## CHAPTER II.

1838—Appointed by President Van Buren Second Lieutenant of Topographical Engineers—Expedition under Nicollet—1839 Second Expedition of Nicollet North of Missouri River—1840 in Washington.

THE Cherokee survey was over. I remained at home only just long enough to enjoy the pleasure of the return to it, and to rehabituate myself to old scenes. While I was trying to devise and settle upon some plan for the future, my unforgetful friend, Mr. Poinsett, had also been thinking for me. He was now Secretary of War, and, at his request, I was appointed by President Van Buren a second lieutenant in the United States Topographical Corps, and ordered to Washington. Washington was greatly different then from the beautiful capital of to-day. Instead of many broad, well-paved, and leafy avenues, Pennsylvania Avenue about represented the town. There were not the usual resources of public amusement. It was a lonesome place for a young man knowing but one person in the city, and there was no such attractive spot as the Battery by the sea at Charleston, where a stranger could go and feel the freedom of both eye and thought.

Shut in to narrow limits, the mind is driven in upon itself and loses its elasticity; but the breast expands when, upon some hill-top, the eye ranges over a broad expanse of country, or in face of the ocean. We do not value enough the effect of space for the eye; it reacts on the mind, which unconsciously expands to larger limits and freer range of thought. So I was low in my mind and lonesome until I learned, with great relief, that I was to go upon a distant survey into the West. But that first impression of flattened lonesomeness which Washington had given me has remained with me to this day.

About this time, a distinguished French savant had returned from a geographical exploration of the country about the sources of the Mississippi, the position of which he first established. That region and its capabilities were then but little known, and the results of his journey were of so interesting a nature that they had attracted public notice and comment. Through Mr. Poinsett, Mr. Nicollet was invited to come to Washington,



with the object of engaging him to make a complete examination of the great prairie region between the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers, as far north as the British line, and to embody the whole of his labors in a map and general report for public use.

Mr. Nicollet had left France, intending to spend five years in geographical researches in this country. His mind had been drawn to the early discoveries of his countrymen, some of which were being obliterated and others obscured in the lapse of time. He anticipated great pleasure in renewing the memory of these journeys, and in rescuing them all from the obscurity into which they had fallen. A member of the French Academy of Sciences, he was a distinguished man in the circles to which Arago and other savants of equal rank belonged. Not only had he been trained in science, but he was habitually schooled to the social observances which make daily intercourse attractive, and become invaluable where hardships are to be mutually borne and difficulties overcome and hazards met. His mind was of the higher order. A musician as well as a mathematician, it was harmonious and complete.

The Government now arranged with him to extend his surveys south and west of the country which he had already explored. Upon this survey I was ordered to accompany him as his assistant.

It was a great pleasure to me to be assigned to this duty. By this time I had gone through some world-schooling and was able to take a sober view of the realities of life. I had learned to appreciate fully the rare value of the friendly aid which had opened up for me such congenial employment, and I resolved that, if it were in me to do so, I would prove myself worthy of it. The years of healthy exercise which I had spent in open air had hardened my body, and the work I had been engaged in was kindred to that which I was now to have. Field work in a strange region, in association with a man so distinguished, was truly an unexpected good fortune, and I went off from Washington full of agreeable anticipation.

At St. Louis I joined Mr. Nicollet. This was the last large city on the western border, and the fitting-out place for expeditions over the uninhabited country. The small towns along the western bank of the Missouri made for two or three hundred miles a sort of fringe to the prairies. At St. Louis I met for the first time General Robert E. Lee, then a captain in the United States Engineer Corps, charged with improvements of the Mississippi River. He was already an interesting man. His agreeable, friendly manner to me as a younger officer when I was introduced to him, left a more enduring impression than usually goes with casual introductions.

In St. Louis Mr. Nicollet had a pleasant circle of friends among the old French residents. They were proud of him as a distinguished country-

man, and were gratified with his employment by the American Government, which in this way recognized his distinction and capacity. His intention, in the prosecution of his larger work to revive the credit due to early French discoverers, was pleasing to their national pride.

His acquaintances he made mine, and I had the pleasure and advantage to share in the amiable intercourse and profuse hospitality which in those days characterized the society of the place. He was a Catholic, and his distinction, together with his refined character, made him always a welcome guest with his clergy. And I may say in the full sense of the word, that I "assisted" often at the agreeable suppers in the refectory. The pleasure of these grew in remembrance afterward, when hard and scanty fare and sometimes starvation and consequent bodily weakness made visions in the mind, and hunger made memory dwell upon them by day and dream of them by night.

