

Narrative of Louis B. Porlier

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NARRATIVE BY LOUIS B. PORLIER. IN AN INTERVIEW WITH THE EDITOR.¹

¹ At Porlier's residence, at Butte des Morts, in 1887. The narrator died at that place in 1899.— Ed.

I was born at Green Bay, in 1815, my father being Jacques Porlier of the old trading company of Jacques Porlier and Augustin Grignon.² Three years after that, the firm built their principal trading post on Overton's Creek, flowing into the upper end of Lake Butte des Morts, two miles below the present village of that name; they had branch posts at Grand Kackalin, on the Lower Fox, and Point Boss, on the Wisconsin. None of the Company lived either at the Butte des Morts or Point Boss agency—Grignon residing at Grand Kackalin, and my father at Green Bay; the business being transacted by clerks, who were chiefly members of the two families; some of the firm visited the establishments each spring or fall. About 1826, Robert Grignon,³ a nephew of old Augustin, became permanent agent at the Grand Butte; but in 1830, he desired to set up business for himself, and I—then only 15 years of age—was sent down to succeed him. Robert opened a trading post on what is now the Benanger farm, a few miles above the Oshkosh city cemetery, and united with his mercantile operations the practice of the agricultural arts, in the crude style of the times; his venture did not prove profitable, and he never forgave himself for leaving his salaried position.

² The narrator was a son-in-law of Augustin Grignon, and assisted Dr. L. C. Draper in interviewing the latter, for *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, iii.— Ed.

³ Robert Grignon served as a lieutenant on the Stambaugh expedition, in the Black Hawk War, 1832.— Ed.

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About 1826, the federal government had established a mail route between Forts Winnebago (Portage) and Howard, the trail crossing the Wolf near our trading post, where the company kept a scow for the transportation of the carrier and such other equestrians as passed that way; the charges were 25 cents for ferrying a man and horse, in the summer season, and 50 cents when ice had to be broken; 12½ cents were charged for a gallon of oats for the horse, and 25 cents for a like quantity of corn, while the man was fed for 50 cents per meal. Pierre Paquette was the mail-contractor; but Joseph Crelié¹ and Antoine Courcielle, two relatives of his, were the actual carriers, taking the trips alternately. In those days the marshes opposite Butte des Morts were capable of bearing up a horse and rider, and, coming up the Fox valley from the southwest, travellers along the trail rode to the very edge of the Wolf River, within easy hailing distance of our post.

¹ See *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, ix, p. 293.— Ed.

My father, in 1830 or 1831, thought seriously of moving his family up to our neighborhood; and commenced to erect a log house a mile below the present village of Butte des Morts; but it was burned down, before completed, by one of the grass-fires, set by the Menominees, who had a village at the Grand Butte. Another house was soon after erected, but not then occupied. In 1834–35, the post was moved to this latter location, the house being used to accommodate the families of clerks and agents, and two more block-houses being built in the immediate vicinity—one for a store, the other for boatmen's quarters. I was not stationed here, then, having in 1833 been sent to Point Boss, with Augustin Grignon's youngest brother, Amable.

In this latter year, another trail was chosen for the mail-route, crossing what is now called Coon's Point in Ward Five of Oshkosh. George Johnson, of Shantytown, on the Lower Fox, and father to William Johnson, the Indian interpreter, desiring to take advantage of this fact, erected that season one or two log-houses at Algoma, opposite Coon's Point; bringing his family up, he commenced business ⁴⁴¹ as ferryman and tavern-keeper.

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For some reason, possibly the unprofitableness of the business, he soon sold out to Robert Grignon, who employed young Augustan Grignon, a natural half-breed son of the old trader, to manage the business for him. In 1835, he sold out to James Knaggs, a Pottawattomie half-breed, who had been for six years in the company's employ at Point Boss. I was at the Bay at the time, and I remember receiving a letter from my father, directing me to go and settle up accounts with Knaggs, as the latter was going out on an independent venture. I went, and soon after, Knaggs started to take possession of his Algoma property, having a good stock of "Indian goods;"—a stock, however, which soon dwindled down, as by that time the trading business was commencing to be far from profitable.

An impression exists that the old fur traders waxed very rich, but an erroneous one it is, I most solemnly assure you. "White man's unsartin!" is the Yankee translation of a common Indian proverb—but the Indian is himself still more uncertain. A universal scheme of credit existed among the earlier traders, whose tenure to the land on which they located was dependent on the good-will of the savages. After loading down his squaws with blankets, provisions, and trinkets, the Indian would most invariably say: "No money, now; no furs; I pay you when hunt is over," and, turning on his heel, would set up the line of march through the door. Coming back in a few moments, he would assume a sorrowful face, "How *can* I pay you, when I have no gun, no traps, no kettle. And my son and my brother and my father have no gun or traps. So lend me some." His demands were generally obeyed. The fellow might die from accident or disease that winter, or never come to see the trader again—and always lose some of the articles lent, and return the rest in a wretched condition. Transportation to the posts, also, was ever attendant with many losses; leakage, damage of craft in going over the rapids of the Lower Fox, mutiny of the Indian oar- and pole-men, and frequent strikes for higher pay, whenever it was known 442 that the trader was anxious for dispatch. When, later, better facilities for transportation were offered, the gain was more than counteracted by excessive competition on every side.

