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Minnesota History Vignettes - Renville

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The King of the Minnesota Prairie

“Living in a barbaric splendor quite like an African King.”

This was a description by a visitor to the Fort of Joseph Renville in the 1830's. Renville was one of the most colorful and influential figures who helped shape the character of pre-settlement Minnesota. His early childhood history is somewhat vague due in part to the fact that he would wrap his legacy in fantastic tales that would often vary over time. What we do know is that he was the son of an insignificant French Voyager father and a Dakota mother born at the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers in 1779. From an early age Renville showed himself extremely resourceful, and he was fluent in English, French and Dakota.

The first recorded history of him was as a highly praised scout starting at age 18 for both British and American interests. After the French and Indian War, the British held title to the fur trading in Minnesota. Renville was well associated with these British traders hired frequently as a trusted guide. After the Revolutionary war he was hired in 1805 to guide Zebulon Pike through the upper reaches of the Mississippi River in a US military expedition for the purpose of establishing the American presence in their newly acquired holdings from the Louisiana Purchase.

During the war of 1812 Renville sided with the British. Due to their long-standing trading arrangements, several Native American tribes sent warriors to fight on behalf of the British against the Americans. Renville showed great ability in fulfilling the important duty as interpreter. He was charged with effectively transmitting orders of the British to the varying Native American tribes. In this role he was able to ensure that great mercy was given to the Americans as they were essentially routed by the British at all the Western frontier strongholds. He rose to the rank of captain in the British Army.

Despite the British victories of the western frontier, the United States eventually won the war of 1812. As with many of the Indians who served on behalf of the British, he took sanctuary in Canada along the Red River. Western Minnesota was not yet fully integrated in the fur trading industry in the 1820's and Renville carefully slipped back into United States in 1822. He established a fort on the far reaches of the Minnesota River on a lake named Lac qui Parle. He set up an independent company, likely secretly supplied by Canadian interest. He constructed a fort that contained his store and a stately large house. He also had his own loyal mercenary army of Métis (mixed blood) associates. The new dominant force in fur trading in the upper Midwest was the American Fur Trading Company and they wisely chose to develop a tenuous partnership with Renville by the 1830's.

Somewhere in his travels Renville developed a deep understanding of the Bible and professed a faith in Christ. Several Yankee missionaries, spurred on by the Second Great Awakening, began to appear on the Minnesota frontier in 1830's to bring salvation to the Native Americans. Renville quickly encouraged many of them to come to his fort some 150 miles west of Fort Snelling and into what must have seemed like the end of civilization at the time. Such early missionaries as Gideon Pond, Thomas Williamson and Stephen Riggs headed west and, much to their surprise, found a well constructed and supplied oasis.

Renville used his influence to make the missionaries' top objective, a translation of the Bible into Dakota, a reality, often personally providing assistance to Pond and Riggs in the interpretations. This work is today credited with playing a key role in the preservation of the Dakota language. The hymnbook Renville himself translated is still used today. It was even at this mission that the first church bell rang out across the land that would later become Minnesota thanks to Renville.

Unfortunately, by the time of Renville's death in 1846, the fur trade had collapsed. His oasis of fort and stately house were quickly deteriorating and the Lac qui Parle Mission was abandoned. He died essentially penniless and was buried in an

unmarked grave near his fort. Fortunately, thanks to the King of the Minnesota Prairie, the good news of the King of Kings was proclaimed.

To read more about Joseph Renville there is a good article here at the [Minnesota Historical Society](#).

You can also visit the [Lac qui Parle State Park](#) just outside of Montevideo. The fort and mansion are gone, but the rebuilt Lac qui Parle mission is still there.

If you don't want to travel that far west, right in Bloomington is the [residence of the Gideon Pond](#) that is surrounded by a city park.

The city's webpage also has a [good historical summation](#) of some of the early Christian missionaries to the Dakota people.

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