Such social evenings followed almost invariably the end of the day's preparations. These were soon now brought to a close with the kindly and efficient aid of the Fur Company's officers. Their personal experience made them know exactly what was needed on the proposed voyage, and both stores and men were selected by them; the men out of those in their own employ. These were principally practised *voyageurs*, accustomed to the experiences and incidental privations of travel in the Indian country.

The aid given by the house of Chouteau was, to this and succeeding expeditions, an advantage which followed them throughout their course to their various posts among the Indian tribes.

Our destination now was a trading post on the west bank of the Mississippi, at the mouth of the St. Peter's, now better known as the Mini-sotah River. This was the residence of Mr. Henry Sibley, who was in charge of the Fur Company's interests in the Mississippi Valley. He gave us a frontier welcome and heartily made his house our headquarters. This was the point of departure at which the expedition began its work. It was on the border line of civilization. On the left or eastern bank of the river were villages and settlements of the whites, and the right was the Indian country which we were about to visit. Fort Snelling was on the high bluff point opposite between the Mini-sotah and the Mississippi. Near by was a Sioux Indian village, and usually its Indians were about the house grounds. Among these I saw the most beautiful Indian girl I have ever met, and it is a tribute to her singular beauty that after so many years I remember still the name of "Ampetu-washtoy"—"the Beautiful day."

The house had much the character of a hunting-lodge. There were many dogs around about, and two large wolfhounds, Lion and Tiger, had



the run of the house and their quarters in it. Mr. Sibley was living alone, and these fine dogs made him friendly companions, as he belonged to the men who love dogs and horses. For his other dogs he had built within the enclosure a lookout about fifteen feet high. Around its platform the railing was usually bordered with the heads of dogs resting on their paws and looking wistfully out over the prairie, probably reconnoitering for wolves. Of the two hounds Tiger had betrayed a temper of such ferocity, even against his master, as eventually cost him his life. Lion, though a brother, had, on the contrary, a companionable and affectionate disposition and almost human intelligence, which in his case brought about a separation from his old home.

On the marriage of Mr. Sibley, Lion so far resented the loss of his first place that he left the house, swam across the Mississippi, and went to the Fort, where he ended his days. Always he was glad to meet his master when he came over, keeping close by him and following him to the shore, though all persuasion failed to make him ever recross the river to the home where he had been supplanted; but his life-size portrait still hangs over the fireplace of Mr. Sibley's library. These dogs were of the rare breed of the Irish wolfhound, and their story came up as an incident in a correspondence, stretching from Scotland to Mini-sotah, on the question as to whether it had not become extinct; growing out of my happening to own a dog inheriting much of that strain.

Cut off from the usual resources, Mr. Sibley had naturally to find his in the surroundings. The prominent feature of Indian life entered into his, and hunting became rather an occupation than an amusement. But his hunting was not the tramp of a day to some neighboring lake for wild fowl, or a ride on the prairie to get a stray shot at a wolf. These hunting expeditions involved days' journeys to unfrequented ranges where large game was abundant, or in winter to the neighborhood of one of his trading-posts, where in event of rough weather the stormy days could be passed in shelter. He was fully six feet in height, well and strongly built, and this, together with his skill as a hunter, gave him a hold on the admiration and respect of the Indians.

In all this stir of frontier life Mr. Nicollet felt no interest and took no share; horse and dog were nothing to him. His manner of life had never brought him into their companionship, and the congenial work he now had in charge engrossed his attention and excited his imagination. His mind dwelt continually upon the geography of the country, the Indian names of lakes and rivers and their signification, and upon whatever tradition might retain of former travels by early French explorers.

Some weeks had now been spent in completing that part of the outfit which had been referred to this place. The intervening time had been

used to rate the chronometers and make necessary observations of the latitude and longitude of our starting-point.

At length we set out. As our journey was to be over level and unbroken country the camp material was carried in one-horse carts, driven by Canadian voyageurs, the men usually employed by the Fur Company in their business through this region. M. de Montmort, a French gentleman attached to the legation at Washington, and Mr. Eugene Flandin, a young gentleman belonging to a French family of New York, accompanied the party as friends of Mr. Nicollet. These were pleasant travelling companions, and both looked up to Mr. Nicollet with affectionate deference and admiration. No botanist had been allowed to Mr. Nicollet by the Government, but he had for himself employed Mr. Charles Geyer, a botanist recently from Germany, of unusual practical knowledge in his profession and of companionable disposition.

