

Obituary - Joseph Renville (1779-1846)

Joseph Renville established Fort Renville and a mission at Lac qui Parle in 1834. He died in 1846. Dr. Williamson wrote the following letter May 15, 1846. A copy of this is in the Chippewa County (Minnesota) Historical Society.

Death scene narrative by Dr Williamson

The present communication contains an obituary notice of one who has been intimately connected with the station at Lac qui Parle, and who has done much, with the blessing of God, for the missionary work among the Sioux. The following account appears to be judicious and impartial: and it will aid the reader in forming an estimate of the piety which is developed on a heathen soil.

Leading Incidents of Mr. Renville's Life

Joseph Renville was the son of a French father and a Dakota or Sioux mother. He was born on the Mississippi some distance below the Falls of St. Anthony and here his first years were spent among the Sioux, his mother having left his father to live with an Indian. Before he was ten years old, his father took him to Canada and intrusted him, for some time, to the care of a Roman Catholic priest, by whom he was baptized. The priest was kind, and communicated to him some knowledge of the principles of Christianity.

While yet a boy, he returned to the Dakota country, and, his father dying before he attained to manhood, he resided for some time with Colonel Dickson, a British trader, who, observing his intelligence, energy, and honesty, furnished him with some goods, and sent him with the Indians in their wanderings, to purchase their furs. In this way, he lived till about the commencement of the late war between the United States and England.

The British having determined to employ the Indians as auxiliaries against this country, Colonel Dickson, recommended Mr. Renville as the person most capable of enlisting and controlling the Sioux; and he was appointed to command them with the rank, pay and emoluments of a captain in the British army. He was not only an active but a humane officer; and it was probably owing chiefly to his influence that the Dakotas were prevented from participating in those cruel and disgusting scenes which disgraced the conduct of the Winnebagoes, Pottawatomies, and other tribes. The great distance of the Dakota country from the seat of hostilities, made many of the warriors turn back before reaching it; so that they must have been unprofitable to their employers. Notwithstanding this, Mr. Renville retained the entire confidence of the British government; and, after the close of the war, he was for some years employed as their agent, and that of the Hudson's Bay Company, residing in winter with his family among the Dakotas, and each summer visiting the British settlements on Red River to receive the presents for the Indians.

In 1819, the United States commenced military works at the mouth of the St. Peter's and Mr. Renville was thus made acquainted with their claim to the Dakota country. In consequence of this, probably, he

relinquished his pension as a British officer, a year or two afterwards, and with it the employ of the British government and Hudson's Bay Company; and united with others in forming what was called the Columbia Fur Company. After five years the American Fur Company, that his influence over the Indians might be for and not against them, purchased the goods, houses, and etc of the Columbia Company, which were on the Mississippi and St. Peter's, and agreed to supply him with goods on liberal terms, and relinquish to him a large extent of country in which he might trade without opposition. About this time he built a house near Lac qui Parle, where he resided for the last twenty years of his life. During his connection with the Columbia Fur Company, the first seed corn was brought to Lac Travers; and, chiefly through his example and influence, the Indians were induced to commence planting there, and a few years subsequently at Lac qui Parle. By this means the lives of many were preserved in 1827, when hundreds of the Dakotas, having nothing to depend on but the chase, perished by famine.

Mr. Renville's Religious History

Mr. Renville appears to have been seriously inclined, and to have sought a knowledge of Christianity, from his early years. But he never understood the English language, and was unable to acquire knowledge by reading. Previous to the establishment of the mission here, he had very little intercourse with white men, except from Indian traders and military officers, many of whom could converse with him only through an interpreter, and most of the others were Roman Catholics or avowed infidels. Of course, his opportunities for gaining a knowledge of Christianity were neither frequent nor favorable. When I first saw him in the summer of 1834, he informed me that he was a Protestant. He was then in his fifty-fifth year. Previous to that time he had seen, and conversed with one or more Protestant clergymen; but it is not probably that he had ever had an opportunity of attending Protestant worship, conducted in a language that he could understand. Previous to this, about 1829 or 1830 the Holy Spirit was pleased, in some way, to cause him to think and feel more on the subject of religion. He began to speak, not only to his own family, but to his Indian relatives on the subject of Christianity; and it is remarkable that some of our native members, who have subsequently given the best evidence of piety, think a great change was wrought in them at that time. What was its nature, I cannot say. Years afterwards, they did not understand that way of salvation by a Redeemer; but their confidence in the superstitions of their people weakened, and there was some improvement in their external conduct. Mr. Renville's own knowledge of the way of salvation must, at the time have been limited and his ideas on the subject indistinct, and, of course, he could not communicate to others what he did not possess. But it would seem as if, at a time when there was no human teacher near, the Holy Spirit opened his heart and that of some others to receive the truth.

