

Father Jacques Marquette, 1673

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Letter (14 pages) “Of the first Voyage made by Father Marquette toward new Mexico, and How the idea thereof was conceived.”



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Of the first Voyage made by Father Marquette
toward new Mexico, and How the
idea thereof was conceived.

THE Father had long premeditated This Undertaking, influenced by a most ardent desire to extend the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, and to make him Known and adored by all the peoples of that country. He saw himself, As it were, at the door of these new Nations when, as early as the year 1670, he was laboring in the Mission at the point of st. Esprit, at the extremity of lake superior, among the outaouacs; he even saw occasionally various persons belonging to these new peoples, from whom he obtained all the Information that he could. This induced him to make several efforts to commence this undertaking, but ever in vain; and he even lost all hope of succeeding therein, when God brought about for him the following opportunity.

In The year 1673, Monsieur The Count De Frontenac, Our Governor, and Monsieur Talon, then Our Intendant, Recognizing The Importance of this discovery,—either that they might seek a passage from here to the sea of China, by the river that discharges into the Vermillion, or California Sea; or because they desired to verify what has for some time been said concerning the 2 Kingdoms of Theguais And Quiuira, which Border on Canada, and in which numerous gold mines are reported to exist,—these Gentlemen, I say, appointed at the same time

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for This undertaking Sieur Jolyet, whom they considered very fit for so great an enterprise; and they were well pleased that Father Marquette should be of the party.¹³

They were not mistaken in the choice that they made of Sieur Jolyet, For he is a young man, born in this country, who possesses all the qualifications that could be desired for such an undertaking. He has experience and Knows the Languages spoken in the Country of the Outaouacs, where he has passed several years. He possesses Tact and prudence, which are the chief qualities necessary for the success of a voyage as dangerous as it is difficult. Finally, he has the Courage to dread nothing where everything is to be Feared. Consequently, he has fulfilled all The expectations entertained of him; and if, after having passed through a thousand dangers, he had not unfortunately been wrecked in the very harbor, his Canoe having upset below sault st. Louys, near Montreal,—where he lost both his men and his papers, and whence he escaped only by a sort of Miracle,—nothing would have been left to be desired in the success of his Voyage.

SECTION IST. DEPARTURE OF FATHER JACQUES
MARQUETTE FOR THE DISCOVERY OF THE GREAT
RIVER CALLED BY THE SAVAGES MISSISIPI,
WHICH LEADS TO NEW MEXICO.

THE feast of The IMMACULATE CONCEPTION of the BLESSED VIRGIN — whom I have always Invoked since I have been in this country of the outaouacs, to obtain from God the grace of being able to visit the Nations who dwell along the Missisipi River — was precisely the Day on which Monsieur Jollyet

arrived with orders from Monsieur the Count de Frontenac, Our Governor, and Monsieur Talon, Our Intendant, to accomplish This discovery with me. I was all the more delighted at This good news, since I saw that my plans were about to be accomplished; and since I found myself in the blessed necessity of exposing my life for the salvation of all these peoples, and especially of the Illinois, who had very urgently entreated me, when I was at the point of st. Esprit, to carry the word of God to Their country.

We were not long in preparing all our Equipment, although we were about to Begin a voyage, the duration of which we could not foresee. Indian Corn, with some smoked meat, constituted all our provisions; with these we Embarked—Monsieur Jolliet and myself, with 5 men—in 2 Bark Canoes, fully resolved to do and suffer everything for so glorious an Undertaking.

Accordingly, on The 17th day of may, 1673, we started from the Mission of st. Ignace at Michilimackinac, where I Then was. The Joy that we felt at being selected for This Expedition animated our Courage, and rendered the labor of paddling from morning to night agreeable to us. And because We were going to seek Unknown countries, We took every precaution in our power, so that, if our Undertaking were hazardous, it should not be foolhardy. To that end, we obtained all the Information that we could from the savages who had frequented those regions; and we even traced out from their reports a Map of the whole of that New country; on it we indicated the rivers which we were to navigate, the names of the peoples and of the places through

which we were to pass, the Course of the great River, and the direction we were to follow when we reached it.

Above all, I placed our voyage under the protection of the Blessed Virgin Immaculate, promising her that, if she granted us the favor of discovering the great River, I would give it The Name of the Conception, and that I would also make the first Mission that I should establish among Those New peoples, bear the same name. This I have actually done, among the Illinois.¹⁶

SECTION 2ND. THE FATHER VISITS, IN PASSING, THE TRIBES OF THE FOLLE AVOINE. WHAT THAT FOLLE AVOINE IS. HE ENTERS THE BAY DES PUANTS; SOME PARTICULARS ABOUT THAT BAY. HE ARRIVES AMONG THE FIRE NATION.

WITH all these precautions, we Joyfully Plied our paddles on a portion of Lake huron, on That of the Illinois and on the bay des Puants.

