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AN EVALUATION OF DOCUMENTS USEFUL TO
THE ETHNOHISTORIAN:
THE WRITINGS OF FATHER HENNEPIN

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Ever since the first appearance of Father Hennepin's *Description of Louisiana* in 1683, the writings and accomplishments of this recollect missionary have been a subject of controversy. The criticism greatly increased after 1698, when a second, more extensive work by the same author appeared under the title *A New Discovery of a Vast Country in America*. This volume included an account of a trip from the Illinois River down the Mississippi to its mouth, which Hennepin claimed he had omitted from the earlier work because of fear of reprisal from La Salle and his friends. This trip, if it actually did take place would have preceded that of La Salle.¹

Not only was such a trip of 3,260 miles in less than a month improbable, but Hennepin's description of the lower Mississippi contained several rather glaring errors of fact. In addition, sections of the work appeared to have been plagiarized from La Salle's official reports and other writings, and throughout Hennepin had greatly exaggerated his own importance. A few skeptics would have gladly dismissed the whole thing as a myth but, unfortunately for them, there existed corroborative evidence proving conclusively that a three-man expedition, including Father Hennepin, had been sent up the Mississippi, captured by the Sioux, and rescued by Du Luth.²

One problem which adds to the difficulties of those using them is the arrangement of the material in these books. In both, a chronological narrative is followed by general sections on the customs of the Indians. Since tribes are seldom mentioned by name, except in the case of the Iroquois, it is often impossible to recognize what Indians are being discussed. For this reason, the subject matter of this paper will be drawn primarily from the captivity sequence, with only occasional references to the general sections when it is possible to be fairly certain that the author is talking about the Sioux.

¹ For the various editions and translations of Hennepin's works, see a bibliographical essay contributed by Victor Palsits to Ruben G. Thwaites, ed., *The New Discovery of a Vast Country in America*, XIV-LXIV (Chicago, 1903). A translation of Hennepin's *Description of Louisiana* by Marion Cross (Minneapolis, 1938) was used in the preparation of the paper.

² For an exhaustive treatment of the problem of authorship, see Jean Delanglez, *Hennepin's Description of Louisiana, A Critical Essay* (Chicago, 1941), which makes a rather conclusive case for plagiarism. Du Luth's account is to be found in Louise P. Kellogg, ed., *Early Narratives of the Northwest, 1634-1699*, pp. 329-334 (New York, 1917).

On April 11 or 12, 1680, Hennepin and two companions were captured on the Mississippi a few miles south of Lake Pepin by a large Dakota war party made up of men from several tribes, who were on an expedition against the Illinois and Miami. Convinced by the travelers that the contemplated attack would not be successful, the Indians turned back to their villages, taking Hennepin's party with them as prisoners. The trip was an agonizing experience, for the priest was sure that some of the Indians wished to kill the prisoners, and he interpreted their weeping over his head as an attempt to convert the rest of the war party to this design.³ Instead of being killed, however, the men were adopted into the tribe, and each one was taken to a separate village. Hennepin reports that except for participation in buffalo hunts, the Indians spent most of their time in the villages, where the priest attempted to learn something of the language and customs of his captors. The prisoners were not guarded closely, and at times were allowed to travel unescorted. On July 25, 1680, while returning from a buffalo hunt, they encountered an expedition led by Sieur Du Luth with whom they returned to the Isanti villages where Father Hennepin utilized his knowledge of the language to serve as an interpreter for Du Luth. Towards the end of September, Hennepin and Du Luth began the return trip via the Wisconsin River to Green Bay, where they wintered, reaching Montreal in the spring of 1681.⁴

As might be expected, Hennepin's narrative indicates that the Dakota were in a period of transition from a fairly sedentary village life, based on a gathering and localized hunting economy, to a more nomadic existence. Although buffalo hunting was important, it had not yet become a dominating factor in Dakota culture. Wild rice, berries, fish, and small game were also included in the diet of these Indians.

Buffalo hunting methods described by Hennepin include the surround on foot, and, on at least one occasion, driving the animals into the river where they could be easily slaughtered. Impounding is not mentioned, and there is no suggestion of cliff drives. Although the author refers elsewhere to the use of fire by the Miami in buffalo drives, he does not directly indicate that it was used by the Dakota. However, on the journey that Hennepin made with his captors to the Isanti village, he says that he failed to keep a satisfactory pace and relates that the Indians set the prairie on fire to speed him along. This would seem to suggest that the fire drive was at least known among the Dakota.⁵

³ *Louisiana*, 89, 94, 97. The weeping of the Sioux over the heads of visitors is mentioned by such other early travelers as Radisson, Le Sueur, and Carver. Only Hennepin, however, seems to have given it a sinister interpretation.