The proposed surveys of this northwestern region naturally divided themselves into two: the present one, at this point connecting with Mr. Nicollet's surveys of the upper Mississippi, was to extend westward to the waters of the Missouri Valley; the other, intended for the operations of the succeeding year, was to include the valley of the Missouri River, and the northwestern prairies as far as to the British line.

Our route lay up the Mini-sotah for about a hundred and fifteen miles, to a trading-post at the lower end of the *Traverse des Sioux;* the prairie and river valley being all beautiful and fertile country. We travelled along the southern side of the river, passing on the way several Indian camps, and establishing at night the course of the river by astronomical observations. The *Traverse des Sioux* is a crossing-place about thirty miles long, where the river makes a large rectangular bend, coming down from the northwest and turning abruptly to the northeast; the streams from the southeast, the south, and southwest flowing into a low line of depression to where they gather into a knot at the head of this bend, and into its lowest part as into a bowl. In this great elbow of the river is the Marahtanka or Big Swan Lake, the summer resort of the Sissiton Sioux. Our way over the crossing lay between the lake and the river. At the end of the *Traverse* we returned to the right shore at the mouth of the Waraju or Cottonwood River, and encamped near the principal village of the Sissitons. Their lodges were pitched in a beautiful situation, under large trees. It needs only the slightest incident to throw an Indian village into a sudden excitement which is startling to a stranger. We were occupied quietly among the Indians, Mr. Nicollet, as usual, surrounded by them, with the aid of the interpreter getting them to lay out the form of the lake and the course of the streams entering the river near by, and, after repeated pronunciations, entering their names in his note-book; Geyer, followed by



some Indians, curiously watching him while digging up plants; and I, more numerously attended, pouring out the quicksilver for the artificial horizon, each in his way busy at work; when suddenly everything started into motion, the Indians running tumultuously to a little rise which commanded a view of the prairie, all clamor and excitement. The commotion was caused by the appearance of two or three elk on the prairie horizon. Those of us who were strangers, and ignorant of their usages, fancied there must be at least a war-party in sight.

From this point we travelled up the Waraju River and passed a few days in mapping the country around the Pelican Lakes, and among the lower spurs of the *Coteau des Prairies*, a plateau which separates the waters of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. This is the single elevation separating the prairies of the two rivers. Approaching it, the blue line which it presents, marked by wooded ravines in contrast with the green prairie which sweeps to its feet, suggested to the *voyageurs* the name they gave it, of the Prairie Coast. At this elevation, about fifteen hundred feet above the sea, the prairie air was invigorating, the country studded with frequent lakes was beautiful, and the repose of a few days was refreshing to men and animals after the warmer and moister air of the lower valley. Throughout this region, the rivers and lakes, and other noticeable features of the country, bear French and Indian names, Sioux or Chippewa, and sometimes Shayan (Cheyenne). Sometimes they perpetuate the memory of an early French discoverer, or rest upon some distinguishing local character of stream or lake; and sometimes they record a simple incident of chase or war which in their limited history were events.

We now headed for our main object in this direction, the Red Pipe Stone Quarry, which was to be the limit of our western travel; from there we were to turn directly north. All this country had been a battle-ground between the Sioux and Sacs and Foxes. Crossing the high plains over which our journey now lay, we became aware that we were followed by a party of Indians. Guard at night was necessary. But it was no light thing, after a day's work of sketching the country, to stand guard the night through, as it now fell to me among others to do. When we would make the noon halt I promptly took my share of it under the shade of a cart in deep sleep, which the fragrant breeze of the prairie made delightful.

Our exaggerated precautions proved useless, as the suspected hostile party were only friendly Sioux who, knowing nothing about us, were on their side cautiously watching us.

The Indians have a belief that the Spirit of the Red Pipe Stone speaks in thunder and lightning whenever a visit is made to the Quarry. With a singular coincidence such a storm broke upon us as we reached it, and

the confirmation of the legend was pleasing to young Renville and the Sioux who had accompanied us.