The first Nation that we came to was That of the folle avoine. I entered Their river, to go and visit these peoples to whom we have preached The Gospel for several years,—in consequence of which, there are several good christians among Them.

The wild oat, whose name they bear because it is found in their country, is a sort of grass, which grows naturally in the small Rivers with muddy bottoms, and in Swampy Places. It greatly resembles the wild oats that Grow amid our wheat. The ears grow upon hollow stems, jointed at Intervals; they emerge from the Water about the month of June, and continue growing until they rise About two feet above it. The grain is not larger than That

of our oats, but it is twice as long, and The meal therefrom is much more abundant. The Savages Gather and prepare it for food as Follows. In The month of September, which is the suitable time for The harvest, they go in Canoes through These fields of wild oats; they shake its Ears into the Canoe, on both sides, as they pass through. The grain falls out easily, if it be ripe, and they obtain their supply In a short time. But, in order to clean it from the straw, and to remove it from a husk in which it is Enclosed, they dry it in the smoke, upon a wooden grating, under which they maintain a slow fire for some Days. When The oats are thoroughly dry, they put them in a Skin made into a bag, thrust It into a hole dug in the ground for This purpose, and tread it with their feet—so long and so vigorously that The grain separates from the straw, and is very easily winnowed. After this, they pound it to reduce it to flour,—or even, without pounding it, they Boil it in water, and season it with fat. Cooked in This fashion, The wild oats have almost as delicate a taste as rice has when no better seasoning is added.

I told these peoples of the folle avoine of My design to go and discover Those Remote nations, in order to Teach them the Mysteries of Our Holy Religion. They were Greatly surprised to hear it, and did their best to dissuade me. They represented to me that I would meet Nations who never show mercy to Strangers, but Break Their heads without any cause; and that war was kindled Between Various peoples who dwelt upon our Route, which Exposed us to the further manifest danger of being killed by the bands of Warriors who are ever in the

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Field. They also said that the great River was very dangerous, when one does not know the difficult Places; that it was full of horrible monsters, which devoured men and Canoes Together; that there was even a demon, who was heard from a great distance, who barred the way, and swallowed up all who ventured to approach him; Finally that the Heat was so excessive In those countries that it would Inevitably Cause Our death.

I thanked them for the good advice that they gave me, but told them that I could not follow it, because the salvation of souls was at stake, for which I would be delighted to give my life; that I scoffed at the alleged demon; that we would easily defend ourselves against those marine monsters; and, moreover, that We would be on our guard to avoid the other dangers with which they threatened us. After making them pray to God, and giving them some Instruction, I separated from them. Embarking then in our Canoes, We arrived shortly afterward at the bottom of the Bay des puantz, where our Fathers labor successfully for the Conversion of these peoples, over two thousand of whom they have baptized while they have been there.

This bay bears a Name which has a meaning not so offensive in the language of the savages; For they call it *la baye salée* ["salt bay"] rather than Bay des Puans,—although with Them this is almost the same and this is also The name which they give to the Sea. This led us to make very careful researches to ascertain whether there were not some salt-Water springs in This quarter, As there are among the hiroquois, but we found none. We conclude, therefore, that This name has been given to

it on account of the quantity of mire and Mud which is seen there, whence noisome vapors Constantly arise, Causing the loudest and most Continual Thunder that I have ever heard.

The Bay is about thirty leagues in depth and eight in width at its Mouth; it narrows gradually to the bottom, where it is easy to observe a tide which has its regular ebb and flow, almost Like That of the Sea. This is not the place to inquire whether these are real tides; whether they are Due to the wind, or to some other cause; whether there are winds, The precursors of the Moon and attached to her suite, which consequently agitate the lake and give it an apparent ebb and flow whenever the Moon ascends above the horizon. What I can Positively state is, that, when the water is very Calm, it is easy to observe it rising and falling according to the Course of the moon; although I do not deny that This movement may be Caused by very Remote Winds, which, pressing on the middle of the lake, cause the edges to Rise and fall in the manner which is visible to our eyes.¹⁷

We left This bay to enter the river that discharges into it; it is very beautiful at its Mouth, and flows gently; it is full Of bustards, Ducks, Teal, and other birds, attracted thither by the wild oats, of which they are very fond. But, after ascending the river a short distance, it becomes very difficult of passage, on account of both the Currents and the sharp Rocks, which Cut the Canoes and the feet of Those who are obliged to drag them, especially when the Waters are low. Nevertheless, we successfully passed Those rapids; and on approaching Machkoutens, the fire Nation, I had the Curiosity to drink the mineral

Waters of the River that is not Far from That vil-
lage. I also took time to look for a medicinal plant
which a savage, who knows its secret, showed to
Father Alloues with many Ceremonies. Its root is
employed to Counteract snake-bites, God having been
pleased to give this antidote Against a poison which
is very common in these countries. It is very pun-
gent, and tastes like powder when crushed with the
teeth; it must be masticated and placed upon the
bite inflicted by the snake. The reptile has so great
a horror of it that it even flees from a Person who
has rubbed himself with it. The plant bears several
stalks, a foot high, with rather long leaves; and a
white flower, which greatly resembles The wall-
flower.¹⁸ I put some in my Canoe, in order to examine
it at leisure while we continued to advance toward
Maskoutens, where we arrived on The 7th of
June.

