

## DES MOINES—WHAT IT MEANS

MUCH has been written as to the origin and meaning of the name, "Des Moines." That it is from the French, and means "The Monks" is true. That the city was named from the river is also true. As there were never any monks in Iowa, it is evident the name is a mis-application, or a corruption. The river was discovered by P re Marquette and M. Jollyet, in 1673.

John Dawson Gilmary Shea (1852), the eminent author of "Histories of Catholic Missions Among Indian Tribes," "Explorations of the Mississippi," "History of the Catholic Church of the United States," in his "History of the Life and Explorations of Marquette," gives the narrative of Marquette in English, as translated by Father Claudius Dablon, Superior of the Mission of the Society of Jesuits at Quebec, of which Marquette was a member, and also in French, as Marquette wrote it.

Marquette was commissioned by Frontenac, Governor General of New France, as the whole northwest part of North America was then called, to explore the Mississippi River. He was also commissioned by his superior, Father Dablon, to establish Missions among the Indians. With him went Jollyet, also a Jesuit, and member of the Society. They went up Fox River, from Green Bay to a village of Miamis, at a point where Portage now is, then crossed over to the Wisconsin River, thence down that stream, and on the Seventeenth of June floated out into the Mississippi, the first white men to see Iowa. In his narrative of the expedition, he says:

"We set out in two bark canoes, M. Jollyet [so Marquette wrote it] and myself and five men, firmly resolved to do all and suffer all for so glorious an enterprise.

"It was on the seventeenth of May, 1673, that we started from the Mission at Michilimacinac.

"We advanced constantly, but as we did not know where we were going, having made more than one hundred leagues without

having discovered anything but beasts and birds, we kept well on our guard. We made only a little fire on the shore at night to prepare our meals, and after supper kept off shore, passing the night in our canoes.

"Proceeding south and southwest, we find ourselves at forty-one degrees north, and then at forty degrees and some minutes, partly by southeast and partly by southwest," after having advanced more than sixty leagues without having discovered anything.

"At last, on June Twenty-fifth, we perceived the footprints of men by the water side, and a beaten path entering a prairie. We stopped to examine it, and concluded it was a path leading to some Indian village. We resolved to go and reconnoiter. We accordingly left our two canoes in charge of our people, cautioning them to beware of a surprise; then M. Jollyet and I undertook this rather hazardous discovery for two single men, who thus put themselves at the discretion of an unknown and barbarous people. We followed the little path in silence, and, having advanced about two leagues, we discovered a village on the banks of the river, and two others on a hill half a league from the former. We passed on and heard the Indians talking. We announced ourselves by a cry with all our strength. At this, the Indians rushed out of their cabins, and, seeing we were but two, they deputed four old men to come and speak with us. Two carried tobacco pipes trimmed with many feathers. They were a long time coming a little way. I spoke first, and asked who they were. They replied, 'We are Illini.' "

The narrative then relates their visit with the Indians, who received them graciously. After six days, on departing, the head chief addressed them, saying:

"I thank thee, Black Gown, and thee, Frenchman [to Jollyet] [*Je te remercie Robe noire, et toi Francaise s'addressment a M. Jollyet*], for taking so much pains to visit us; never has the earth been so beautiful, nor the sun so bright as to-day; never has the river been so calm nor so free from rocks, which your canoes have removed as they passed; never has our tobacco had so fine a flavor, nor our corn appeared so beautiful as we behold it to-day."

Placing his hand on the head of a little Indian boy, he said:

"Here is my son, whom I give to you to show you my heart. I pray you have pity on me and my nation. It is you who know the

Great Spirit who made us all. It is you who speak to Him, and know His word. Ask Him to give us life and health, and come and live with us.”

Marquette promised to return in four months. A big feast followed, at which dog flesh was served, the highest token of esteem an Indian could offer. Marquette was presented with an elaborately ornamented calumet, or peace pipe, which he was told would assure him welcome and safety among Indians wherever he went.