⁴ *Louisiana*, 131; Delanglez, *Description*, 34-38.

⁵ *Louisiana*, 59, 101-102, 104-105.

The organization of the hunt is a good example of the transitional state of the society. Before the hunt, a council was held to designate the hunting areas and set the time of the hunt. The bands then separated. That these rules were enforced, is clear from the experience of the missionary. He encountered a band which had apparently hunted before the time agreed upon, and accepted their invitation to join them in feasting. Suddenly, another band invaded the camp with such fury that at first Hennepin took them to be enemies. They confiscated the meat and grease, and upset the wigwams. In this procedure may be found the germ of the communal hunt, but as yet the organization was very informal and there were no police to enforce the rules. Punishment of a violater was performed by any of the other bands. Hennepin does not mention any permanent divisions of hunting territory. The council apparently set up the assigned areas at the beginning of each season. This is in marked contrast to conditions two decades later, when Le Sueur found the hunting grounds well defined.⁶

Although the communal buffalo hunt had made food more accessible, it would seem doubtful whether the Dakota had as yet learned to preserve the meat by making pemmican. Hennepin comments upon the excellent pemmican made by tribes east of the Mississippi. There is, however, some suggestion that the technique was developing, for Hennepin refers to the use of drying racks and to the custom of bringing the best parts of the buffalo back to camp, the hunters eating only the entrails. His unfavorable comments on spoiled meat, and repeated references to hunger would seem to indicate that attempts at preserving meat and making pemmican were as yet unsuccessful among the Sioux.⁷

From Hennepin's comments on transportation, it would seem that canoe making had passed its peak and was beginning to decline. Although the canoes of the Dakota were faster than those of tribes to the south and east, these Indians apparently often preferred to go on foot. The author notes with regret that the party which captured him chose to take a circuitous overland route from St. Anthony Falls to Mille Lacs Lake rather than proceed up the Rum River. Later in commenting on a buffalo hunt involving a canoe trip, he states that the canoes were in exceedingly poor condition. Although the area covered by Hennepin would hardly be conducive to the use of dog travois, the complete absence of any mention of this form of transportation seems to indicate that it had not yet appeared.⁸

⁶ *Louisiana*, 118; J. G. Shea, ed., *Early Voyages Up and Down the Mississippi*, 101-102 (Albany, 1861).

⁷ *Louisiana*, 61-62, 171.

⁸ *Louisiana*, 104, 115.

Unfortunately, Hennepin did not describe the houses of the Sioux, but simply referred to them as "cabins." Had the tipi been in use, he would probably have mentioned it. On the other hand, if, as some writers have supposed, a structure resembling the long house was used, it would be probable that Hennepin, who was well acquainted with the Iroquois, would have noted the similarity. There is one obscure passage in the general descriptive section on Indian customs which mentions the construction of "cabins" made of thatch. By its position the passage could be interpreted as referring to the Sioux. The most probable reason for Hennepin's failure to describe the houses is that they were so similar to those of adjacent tribes that a description seemed unnecessary.⁹

One of the somewhat surprising things about the account is its complete omission of any mention of agriculture among the Sioux. Although the missionary planted some seeds he had brought with him, when he returned to the village he found the plot overgrown with weeds. The Indians had not even bothered to pick the vegetables. In an account of a visit to the Sioux only two decades earlier, Radisson speaks of their ambassadors as arriving with presents of corn and other vegetables. A possible solution to this contradiction might be that the tribe which Radisson visited was located north of the Isanti and may have been the Yanktonai. Increasing pressure from the Cree and Assiniboine between 1660 and 1680 could have led to the abandonment of farming by the tribe.¹⁰

Although pottery was used for cooking, there is no reference to any being made during Hennepin's captivity. This omission might be attributed to the short period of time that Hennepin was actually living in the village, but it could also indicate that the art was slowly beginning to disappear. It should be admitted, however, that in the general section on customs there is a reference to the role of women in this activity, which could be interpreted from the contents to refer to the Dakota. It is also stated that bark dishes were used, but Hennepin does not mention the use of buffalo stomachs for cooking. This apparently was a later development.¹¹

⁹ In David I. Bushnell, Jr., *Villages of the Algonquian, Siouan and Caddoan Tribes West of the Mississippi*, 46 (Bureau of American Ethnology, *Bulletin* Number 77—Washington, 1922), Mille Lac houses are described as follows: "The structures were probably bark or mat covered, many of an oval form quite similar to the Ojibway who later occupied the nearby sites on the shore of Mille Lac." On page 51 in describing Kaposia, Bushnell notes the similarity of some of the buildings there to the long house.

