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Minnesota History Vignettes - William and Hester Boutwell

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A Man of Character

“Providence directed me to send a dispatch 3 days march across the wilderness to Yellow Lake with a proposal to Miss Hester Crooks. The seventh day the messenger brought me an affirmative and the next day I packed up my affects, swung my pack and marched.”*

The above-mentioned dispatch that missionary William Boutwell sent to Miss Hester Crooks was that of a proposal to marriage. Before you judge his unusual choice of methods, it is best understand the circumstances that led to this heartfelt romance.

William came from hearty New Hampshire stock and was educated at Dartmouth and Andover. He was ordained a Presbyterian minister and answered the call to be a missionary to the Lake Superior Ojibwa at age 28 in 1831. He began his work by heading to Mackinac Island on the straits between Lake Michigan and Lake Huron. This was a logical place to begin his missionary work because it was the center of commerce at the time to all of the upper Midwest from Illinois to the border country of Minnesota.

This was a fortunate beginning spot for William for a couple of reasons. The American Fur Trading Company was the dominant commercial force in the region and it was through the Ojibwa nation that the majority of trading occurred in the region that would later become the northern portions of Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota. A Christian revival had also swept through the island only a couple years prior, making the missionary feel welcome. To help gain a greater understanding of the region he would be ministering to, Boutwell was able to join on as a worker for Henry Schoolcraft’s famous 1832 expedition that discovered the source of the Mississippi River. Boutwell was part of the discussion that actually came up with the name Itasca Lake for the source.

The second reason it was fortunate was his acquaintance with a stunningly beautiful and poised Hester Crooks. She was 15 years younger than Boutwell and she was the only child from the short marriage of Ramsay Crooks, one of the leading partners in the American Fur Trading Company, and his first wife who was a mixed blood Ojibwa. Miss Crooks was educated at the mission school on Mackinac and had a heart of compassion toward her Ojibwa kin. She had the dark hair and eyes of her Ojibwa ancestry and carried herself with godly character.

There was no indication of any romance while the two were acquainted both at Mackinac and later Madeline Island serving in their missionary work. In the spring of 1834 they both left Madeline Island, going in separate directions: Hester to teach at Yellow Lake near present-day Siren, Wisconsin and William to the shores of Leech Lake near present-day Walker, Minnesota. When William arrived amongst the Ojibwa, he quickly realized that in order to have any success there was an expectation that he take an Ojibwa wife and become part of the clan. This was a common practice amongst traders, often leading to forgotten children known as the Métis. William felt this practice lacked honor and he was perplexed what to do. That is when “Providence” gave him direction.

Boutwell’s journey from Leech Lake was some 150 miles across the hostile wilds of Minnesota to meet Hester at Yellow Lake. From there they took the common trading route up to Madeline Island and were married at the La Point Mission on September 1, 1834. They enjoyed donuts and tea for their reception. Because of the lateness of the season, they had no time to loiter for their honeymoon if they were to make it back to their mission outpost at Leech Lake before the winter snows. They arrived there on October 9 and William quickly constructed a log cabin.

William and Hester had a strong marriage partnership on the mission field. Hester was greatly revered amongst the Ojibwa,

often saving expeditions from attack and stopping disputes within her community just by her presence. William would frequently tell friends he didn't feel worthy to have her as a wife. Unfortunately, their mission at Leech Lake and later Lake Pokegama near present-day Pine City by most accounts were considered failures in attempting to convert and provide education for the Ojibwa people. This was due in large part to souring relationships with the fur trade and an ongoing war with the Dakota nations to the south. They would eventually abandon their missionary efforts in 1847 to become one of the early settlers in Stillwater, Minnesota.

Using annuity treaty payments Hester received, the couple was able to start a prosperous farm northwest of Stillwater. William was an itinerant preacher at several churches throughout the St. Croix Valley. They would have 9 children together; unfortunately Hester died early at age 36 a year after giving birth to her last child. She was buried in the family cemetery across the road from the farm. William passed away on his farm in 1890 in a home he lived in with his daughter Kate and her husband Edward Jones. That home still stands today in Stillwater at 12588 Boutwell Rd. and, as best I can tell from Google maps, there is access across the road to the South to the cemetery where the two that had an interesting wilderness romance forever lie side by side.

If you enjoy deeper research and you want to read more about this tidbit of Minnesota history, the Minnesota Historical Society does have an extensive collection of Boutwell's papers. His work is often quoted and considered some of the most reliable descriptions of the Ojibwa conditions in Minnesota at that time.

Also the city of Stillwater has a nice description of the Boutwell family history.

*A suggested library book would be Selections from Minnesota History - a fiftieth anniversary anthology by Gilman and Holmquist, Minnesota Historical Society (1965). Page 52 has the story, "Wilderness Marthas" by Grace Lee Nute retelling the Boutwell story.

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