

1905

Explorations of Verendrye and His Sons From Lake Superior to the Rocky Mountains, 1728 to 1749

Warren Upham

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/jmas>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Upham, W. (1905). Explorations of Verendrye and His Sons From Lake Superior to the Rocky Mountains, 1728 to 1749. *Journal of the Minnesota Academy of Science*, Vol. 4 No.2, 277-281.

Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/jmas/vol4/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at University of Minnesota Morris Digital Well. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the Minnesota Academy of Science by an authorized editor of University of Minnesota Morris Digital Well. For more information, please contact skulann@morris.umn.edu.

[*Paper K.*]

EXPLORATIONS OF VERENDRYE AND HIS SONS,
FROM LAKE SUPERIOR TO THE ROCKY
MOUNTAINS, 1728 TO 1749.

By Warren Upham.

My first interest in the life and work of Verendrye, the heroic first explorer of the northern border of Minnesota, came from my search for the origin, meaning, and earliest use of our Minnesota geographic names. In the year 1728, when Pierre Gautier Varennes, more commonly known by his title as the *Sieur de la Verendrye*, was stationed as an agent of the fur trade at lake Nipigon, north of lake Superior, a rudely sketched map was drawn for him by an intelligent Assiniboine Indian, named Ochagach, with aid by other Indians, tracing the canoe route of streams, lakes, and portages, from lake Superior along the north boundary of the present state of Minnesota to the Lake of the Woods, and thence northwestward to lake Winnipeg and the Saskatchewan river. This aboriginal delineation of geographic features northwest of lake Superior, with some names inserted by the French as derived from the Indians, was shown by Verendrye to Beauharnois, the governor of Canada, and about the year 1730 it was sent to France. The noted French geographer, Bellin, writing at Paris twenty-five years later, mentioned this sketch drawn by Ochagach for Verendrye as the earliest map of the country beyond lake Superior in the archives of the French Department of the Colonies. It remained unpublished, however, more than a hundred and fifty years, until a tracing of it was printed by Dr. Edward D. Neill, in 1882, in the fourth edition of his *History of Minnesota*. Two years afterward it was reprinted by Prof. N. H. Winchell in the first volume of his final report on the Geological and Natural History Survey of this state.

The series of many small lakes on our northern boundary is conspicuous on this map, and the thirteenth lake outlined, larger than any of the twelve others preceding it on the route going westward, is named Lac Sesakinaga, evidently the same as our present lake Saganaga. Rainy lake is called Lac Tecamamisuen; but the lake of the Woods and lake Winni-

peg, though clearly identifiable by their delineation, the former having many islands, and the latter being narrowed at the middle, are unnamed. The Saskatchewan river, of which only the lower part is shown, not extending to the junction of its south and north branches, is called *Fleuve de l' Ouest* (River of the West.)

Not far south of the Saskatchewan, in the place of the Porcupine and Pasquia hills, the sketch of Ochagach bears the name *Montagnes de pierres brillantes* (Mountains of shining stones), which probably suggested later the names Shining mountains and Rocky mountains, applied to our great western Cordilleran belt. As known by Ochagach, however, and described by him to the French, the mountains of his sketch were doubtless the Cretaceous escarpment, generally from 500 to 1,000 feet in height of mostly steep ascent from its base to its top, south of the lower Saskatchewan and west of lakes Winnipegosis and Manitoba and the Red river. This escarpment is now known, in its successive parts from north to south, as the Pasquia and Porcupine hills, Duck mountain, and Pembina mountain, and the Coteau des Prairies, which reach from the Saskatchewan valley southward into North Dakota and to the southwest part of Minnesota.

The "shining stones" were probably selenite crystals from the Cretaceous shales, the same as those which Groseilliers and Radisson had seen, or of which they had heard some description, during their visit nearly seventy years before, in 1660, among the Prairie Sioux, in whose country, as Radisson wrote, "There are mountains covered with a kind of Stone that is transparent and tender, and like to that of Venice." The Sioux or Dakota people knew of the selenite crystals in the shales, and in the comparatively thin overlying glacial drift, which together form the Coteau des Prairies; and the Assiniboines knew of the same "shining stones" of the same formations in the Pembina, Riding, and Duck mountains, and in the Porcupine and Pasquia hills.

In 1731, Verendrye, commissioned and equipped by the Canadian government, with his sons and his nephew, Jemerye, began their explorations far west of lake Superior, which they left by the route of Pigeon river and the series of lakes and streams continuing west along the present northern boundary of Minnesota. Fort St. Pierre, a trading post, was

built at the mouth of Rainy lake; Fort St. Charles on the west side of the Lake of the Woods near its "Northwest Angle," and other forts or trading posts on lake Winnipeg and the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan rivers. Verendrye had more zeal for crossing the continent and reaching the Pacific than for the wealth to be gained by the fur trade. His expeditions did not financially meet expenses, and rivals sought to displace him from the patronage of the governor and the king; but shortly before his death, in 1749, when he had expected soon to set out again on new expeditions, the king honored him by the cross of St. Louis. The name of the St. Louis river, the largest tributary of lake Superior, probably came from this honor conferred on Verendrye. He was the founder of the fur trade in the northern part of Minnesota, in Manitoba, and the Saskatchewan region, where it greatly flourished during the next hundred years; and two of his sons were the first white men to see the Rocky mountains, or at least some eastern range of our great Cordilleran mountain belt.

