who visit the room who know nothing about our state history it conveys a wrong impression. As a work of imaginative art it is finely executed and appropriately colored.

There is, however, a higher element in art than mere mechanical execution. True art is true to nature and to facts.

"Art is the child of nature; yes, her darling child, in whom we trace the features of the mother's face"—*Longfellow*.

In the absence of a knowledge of facts it would be warrantable to supply them, but the result ought to be labeled, not a historic painting but an imaginative restoration of history. Poems are thus built up. Novels are "based on history." Milton's "Paradise Lost," most of the dramas of Shakespeare, are of this character. But they are not history and do not claim to be history. The known events of those histories are scant or too prosaic. The poets were justifiable, in constructing their works, in supplying lacking parts.

In the case of the discovery of the falls of St. Anthony, what an opportunity for a truthful painting! the scene, the historic event, the lively description by Hennepin—the very details are all available.

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