

Biographic Sketch of Chief Gabriel Renville

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By Samuel J. Brown.

The subject of this sketch was born at Big Stone lake about April, 1825, and died at the residence of the writer at Brown's Valley, Minn., on August 26, 1892, being in his sixty-eighth year at the time of his death.

Gabriel's father was a full and only brother of the noted bois brulé, Joseph Renville (for whom one of the counties of the State is named), and was called in Sioux Ohiya, and in English Victor, -the latter a translation of the Sioux name. Ohiya or Victor Renville was born and reared among the Sioux, and, though a mixed-blood, was, it is said, in appearance, language, habits, and feelings, a full-blood Sioux. He was a warrior of considerable note, and while on the war-path against the Chippewas was killed and scalped in the neighborhood of what is now Fort Ripley about the year 1832, shot dead in his canoe while coming down the Mississippi.

Gabriel's mother, Winona Crawford, also a mixed-blood, was the grand-daughter of Ta-tanka-mani, or Walking Buffalo, mentioned by Lieutenant Pike in 1805, and also described in Neill's History of Minnesota as a "Sioux chief who was the principal man at the treaty of Portage des Sioux [near the mouth of the Missouri river] in 1815," and was the daughter of a Sioux woman (Ta-tanka-mani's daughter) and a Mr. Crawford, a prominent British trader in the Northwest prior to and during the War of 1812. She was also born and reared among the Sioux, and, though married, always retained her father's name. She lived for some time with the family of the noted Colonel Dixon, the "red-headed Scotchman" and trader at lake Traverse, who figured so prominently among the Indians of the Northwest in the war with England in 1812. She was married about 1819 to Narcisee Frenier, a bois brulé and Indian trader at lake Traverse, who, shortly after his marriage went over to the Missouri river to look for a location for a trading post, was taken sick on the trip, and, as is supposed, died, for he never returned. By this union there was born a daughter, Susan, who became the wife of the late Joseph R. Brown, and who is still living, and now residing with her son, the writer, at Brown's Valley, Minn.

After Frenier's death, Winona married Ohiya, or Victor Renville, and by this union there was born a son, the subject of this sketch. About three years after the death of Gabriel's father she married Akipa, a full-blood, who later was given a white man's name and called Joseph Akipa Renville, and who was always prominent in the councils of his tribe, and who died at Sisseton Agency, South Dakota, in 1891. By this union there were born two sons, Charles Renville and Thomas Renville, both of whom have in late years added "Crawford" to their name, and who are

now living at Good Will, South Dakota, the former being pastor of the Presbyterian church there. Winona Crawford died at Sisseton Agency, S. D., in 1897, aged about ninety-two years.

Gabriel Renville never attended school, except for about a month in Chicago, and except also when he was learning to read and write his own language from the missionaries. When he was about sixteen years old, my father, then living at Grey Cloud, after cutting his hair and dressing him in white boys' clothes, took him to Chicago and placed him in school there; but school-room confinement and association with strangers speaking an unintelligible and strange tongue did not agree with him or suit him, and in about a month he ran away and traveled on foot across the prairies of Illinois and through the woods of Wisconsin back to his home in Minnesota. He could never be induced to return, but in later years always upbraided my father for not giving him a sound thrashing and sending him back.

He spoke no English, but was a thorough master of the Sioux tongue. He possessed an unlimited command of the language, was an easy speaker, and was never at a loss for words. The writer was intimately associated with him for many years,--acted as his interpreter on many a visit to the Great Father at Washington, and had therefore ample opportunities for judging,--and can say that in his opinion Gabriel Renville had no superior--no equal, even--as to ability in the use of the Sioux language. He knew the use of it so well and so completely that his every word was a sledge hammer, always clear, homely but strong, and to the point. The writer well remembers that on one occasion when in Washington he was asked by a high official if he would be pleased with an Eastern man for Agent. His answer was, "No, give us a Western man. Eastern men are wise and good, but they can't tell an Indian from a buffalo calf."

In personal appearance Chief Renville was a striking figure,--broad-shouldered, tall, straight, sinewy, and athletic looking. He would command attention anywhere.

As to his services and conduct during the Sioux outbreak of 1862 and the war following the outbreak, as well as the estimate placed upon his character and worth by prominent men who knew him, the writer can do no better than to give extracts of letters and papers from Gen. H. H. Sibley, Major Joseph R. Brown, Gen. John B. Sanborn, Senator C. K. Davis, all of Minnesota, and Prof. C. C. Painter, formerly of Fisk University, Tenn., and afterward agent of the Indian Rights Association at Washington, D. C.

General Sibley, in a communication to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, dated June 22, 1868, said:

Mr. Renville was among the most trusted and reliable of the mixed-bloods employed by me, while I was prosecuting the campaigns against the hostile Sioux in 1864 and 1865. Indeed, so well pleased was I with his fidelity, energy, and intelligence, that I appointed him Chief of the scouts to whom the outer line of defences of the frontier of this State, and of Dakota Territory, was entrusted; and he signalized himself by unremitting and distinguished services, in that important position.