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Some contradiction exists concerning the capture of Black Hawk. David McBride¹ asserts that Chaetar and One-eyed Dekorra, of the Winnebago nation, were the personal captors of the Sac chief. In the autumn of 1832, month or two, I believe, after Col. Stambaugh's expedition, I was, in company with Are able Grignon, near Fort Winnebago, on my way to Point Boss. We met Robert Grignon coming down the Fox in a canoe, still weak from his late wounds, and accompanied by one of the government blacksmiths, from Prairie du Chien. Our parties united on the shore, and Robert told us the story of his connection with the Black Hawk capture. He was invalided at Fort Winnebago, and when convalescent was, on pleasant evenings, wont to wander several miles from the fort. One time, about the 25th of August, he was sitting on a stone, watching the sun set. He heard voices near him, and, peering through the brush, saw Black Hawk and the Prophet engaged in earnest conversation, in the Chippewa tongue, while two other Sac chiefs were standing near. The party started suddenly, grasping their rifles in readiness for defense; but when the trader arose, and showed his face, Black Hawk walked towards him with a smile, advancing his right hand to greet his white acquaintance. Then the chieftain told him of his repeated defeats; his constant flight for several weeks from the American and Winnebago runners; his determination to surrender himself to the United States agent; and his desire to have Grignon to conduct him to that official. "I am hunted down," continued Black Hawk, "like a deer by dogs. The Winnebagoes have abandoned my cause. The forests are teeming with spies of every sort, who seek my body, dead or alive, for base money. But I will not satisfy them. I will go to the American agent and give myself up, as a man should do,

1 *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, v, pp. 293–297.— Ed.

443 for flight is useless, and personal violence is not honorable. I am sure they will see how honorable I am, in this, and treat me like a chief. But I will be shot, if I am seen by the spies or soldiers; for he who kills me, gets a reward. Cowards, they would shoot from behind a bush, when I was not looking. Take me around privately, and Black Hawk will ever remember Grignon."

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In accordance with this urgent request, Grignon took the entire party through a private entrance to the fort, which he himself daily used when going upon his evening walks; and handed over Black Hawk to the American agent, who was then stopping with the garrison. The chieftain was the center of curiosity, when Grignon assembled his protégés before the agent, in the open square of the fort, but the dignified warrior ignored all needless intercourse. A lady who was present asked Grignon to request for her, the long black plume which the prisoner wore in his hair. On making the lady's plea known to Black Hawk, the savage stretched himself up to his full height, and drawing his blanket closer around him, replied: "Never shall the plume which has touched Black Hawk's head be seen upon that of a squaw!" When the agent was putting handcuffs upon the rebel chief, the latter said he never expected to be treated like that; but upon being assured that the orders were strict, and could not be disobeyed in any case, notwithstanding the admiration which all observers felt in the chief's noble conduct, he was somewhat appeased.

The particulars of Grignon's relation produced a strong effect on my young mind at the time, and I think I still retain as perfect a recollection of his very words, as if they were recited to me but yesterday.¹

¹ *Cf. Wis. Hist. Colls.*, xiii, p.465, *note*.— Ed.

Constant reference is made by some narrators to fierce battles having been fought at Grand Butte des Morts, in the early days of the Outagamie troubles. It is frequently asserted that great mounds existed here, in early days—the wholesale receptacles of the bones of luckless Sacs and Foxes. Now, I always took great interest in these matters, 444 and was a persistent searcher after Indian traditions touching upon them; and as a result can say that I never found an Indian who ever heard of such occurrences, or such mounds, at the Grand Butte. They locate all the contests at Petit Butte des Morts, including both of Morand's expeditions.¹ When I came here, in 1830, there were several mounds there, of varying sizes; the largest was on the North Menasha side, and was about one hundred feet in diameter, rising gradually from the ground to a peak in the center, which

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might have measured ten feet in height, from the level ground. It was nearly circular. The Indians said it was made by the whites, and was the burial place of Sacs and Foxes who had been killed in a great fight there, and thrown in a heap, to be covered with earth. It was probably a great deal larger when first built, and had settled, as the bodies mouldered. I never dug into one, but have seen others who have, who say they found copper tools and pottery mixed up with the bones. The Menomonees always seemed to express great indifference concerning them.