As we came into the valley the storm broke away in a glow of sunshine on the line of red bluff which extended for about three miles. The day after our arrival the party of Indians we had been watching came in. We spent three friendly days together; they were after the red pipe stone, and we helped them, by using gunpowder, to uncover the rock.

It was in itself a lovely place, made interesting by the mysterious character given to it by Indian tradition, and because of the fact that the existence of such a rock is not known anywhere else. It is on the land of the Sissiton Sioux, but the other Indians make to it annual pilgrimages, as it is from this they make their images and pipes. This famous stone, where we saw it, was in a layer about a foot and a half thick, overlaid by some twenty-six feet of red-colored indurated sand-rock; the color diminishing in intensity from the base to the summit. The water in the little valley had led the buffalo through it in their yearly migration from north to south, and the tradition is that their trail wore away the surface and uncovered the stone.

There was a detached pedestal standing out a few feet away from the bluff, and about twenty-five feet high. It was quite a feat to spring to this from the bluff, as the top was barely a foot square and uneven, and it required a sure foot not to go further. This was a famous place of the country, and nearly all of us, as is the custom in famous places the world over, carved our names in the stone. It speaks for the enduring quality of this rock that the names remain distinct to this day.

When the position had been established and other objects of the visit accomplished, we took up the northern line of march for the *Lac qui parle*, the trading-post and residence of the Renville family.

On our way we passed through and mapped the charming lake country of the *Coteau des Prairies*.

The head of the Renville family, a French Canadian, was a border chief. Between him and the British line was an unoccupied region of some seven hundred miles. Over all the Indian tribes which ranged these plains he had a controlling influence; they obeyed himself and his son, who was a firm-looking man of decided character. Their good will was a passport over this country.

The hospitable reception which is the rule of the country met us here. I take pleasure in emphasizing and dwelling on this, because it is apart from the hospitality of civilized life. There is lively satisfaction on both sides. The advent of strangers in an isolated place brings novelty and excitement, and to the stranger arriving, there is great enjoyment in the change from privations and watchful unrest, to the quiet safety and profusion of plenty in such a frontier home. Our stay here was made very agreeable. We had abundance of milk and fresh meat and vegetables, all seasoned with a traveller's appetite and a hearty welcome.



To gratify us a game of Lacrosse was played with spirit and skill by the Indians. Among the players was a young half-breed of unusual height, who was incomparably the swiftest runner among them. He was a relation of the Renvilles and seemed to have some recognized family authority, for during the play he would seize an Indian by his long hair and hurl him backward to the ground to make room for himself, the other taking it as matter of course.

Some time was spent here in visiting the various lakes near by, fixing their position and gathering information concerning the character of the country and its Indians. This over, and the limit of the present journey attained, we turned our faces eastward and started back to the mouth of the St. Peter's.

While Mr. Nicollet was occupied in making a survey of the Lesueur River, and identifying localities and verifying accounts of preceding travellers, I was sent to make an examination of the Mankato or Blue Earth River, which bore upon the subjects he had in view. The eastern division of the expedition now closed with our return to Mr. Sibley's.

Among the episodes which gave a livelier coloring to the instructive part of this campaign, was a hunting expedition on which I went with Mr. Sibley. With him also went M. Faribault, a favorite companion of his on such occasions. It was a royal hunt. He took with him the whole of Red Dog's village—men, women, and children. The hunting-ground was a number of days' journey to the south, in Ioway, where game was abundant; many deer and some elk. It was in November, when the does are in their best condition. The country was well timbered and watered, stretches of prairie interspersed with clumps and lines of woods.

Early in the morning the chief would indicate the camping-ground for the night, and the men sally out for the hunt. The women, with the camp equipage, would then make direct for the spot pointed out, ordinarily some grove about nine miles distant. Toward nightfall the hunters came in with their game.

The day's tramp gave a lively interest to the principal feature which the camp presented; along the woods bright fires, where fat venison was roasting on sticks before them, or stewing with corn or wild rice in pots hanging from tripods; squaws busy over the cooking and children rolling about over the ground. No sleep is better or more restoring than follows such a dinner, earned by such a day.