¹⁰ *Louisiana*, 108, 124; George Hyde, *Red Cloud's Folk*, 3-13, 319 (Norman, Oklahoma, 1937); and Gidson D. Scull, ed., *Voyages of Peter Esprit Radisson*, 207 (Boston, 1885).

¹¹ *Louisiana*, 172.

One of the most interesting passages is the discussion of the attitude of the Indians toward the kettle which the travelers brought with them. The Sioux approached it with considerable reverence, and would only touch it when their hands were covered, perhaps as a natural consequence of having been burned. In addition, they would not enter a wigwam where it was located. This attitude would seem to be rather strong evidence that at least the tribe with which Hennepin was quartered had had little or no contact with the whites. Of course, Hennepin would have been reluctant to reveal any indication of previous white visitors, but it is also rather difficult to believe that he could have manufactured the kettle story. On the other hand, he also related an incident in which a chieftan who feels that Hennepin has been mistreated, attempts to appease him with a gift of furs. He is surprised when Hennepin refuses to accept them. The amazement of the Sioux on learning that the priest has taken a vow of celibacy also suggests at least a knowledge of traders, if not a direct acquaintance with them. But in any event, it is certain that there had been no contact previous to Hennepin's visit which produced any marked change in the culture of the tribe.¹²

One of the interesting puzzles presented in the book is the identity of an allied tribe which came from the west, according to Hennepin's calculations, five hundred leagues away. Since this tribe spoke to the missionary through an interpreter, we can dismiss the suggestion that these were the Tetons. The conversation is related at some length in the *New Discovery* to prove the nonexistence of the Strait of Ainan. It is possible that these visitors were Cheyenne or, less likely, Omaha. It is significant that they stated that the tribes to the west of them hunted buffalo on the "meadows and large plains fields." This would seem to indicate that the occupation of the plains by buffalo hunters had already begun, well before the appearance of the horse—a conclusion supported by recent archaeological discoveries. As for the Teton, Hennepin states that they lived part of the year at the next waterfalls above St. Anthony, probably near the present location of Sauk Rapids. Since the word Teton means prairie dweller, it would seem probable that these people had already become more nomadic than the other Siouan Dakota tribes. Hennepin makes no distinction between the Sioux of the east and the Sioux of the west, a difference noted by Le Sueur a few decades later.¹³

Hennepin relates that in their village, the Dakota apparently felt secure, but on hunting parties they were constantly on guard against a surprise attack. Who then was the enemy? According to most accounts, the Chippewa were at that time maintaining a strict neutrality toward the Dakota, and it is somewhat question-

¹² *Louisiana*, 109, 111; Thwaites, *New Discovery*, 1: 267-270.

¹³ Shea, *Early Voyages*, 111; *Louisiana*, 122.

able whether the Fox had begun as yet to seriously threaten them. The most likely answer would seem to be that already the Cree-Assiniboine alliance, armed by the French or perhaps to a limited extent by the English at Hudson Bay, had begun the attacks that would drive the Teton and Yankton south. The relative security of the village may have resulted from the unwillingness of these tribes to enter the swamps where the Isanti lived.¹⁴

Curiously, Hennepin's text does not mention the Yankton or Yanktonai, although Tonti's account of Hennepin's trip lists them, and they are located near Red Lake on the map accompanying the *Description*. Such a location would be logical, for the Assiniboine were a branch of the Yanktonai who split off sometime prior to 1650. The location indicated is roughly the same as that given by La Chesneye in 1697, but by 1700 they had moved south of the Minnesota where they were noted by Le Sueur. One inexplicable oddity of Hennepin's map is the designation given for the Chongaskethon, a branch of the Sisseton, who are placed north of the Yanktonai.¹⁵

While the writings of Father Hennepin do not give a detailed account of the material and nonmaterial culture of the Sioux, they do provide clues to the beginning of the transition of these Indians from a sedentary to a nomadic life. This paper has attempted to suggest briefly some tentative conclusions which can be drawn from a small part of this material. A detailed study would undoubtedly yield considerably more information. If an extensive study could be made of the writings of the various men discussed in the papers, and of the accounts of Radisson, Le Sueur, and the Jesuit missionaries, and this material correlated with recent archaeological findings in this area, it would seem likely that much of the confusion regarding the migrations and culture of the Dakota in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries could be cleared up.

¹⁴ Hyde, *Red Cloud's Folk*, 3-10. For an explanation of the map accompanying Hennepin's text, see Delanglez, *Description*, 120-140.

¹⁵ Shea, *Early Voyages*, 111; Frederick W. Hodge, *Handbook of American Indians*, 1: 291 (Bureau of American Ethnology, *Bulletin* Number 30—Washington, 1907).