SECTION 3RD. DESCRIPTION OF THE VILLAGE OF MAS-
KOUTENS; WHAT PASSED THERE BETWEEN THE
FATHER AND THE SAVAGES. THE FRENCH
BEGIN TO ENTER A NEW AND UNKNOWN
COUNTRY, AND ARRIVE AT MISSISSIPI.

HERE we are at Maskoutens. This Word may, in
Algonquin, mean "the fire Nation,"—which,
indeed, is the name given to this tribe. Here is the
limit of the discoveries which the french have made,
For they have not yet gone any farther.

This Village Consists of three Nations who have
gathered there — Miamis, Maskoutens, and Kikabous.
The former are the most civil, the most liberal, and
the most shapely. They wear two long locks over
their ears, which give them a pleasing appearance.

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They are regarded as warriors, and rarely undertake expeditions without being successful. They are very docile, and listen quietly to What is said to Them; and they appeared so eager to Hear Father Alloues when he Instructed them that they gave Him but little rest, even during the night. The Maskoutens and Kikabous are ruder, and seem peasants in Comparison with the others. As Bark for making Cabins is scarce in this country, They use Rushes; these serve Them for making walls and Roofs, but do not afford them much protection against the winds, and still less against the rains when they fall abundantly. The Advantage of Cabins of this kind is, that they make packages of Them, and easily transport them wherever they wish, while they are hunting.

When I visited them, I was greatly Consoled at seeing a handsome Cross erected in the middle of the village, and adorned with many white skins, red Belts, and bows and arrows, which these good people had offered to the great Manitou (This is the name which they give to God). They did this to thank him for having had pity On Them during The winter, by giving Them an abundance of game When they Most dreaded famine.¹⁰

I took pleasure in observing the situation of this village. It is beautiful and very pleasing; For, from an Eminence upon which it is placed, one beholds on every side prairies, extending farther than the eye can see, interspersed with groves or with lofty trees. The soil is very fertile, and yields much indian corn. The savages gather quantities of plums and grapes, wherewith much wine could be made, if desired.

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No sooner had we arrived than we, Monsieur Jollyet and I, assembled the elders together; and he told them that he was sent by Monsieur Our Governor to discover New countries, while I was sent by God to illumine them with the light of the holy Gospel. He told them that, moreover, The sovereign Master of our lives wished to be known by all the Nations; and that in obeying his will I feared not the death to which I exposed myself in voyages so perilous. He informed them that we needed two guides to show us the way; and We gave them a present, by it asking them to grant us the guides. To this they very Civilly consented; and they also spoke to us by means of a present, consisting of a Mat to serve us as a bed during the whole of our voyage.

On the following day, the tenth of June, two Miamis who were given us as guides embarked with us, in the sight of a great crowd, who could not sufficiently express their astonishment at the sight of seven frenchmen, alone and in two Canoes, daring to undertake so extraordinary and so hazardous an Expedition.

We knew that, at three leagues from Maskoutens, was a River which discharged into Missisipi. We knew also that the direction we were to follow in order to reach it was west-southwesterly. But the road is broken by so many swamps and small lakes that it is easy to lose one's way, especially as the River leading thither is so full of wild oats that it is difficult to find the Channel. For this reason we greatly needed our two guides, who safely Conducted us to a portage of 2,700 paces, and helped us to transport our Canoes to enter That river; after

which they returned home, leaving us alone in this Unknown country, in the hands of providence.⁸⁰

Thus we left the Waters flowing to Quebec, 4 or 500 Leagues from here, to float on Those that would thenceforward Take us through strange lands. Before embarking thereon, we Began all together a new devotion to the blessed Virgin Immaculate, which we practiced daily, addressing to her special prayers to place under her protection both our persons and the success of our voyage; and, after mutually encouraging one another, we entered our Canoes.