When they departed, six hundred persons went with them to their canoes. They then resumed their journey down the river to Arkansas River, where they decided to go no farther, but return to Canada. On reaching the *Rivier des Illini* (now Illinois), they learned from the Indians of a shorter route. They therefore went up the Illini to a point near the *Rivier des Plaines*, crossed over to the latter, thence down the latter to its entrance into Lake Michigan. They went by slow degrees, visiting Indian villages on the way.

Arriving at the lake, they separated, Marquette to return to his mission along the Hurons, and Jollyet to Quebec, to report to the Government. Marquette built a cabin at the mouth of the *des Plaines*, established a Mission at Le Vantam, and for a year or more preached to the Indians and visited their villages. In May, 1675, sick from exposure in the swamps and lowlands in that section, with two companions, he started up Lake Michigan for Saint Ignace. He soon became prostrated, and a few days later motioned to land. A cabin was hastily prepared, a bed of pine boughs made, and he was tenderly removed thereto, but he rapidly grew worse, and on the Eighteenth passed to his rest. His body was enshrouded in birch bark and buried in the sand, near what is now the mouth of Marquette River. Two years later, friendly Indians removed his remains to Saint Ignace, and in 1877, on the site of the old Saint Ignace Mission Church, descendants of French and Indians erected a monument in memory of him.

Jollyet started on his trip to Quebec. When going down Saint Lawrence Rapids, his canoe capsized and all its contents were lost, together with the little Indian boy, Jollyet barely escaping with his life. Subsequently, he made his report of the expedition from memory, but it was very incomplete and never given to the public.

Other explorers soon followed Marquette and made their reports. Meanwhile, Marquette's narrative lay in the archives of Father Dablon's college, Frontenac, the Governor of New France, having become involved with the Jesuits and Church authorities over the sale of liquor to the Indians, the Church opposing it. He suppressed publication of the narrative, and it would have remained in oblivion had not Dablon and Thevenot, a distinguished French traveler and author, in 1681, discovered it and arranged for its publication.

A few years later, Canada fell into the hands of England, the Jesuits were condemned and ostracised, and the college at Quebec ordered closed, but before its close, Father Cazot, desiring to save some valuable church records and objects, gathered them together and deposited them in *Hotel Dieu*, a hospital in Quebec, in care of nuns not embraced in the edict against the Jesuits, and among them was the original narrative of Marquette. In 1852, the narrative was delivered by the nuns to Mr. Shea, who says:

"The manuscript comprised sixty pages, thirty-seven of which were a narrative of the voyage down the Mississippi River, from the mouth of the Wisconsin River, one leaf to the calumet presented to Marquette, all in Marquette's handwriting. There was also a map charted by Marquette, on which is shown, in latitude about forty, a river. Near its mouth is inscribed two Indian villages, one 'Moingowena', the other 'Peoweria.' The distance and circumstances give good reason to believe the river is now the Des Moines."

Other explorers and travelers followed Marquette—La Salle, 1679; Hennepin, 1680; Franquelin, 1688; Charlevoix, 1721; Sinex Map of North America, 1710; l'Isle Louisiana and Mississippi Map, 1722; all follow the nomenclature of Marquette except Franquelin, who wrote it "Moingoana."

Father Kemper, in his "History of the Catholic Church in Iowa," says:

"In the Spring of the year 1720, the Capuchin, Pére Le Grand, drafted for the Capuchin Monastery at Dijon, a terrestrial globe, which is now preserved in the public library in Dijon, in France, on which the Mississippi, Missouri, Illinois, Des Moines, and Saint

Peter rivers are plainly marked, and special prominence is given to the Des Moines River, which there has the name of '*R. des Moingona*—River of the Moingonas. From this Indian tribe, the present name of the river has its derivation, and not as some have presumed, from '*R. des Moines*'—River of the Monks.

"Tradition speaks of the Indian custom, from ages immemorial, of using a path from the Des Moines Rapids on the Mississippi westward, and the very name of the people of this river has reference to this Indian highway, the *Moingona*, signifying 'The People by the Way.' When the early settlers took possession of the land, they could yet see plain evidences of this Indian trail leading to the Des Moines and beyond it to the west. It must have been at some former period a great thoroughfare, as it was worn in many places on level ground for miles, six inches in depth."