The chief original sources of our knowledge of the explorations by Verendrye and his sons are the early French Colonial documents, of which a large number relating to their numerous exploring expeditions have been collected and published by Pierre Margry in the sixth volume of his "Discoveries and Settlements of the French in the West and in the South parts of North America, 1614-1754, Memoirs and Original Documents." In his last volume of the series, printed in French at Paris in 1886, pages 583-632 narrate the Verendrye explorations. The document which most interests us, as containing the narration of the journey in 1742-43 by two of Verendrye's sons to the Rocky mountains, is in pages 598-611, and is entitled "Journal of an Expedition made by the Chevalier de la Verendrye with one of his Brothers, for discovery of a passage to the Pacific Ocean; addressed to the Marquis de Beauharnois."

A very satisfactory manuscript discussion of the route of this expedition crossing the Plains from the Missouri river to the Rocky mountains, with platting of the courses as narrated, has been supplied to the Minnesota Historical Society from a corresponding member, Captain Edward L. Berthoud, of Golden, Colorado. This manuscript was received through the kindness of another member, Mr. Olin D. Wheeler, of St.

Paul, well known as the editor, for the Northern Pacific railway, of the yearly publication entitled "Wonderland," and author last year of an important historical work in two volumes, "The Trail of Lewis and Clark."

Captain Berthoud, following the narrative in the Margry Papers, shows that quite surely the Verendrye sons came, by southwest and south-southwest marching from the Mandans on the Missouri river to the Big Horn mountains. They first got a distant view of the mountains, as the Journal given by Margry tells us, on New Year's day of 1743. On January 21, in a great war party of the Indians of the Plains for attacking their hereditary enemies, the Shoshone or Snake Indians, at one of their great winter encampments, the Verendryes reached the foot of the mountains, which, as the Journal says, "are for the most part well wooded, and seem very high."

If they went, in this war raid, around or alongside the north end of the Big Horn range, they may have passed beyond the Big Horn river, coming to the Shoshone camp near the stream now known as the Shoshone river, tributary to the Big Horn river from the west, so that the mountains near whose base was the camp of the Snake Indians would be the Shoshone mountains, close southeast of the Yellowstone Park. Probably their extreme advance, to the Snake Indian camp, was somewhere in the foot-hills of the lofty and extended Big Horn range; and if they went beyond that range, I think that it was only to the Shoshone mountains.

The general route of the return was eastward to the Missouri river, as narrated in the Journal, and thence northward up the west side of the Missouri, to the Mandan villages, from which the expedition had started. This part of the journey is not considered in Captain Berthoud's manuscript. Both the outward march and the route of the return are well discussed by Parkman in his work of two volumes, "A Half Century of Conflict," published in 1892. Volume II, in pages 29-58, with a sketch map of the routes going to the Rocky mountains and returning east to the Missouri, as recorded in the Journal printed by Margry, gives a very vivid account of this whole expedition.

When the Verendryes reached the Missouri on the return, a cairn monument was erected by them on some hill or point of the bluffs overlooking that great stream, and a leaden plate,

commemorating the expedition, was buried. This locality was somewhere near the present south boundary of South Dakota, about a month's travel below the Mandan villages. It would be a most interesting discovery, if this plate of lead, "bearing the arms and inscription of the king," could be found. Its burial was unknown to the Indians, who were merely told that the cairn was built as a memorial of the coming of these Frenchmen to their country.

It may well be hoped that some county yet to be formed on the northern border of Minnesota will receive the name Verendrye, in historic commemoration of the explorations, hardships, and sacrifices of the patriotic and truly noble Sieur de la Verendrye and his sons.

May 9, 1905.

[*Paper L.*]

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE BUSINESS MAN.

By Harlow Gale.

Having lived largely among business men for the past two years, after having been studying and teaching Psychology for eighteen years, it has been interesting to me to observe the mental life of the typical business man as he is specially different from the working man and professional man.

His eyes and ears, as the avenues of his connection with the world about him, are unusually acute and alert for everything connected with his business. He can size up the topography of a saleable piece of land, spy out new houses for insurance, hear an indistinct telephone order, or catch up customers' foreign names in a surprising way. The touch sense of the cloth and paper dealer is very sensitive; even the sense of taste and smell in the druggist and tea merchant is unusually acute. The special sense, then, which is of particular use in the life of each business specialist has been developed somewhat more than in the average man, just as the only remaining sense, that of touch, has been so remarkably devel-