The River on which we embarked is called Meekousing. It is very wide; it has a sandy bottom, which forms various shoals that render its navigation very difficult. It is full of Islands Covered with Vines. On the banks one sees fertile land, diversified with woods, prairies, and Hills. There are oak, Walnut, and basswood trees; and another kind, whose branches are armed with long thorns. We saw there neither feathered game nor fish, but many deer, and a large number of cattle. Our Route lay to the southwest, and, after navigating about 30 leagues, we saw a spot presenting all the appearances of an iron mine; and, in fact, one of our party who had formerly seen such mines, assures us that The One which We found is very good and very rich. It is Covered with three feet of good soil, and is quite near a chain of rocks, the base of which is covered by very fine trees. After proceeding 40 leagues on This same route, we arrived at the mouth of our River; and, at 42 and a half degrees Of latitude, We safely entered Missisipi on The 17th of June, with a joy that I cannot Express. .

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SECTION 4TH. OF THE GREAT RIVER CALLED MISSISSIPI; ITS MOST NOTABLE FEATURES; OF VARIOUS ANIMALS, AND ESPECIALLY THE MISKIOUS OR WILD CATTLE, THEIR SHAPE AND NATURE; OF THE FIRST VILLAGES OF THE ILINOIS, WHERE THE FRENCH ARRIVED.

HERE we are, then, on this so renowned River, all of whose peculiar features I have endeavored to note carefully. The Missisipi River takes its rise in various lakes in the country of the Northern nations. It is narrow at the place where Miskous empties; its Current, which flows southward, is slow and gentle. To the right is a large Chain of very high Mountains, and to the left are beautiful lands; in various Places, the stream is Divided by Islands. On sounding, we found ten brasses of Water. Its Width is very unequal; sometimes it is three-quarters of a league, and sometimes it narrows to three arpents. We gently followed its Course, which runs toward the south and southeast, as far as the 42nd degree of Latitude. Here we plainly saw that its aspect was completely changed. There are hardly any woods or mountains; The Islands are more beautiful, and are Covered with finer trees. We saw only deer and cattle, bustards, and Swans without wings, because they drop Their plumage in This country. From time to time, we came upon monstrous fish, one of which struck our Canoe with such violence that I Thought that it was a great tree, about to break the Canoe to pieces.²¹ On another occasion, we saw on The water a monster with the head of a tiger, a sharp nose Like That of a wildcat, with whiskers and straight, Erect ears; The head was gray and The Neck quite black; but We saw no

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more creatures of this sort. When we cast our nets into the water we caught Sturgeon, and a very extraordinary Kind of fish. It resembles the trout, with This difference, that its mouth is larger. Near its nose—which is smaller, as are also the eyes—is a large Bone shaped Like a woman's busk, three fingers wide and a Cubit Long, at the end of which is a disk as Wide As one's hand. This frequently causes it to fall backward when it leaps out of the water.²² When we reached the parallel of 41 degrees 28 minutes, following The same direction, we found that Turkeys had taken the place of game; and the pisikions, or wild cattle, That of the other animals.

We call them "wild cattle," because they are very similar to our domestic cattle. They are not longer, but are nearly as large again, and more Corpulent. When Our people killed one, three persons had much difficulty in moving it. The head is very large; The forehead is flat, and a foot and a half Wide between the Horns, which are exactly like Those of our oxen, but black and much larger. Under the Neck They have a Sort of large dewlap, which hangs down; and on The back is a rather high hump. The whole of the head, The Neck, and a portion of the Shoulders, are Covered with a thick Mane Like That of horses; It forms a crest a foot long, which makes them hideous, and, falling over their eyes, Prevents them from seeing what is before Them. The remainder of the Body is covered with a heavy coat of curly hair, almost Like That of our sheep, but much stronger and Thicker. It falls off in Summer, and The skin becomes as soft As Velvet. At that season, the savages Use the hides for making fine

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Robes, which they paint in various Colors. The flesh and the fat of the pisikious are Excellent, and constitute the best dish at feasts. Moreover, they are very fierce; and not a year passes without their killing some savages. When attacked, they catch a man on their Horns, if they can, toss Him in the air, and then throw him on the ground, after which they trample him under foot, and kill him. If a person fire at Them from a distance, with either a bow or a gun, he must, immediately after the Shot, throw himself down and hide in the grass; For if they perceive Him who has fired, they Run at him, and attack him. As their legs are thick and rather Short, they do not run very fast, As a rule, except when angry. They are scattered about the prairie in herds; I have seen one of 400.

We continued to advance, but, As we knew not whither we were going,— for we had proceeded over one Hundred leagues without discovering anything except animals and birds,— we kept well on our guard. On this account, we make only a small fire on land, toward evening, to cook our meals; and, after supper, we remove Ourselves as far from it as possible, and pass the night in our Canoes, which we anchor in the river at some distance from the shore. This does not prevent us from always posting one of the party as a sentinel, for fear of a surprise. Proceeding still in a southerly and south-southwesterly direction, we find ourselves at the parallel of 41 degrees, and as low as 40 degrees and some minutes,— partly southeast and partly southwest,— after having advanced over 60 leagues since We Entered the River, without discovering anything.

Finally, on the 25th of June, we perceived on the