In Biddle's revised report of "Lewis and Clark's Expedition," is a marginal note saying that "Moingona" is an old word of Algonquin origin; it does not mean "The Monks."

Adair's "American Indians" gives the word, "Moingona."

Charlevoix, a noted French traveler, historian, and Jesuit, came over from France, stopped at the Kaskaskian Mission nearly two years, where he must have learned much of Marquette and his work, for, in 1721, he traversed the river from its mouth to its source, and in his "History of New France," as all northwestern America was then called, he wrote:

"The Moingona issues from the midst of an immense meadow, which swarms with buffalo and other wild beasts. Its course is said to be three hundred and fifty leagues in length. It rises from a lake. Going up the Moingona, we find great quantities of pit coal."

Nicollét, in his report to the United States Government, explaining his "Hydrographic Map of the Mississippi Basin," gives the name "Moingoana," but says it is a corruption of the Algonquin word "Mikoning."

Winterbottom, in 1795, charted it "Moin;" Bertram's map charts it "les Monk."

Here, then, we have this name given by Marquette, used and recognized by explorers, historians, and chartists for more than one

hundred and fifty years. They were all Frenchmen, and good scholars; not one says it means "The Monks;" most of them declare it does not.

Then, what does it mean? Marquette did not give it. He probably would have done so had he not died before completing his mission. His report was compiled for the Government from his notes by Thevenot, six years after his death.

Thirty years ago, I asked the old chief of the remnant of the Sauk and Fox tribes at Tama, a man over ninety years old, the meaning of the word, and he said he did not know; it was not his language.

The best source of information now, therefore, is the language used by the Indians whom Marquette met. They spoke a dialect of the Algonquin. They were descendants of the once noted Mascotins, or Fire Indians, who dwelt around Lake Michigan and along Illinois River.

Schoolcraft, who traveled and lived with these Indians several years, in his "Archives of the Aborigines," Volume Three, gives an extensive analysis of the language. He says:

"It is composed largely of pronouns, confined principally to inanimate things; also cluster words, every one of which is a sentence or affirmation. A word often is interpreted variously by a sign or gesture when spoken."

His list of key words gives "moin," meaning corn; "gon," meaning land or place; "na," meaning excellent, good, always. From this, it is a fair presumption that the word written by Marquette, as best he could in French, as spoken by the Indians, is a cluster word meaning "a good place to raise corn—to live," and agrees with the sentiment expressed by the Indians to Marquette. It is not a French word.

Now, then, how came the change to "Des Moines?"

Nicollét explains it by saying that, "The territory west of the Mississippi was all under the dominion of Spain, and all traffic or trade was that of agents, Spanish and French, of the American Fur Company, who traveled up and down the rivers, trading with the Indians, and, finding it difficult to speak the word 'Moingona,' they clipped it to 'De Mon,' 'De Mong,' etc. The Creoles did the

same. They now do so. They say, 'Road of the Mons,' meaning the road from the head of the lower rapids to the Indian village above, so as to avoid the rapids. Early settlers followed the habit."

This clipping is shown in the treaty with the Sauk and Fox Indians as late as 1834, wherein the river is named "Demoin," and one tribe is called the "Sok." Sault Saint Marie is clipped to "Soo;" Raccoon River is clipped to "'Coon," and myriads of people do not know what it stands for.

In 1834, Congress having attached the "Black Hawk Purchase" to the Territory of Michigan, for temporary government, the Legislature of Michigan divided it into two counties; the south half was named after the river, and, with little regard for history, facts or tradition, sought to euphonize it by making it pure French, and named it "Des Moines."

Instead, therefore, of perpetuating the Indian name of the river, we have a name which has no incident or tradition on which to base it, and entirely alien to that given by Marquette, a historical fact much regretted.

April Sixteenth, 1905.

**Transcribed from:**

**PIONEERS OF POLK COUNTY, IOWA AND REMINISCENCES OF EARLY DAYS**

**by L. F. Andrews**

**Volume I**

**Des Moines, Baker-Trisler Company, 1908**