Mr. Renville was instrumental in saving the lives of many white captives, taken by the Indians in 1862, by his influence and determined efforts in their behalf; and he lost a large amount of

property, including horses, appropriated by the hostile savages, or destroyed, in consequence of his opposition to their murderous course.

In fact he was reduced from a position of comfort and comparative opulence, to depend upon what he could earn by his daily exertions, for the subsistence of himself and his family, and he was not included in the award of the \$7,500 appropriated by Congress to be apportioned among those who had remained faithful to the government, by some strange and unaccountable omission.

I have appealed many times to the Interior and War Departments in behalf of the Indians and mixed-bloods who exposed life and property in defending the whites against the outrages and massacres to which so many were subjected, during the outbreak referred to, but no one individual is entitled to more consideration than Gabriel Renville, and I trust it will be in the power of your Bureau to make ample amends to him for the losses he has sustained, and the sacrifices he has made, in maintaining the power of the government against the organized and almost universal disaffection and violence of his own kindred and people.

Major Brown, in a communication to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, dated March 5, 1870, said:

Those organized for an armed resistance to the hostilities of the hostile bands were largely of the relations of the Chief, and were organized and operated under his exertions and authority. By the exertions of those Indians hundreds of whites were saved, and many of the hostile bands were punished. During the month of May, 1865, thirteen men who were on their way to depredate upon the whites were killed at different times by those friendly Indians, while acting as scouts for the protection of the frontier under the immediate command of Gabriel Renville, their chief.

Professor Painter, in a letter to Dr. Edward Everett Hale, of Boston, dated in September, 1888, said:

Renville is a fine specimen of the "noble red man;" stately, dignified, reticent, intelligent, straightforward and manly in his bearing, impressing those with whom he meets as possessing great reserved force which could easily be called into action if his good sense and perfect mastery of himself consented. During the winter I had many interviews with him, and was impressed always increasingly by the quiet dignity and greatness of the man. He told the story of his great wrongs in an unruffled, dispassionate calmness, which almost appeared to be indifference, but there were now and then flashes of lightning in his eye which revealed reserves of strength and feeling which were under the control of a master mind and will.

General Sanborn, in a note to the writer dated September 16, 1892, said:

Renville's death was a great loss to his people, and to all his acquaintances. He was one of the best, if not the best man I ever knew, if good and benevolent actions done from good and

benevolent motives constitute true goodness, which I think all concede. He was also a man of great mental force, capable of doing a great deal of good or a great deal of evil. It was fortunate both for the Indians and the whites that his influence and power was always used and always found on the side of right and justice. The Sissetons cannot expect to see his like again.

Senator Davis, in the course of a speech in the United States Senate, according to the Congressional Record of February 8, 1899, said:

I knew Gabriel Renville well. He first called my attention to this subject when I was governor of Minnesota, in 1874 and 1875. He was a great man in his way, and was a good man from any point of view. His men fought on our side in the Indian war. He rescued many white women and children from the hands of Little Crow and his band, then waging war against us. He sent his young men into the armies of the United States during the war of the rebellion.

The writer is in possession of many other letters and papers from many other prominent men, among them Bishop Whipple, Dr. Daniels, and Major Rose, all of whom knew him well, all speaking in the highest terms of the man; but space will not allow of their reproduction here, and so will content himself by simply saying that he believes that the brains of Gabriel Renville saved many whites during the Sioux outbreak of 1862, that no person in the friendly camp made greater exertions for the preservation of the whites than he and that the combination of friendly Indians and mixed-bloods, through which the white captives were obtained from the hostile Indians and delivered over to General Sibley, originated with and was organized by him.

So deeply and so thoroughly was the Department of the Interior impressed with Renville's abilities and general usefulness that at the close of the Indian war, at its suggestion, he was made Chief of the Sisseton and Wahpeton Sioux of lake Traverse, and remained as such chief until his death.

This rambling and imperfect sketch, already too long, must be brought to a close. But before doing so the writer would add that Minnesota owes much to Gabriel Renville, and that the least it ought to do for him would be to cause a suitable monument to be erected to his memory; and that in his opinion the shaft so to be erected should stand not only on the soil of the State he loved and served so well, but also on the spot where his forefathers lived, on the "old Sioux reservation," which was confiscated by Congress, and which he labored so hard to have restored to the scouts and soldiers of his tribe, on the spot where General Sibley camped for a week with his whole army in 1863, preparing for a dash across the plains to the Missouri, and where Renville was then consulted and advised with so often, and where he and his scouts were accustomed to bivouac while "chasing the Little Crow," and where the old chief died, between Big Stone and Traverse lakes. Let this be done that we may show to her sister states, and indeed to the world, that Minnesota can honor a worthy son, even though a mixed-blood Indian.

Browns's Valley, Minn., Nov. 18, 1903.