¹ See numerous references to the old Fox War, in previous volumes of this series. In vol. xvi we hope to publish a large quantity of documents thereon, recently obtained by us from the French archives in Paris. See also, in *Wis. Hist. Soc. Proc.*, 1899, pp. 204–211, Lawson's "The Outagamie Village at West Menasha."— Ed.

Grand Butte des Morts (great hill of the dead) was so named by the French, because it was a higher point of land than usual in this particular region of the Wolf valley, and was the principal burying ground for the Sacs and Foxes, and the Menomonees after them; though the latter tribe had practically abandoned it as a general cemetery, before the opening of the nineteenth century, and buried their dead at various points, wherever mortal disease or accident befell them. When the band was off upon its hunt, and a member died, the deceased was hung up in a tree, on a scaffolding of saplings, and left there until his party set out for their return, when they would gather the bodies of their deceased friends and bury them in the common field 445 at Grand Butte des Morts. The brave was always interred in a single grave, with his tools and implements of the chase, and the earth slightly rounded over the grave, as in the manner of the whites; no other mounds ever existed at this place, or wholesale burial occurred, under other circumstances.

The village at the Grand Butte, that I knew in early days, consisted of less than 100 wigwams, though accounted a large one. This was their planting ground in summer. The system of cultivation was crude, hoes being the only implements used in the preparation for and cultivation of their corn; but the land was not overburdened, as they had a rough

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system of rotation, and the crops were generally good. Each family cultivated its own patch independently; the squaws, of course, did all the work, though the men assisted in the rice harvest. Rice was obtained on the marshes opposite their village, on Lakes Apuckaway, Poygan, and Du Bœuf (Buffalo Lake), and on Willow Creek, a tributary of Lake Poygan; that and the corn were gathered in September; they kept a small quantity for the winter, and buried the rest in sandy knolls, drawing upon the supply the following summer, while preparing the crop—game being the principal food in cold weather. Harvest over, they retired to the hunting grounds, which were on the Chippewa, the upper waters of the Wolf, Wisconsin, and Fox, sometimes upon the Embarrass, and frequently as far south as Beaver Dam and Waupun. Other villages of Menomonees, more or less strong, were located as follows: two at Winneconne, on both sides of the river; at Shiocton; Crooked Nose Village, at Semple's place, near Shawano; at New London; on the Embarrass; at Tustin; at Partridge Crow, on the Wolf; and at Shawano, the headquarters of the grand sachem and principal chiefs. The Menomonees had continually many Chippewas mixed up with them, and frequent intermarriages occurred; the Winnebagoes, in the earlier days, were tabooed from select Menomonee society.

About 1885, I again assumed the position of regular clerk at the Grand Butte des Morts post. Augustin Grignon 446 moved up with his family in 1840, and I married Mlle. Grignon the following year. In 1848, at the regular payment at Lake Poygan under Colonel Bruce, a treaty was held with the Menomonees, by Commissioner Medill; the traders were there, in full force, our party being of the number. For two days, the Indians parleyed with the commissioner, but without result, when Henry S. Baird, secretary to the latter, became disgusted with their mulishness and on the morning of the third day saddled his horse and went home. Medill then appointed Morgan L. Martin as his scribe, and still parleyed through the fourth day, without success. The government, in the Cedar Point treaty of 1836, by which the Menomonees sold their possessions, had given the nation the right to hunt upon such lands as were not preëmpted, and to fish upon the larger streams and lakes, until the tribe had selected a reservation and were formally removed thereon, by

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the United States. The Menomonees had for twelve years made no efforts to seek such a reservation, and the government proposed, in this latter treaty, to bind them to make such selection within a given time, or be removed out of the State—for their existence in roving bands was injurious to settlement. The tribe would not consent, hence the trouble. On the evening of the fourth day, Martin came to Augustin Grignon's tent, and asked him to advise the chiefs to make a treaty, for it was their last chance, as in the event of a failure at this council, the president would remove them without ceremony, and they would then forfeit all right to a permanent home. Grignon summoned me, and requested that I should state the case to Oshkosh and the other chiefs. I did so, and that night a long council was held in the Indian camp; I staid for some time, to hear what was said. One chief, I now forget who, told them that Pontiac was right, when he gathered the western tribes in his uprising of 1768; that the whites were rapidly crowding them off the long bench, on which at first they had only asked a resting corner; and that final dissolution must certainly come. "The American never comes unless he wants something! Without a want, 447 he never takes us by the hand," concluded the speaker, and a wild burst of enthusiasm followed this declaration. On the morning of the next day, concluding that discretion was the better part of valor, they signed the treats; in accordance with governmental desires, and were soon after removed to the Shawano reservation. This was the last blow to the trading business of this region. It came none too early, for the disasters of many years had now quite impoverished those engaged in it; but the pursuit they could not readily abandon, for the associations of a lifetime had wedded them to its practise.