On the march one day, a squaw dropped behind, but came into camp a little later than the others, bringing a child a few hours old. By circum-

stance of birth he should have become a mighty hunter, but long before he reached man's age he had lost birthright, he and his tribe, and I doubt if he got even the mess of pottage for which Esau bartered his. During the hunt we had the experience of a prairie fire. We were on a detached excursion, Sibley, Faribault and I. After midnight we were aroused from a sound sleep by the crackling noise, and springing to our feet, found ourselves surrounded, without a minute to lose. Gathering in our animals, we set fire to the grass near our tent, transferring quickly animals and baggage to the cleared ground. The fire swept past, and in a few seconds struck a grove of aspens near by and leaped up the trees, making a wall of flame that sent a red glow into the sky brighter even than the waves of fire that rolled over the prairie. We lost nothing, only tent and belongings a little blackened with the smouldering grass; but the harm was to the woods and the game.

The work of the year and in this quarter was now finished, and we returned to St. Louis, to prepare for the survey of the more western division in the succeeding year.

A partial equipment for the expedition to the northwest prairies was obtained in St. Louis. Arrangements had previously been made at *Lac qui parle*, during the preceding journey, for a reinforcement of men to meet the party at an appointed time on Rivière à Jacques, a tributary to the Missouri River. At St. Louis five men were engaged, four of them experienced in prairie and mountain travel; one of them Etienne Provost, known as *l'homme des montagnes*. The other man was Louis Zindel, who had seen service as a non-commissioned officer of Prussian artillery, and was skilled in making rockets and fireworks. We left St. Louis early in April, 1839, on board the Antelope, one of the American Fur Company's steamboats, which, taking its customary advantage of the annual rise in the Missouri from the snows of the Rocky Mountains, was about starting on its regular voyage to the trading-posts on the upper waters of the river.

For nearly two months and a half we were struggling against the current of the turbid river, which in that season of high waters was so swift and strong that sometimes the boat would for moments stand quite still, seeming to pause to gather strength, until the power of steam asserted itself and she would fight her way into a smooth reach. In places the river was so embarrassed with snags that it was difficult to thread a way among them in face of the swift current and treacherous channel, constantly changing. Under these obstacles we usually laid up at night, making fast to the shore at some convenient place, where the crew could cut a supply of wood for the next day. It was a pleasant journey, as little disturbed as on the ocean. Once above the settlements of the lower Missouri, there were no sounds to disturb the stillness but the echoes of the high-pressure



steam-pipe, which travelled far along and around the shores, and the incessant crumbling away of the banks and bars, which the river was steadily undermining and destroying at one place to build up at another. The stillness was an impressive feature, and the constant change in the character of the river shores offered always new interest as we steamed along. At times we travelled by high perpendicular escarpments of light colored rock, a gray and yellow marl, made picturesque by shrubbery or trees; at others the river opened out into a broad delta-like expanse, as if it were approaching the sea. At length, on the seventieth day we reached Fort Pierre, the chief post of the American Fur Company. This is on the right or western bank of the river, about one thousand and three hundred miles from St. Louis. On the prairie, a few miles away, was a large village of Yankton Sioux. Here we were in the heart of the Indian country and near the great buffalo ranges. Here the Indians were sovereign.

This was to be our starting-point for an expedition northward over the great prairies, to the British line. Some weeks were spent in making the remaining preparations, in establishing the position and writing up journals, and in negociations with the Indians. After the usual courtesies had been exchanged our first visit to their village was arranged. On our way we were met by thirty of the principal chiefs, mounted and advancing in line. A noble-looking set of men showing to the best advantage, their fine shoulders and breasts being partly uncovered. We were conducted by them to the village, where we were received with great ceremony by other chiefs, and all their people gathered to meet us. We were taken into a large and handsome lodge and given something to eat, an observance without which no Indian welcome is complete. The village covered some acres of ground, and the lodges were pitched in regular lines. These were large, of about twenty skins or more. The girls were noticeably well clothed, wearing finely dressed skins nearly white, much embroidered with beads and porcupine quills dyed many colors; and stuffs from the trading-post completed their dress. These were the best formed and best looking Indians of the plains, having the free bearing belonging with their unrestrained life in sunshine and open air. Their mode of life had given them the uniform and smooth development of breast and limb which indicates power, without knots of exaggerated muscle, and the copper-bronze of their skins, burnt in by many suns, increased the statue-like effect. The buffalo and other game being near, gave them abundant food and means to obtain from the trading-posts what to them were luxuries.

Having made the customary and expected presents which ratified the covenants of good will and free passage over their country, we left the village, escorted half-way by the chiefs.