Soon afterwards he took his family on a journey of five hundred miles to Prairie du Chien (at that time the nearest settlement of white people, except the English settlement on Red River) was regularly married to the mother of his children and had her and them baptized by a priest. At that time, there was no Protestant clergyman there. He also procured from New York a large folio French Bible, and, there being no person within sixty miles of him, who could read it, he requested the Fur Company which he was connected, to procure him a clerk capable of teaching his family the French language. The clerk was sent to him; but he proved to be a Roman Catholic who had little inclination to read the Scriptures.

A knowledge of Mr. Renville's character and influence, his expressed wish to have Protestant missionaries near him, led to the establishment of the mission. He aided us on our way and after our arrival. Through his influence, in no inconsiderable degree, - though subsequent events show clearly that the Holy Spirit was the chief agent, the Indians were restrained from destroying our domestic animals,

during the first years of our residence here, and many of them inclined to receive religious instruction, & etc. He gave us much assistance in catechizing and instructing the people, and though in learning the Dakota language he did less for us than we desired, and sometimes thought he should have done, the aid which he did render was highly important.

Very soon after our arrival he made known to us his wish of communing with us, and about six months afterwards, he was received on examination as a member of the church here. In August 1841, he was chosen and ordained a ruling elder; and from that time till his death, discharged the duties of the office in a manner acceptable and profitable, both to the native members of the church and the members of the mission.

His Last Sickness and Death

On the first Sabbath of March, he met with us in our public services for the last time, and assisted in distributing the elements at the administration of the Lord's Supper. The influenza was then prevailing in the neighborhood, and he was attacked with a violent cough which did not yield to the remedies which had often relieved him before. He bore his sufferings with much patience, and when informed that his disease would probably prove fatal, requested that we should pray, not for his body, but for the life of his soul. A week before his decease, his oppressed breathing and other symptoms made it manifest that the time of his departure was near. He appeared fully aware of it and he was filled with anxiety. He spoke feelingly of one of his sons who was impenitent and of the sufferings and temptations to which he feared all his children, especially his unmarried daughters, would be exposed, in consequence of the destitute condition in which he was leaving them and their ignorance of what was necessary to provide for themselves in such circumstances. He was exhorted to commit his family to God, and all worldly concerns to others and to think only of the things of another world. A day or two afterwards, he told me that he mourned much on account of his sins, and prayed much for forgiveness, mentioning one or two things in which he thought he had done wrong, a short time before. When reminded of the efficacy of the blood of Christ, he replied, "I know it, and that is all my hope." He requested me to read the Scriptures to him and to pray with him. The evening before his decease, he asked me what became of the soul immediately after death. I reminded him of our Saviour's words to the thief on the cross and Paul's desire to depart and be with Christ. He said, "That is sufficient" and presently added, "I have great hope that I shall be saved through grace."

About 8 o'clock the next morning, which was the Sabbath, I was called to see him. He was so evidently in the agonies of death that at first I did not think of attempting to do anything for him. After some time, his breathing became easier and he was asked if he wished to hear a hymn. He replied, "Yes" and repeated the first words of a hymn of praise to Jesus. After it was sung, he said "It is very good." Being asked if he wished to hear another, he assented and referred to a paraphrase of the one hundred and forty-sixth Psalm in the Dakota language. After it was sung he looked at Mr. Huggins, who led the singing, and said, "You have made me glad" which is the Dakota manner of saying, "I thank you". After a short pause, he added, "It has done me good; I feel somewhat relieved." As he again reclined on the bed, I saw a sweet serenity settling on his countenance, and I thought that his severest struggle was probably past; and so it proved. The clock striking ten, he looked at it and intimated that it was time for us to go to church. As we arose leave him, he extended to us his withered

hand. After we left him he spoke some words of exhortation to his family, then prayed till his strength was gone; and before noon, calmly and quietly yielded up his spirit.

Estimate of His Character

In estimating the character of converts from among the heathen, we should ever remember that, though they may possess as strong faith and as fervent love and zeal, and attain as much knowledge of the doctrines of Christianity, neither Scripture nor the history of the church warrant us to expect that steadfastness and beautiful consistency of character which is found in many of those who have known the way of the Lord from their childhood.

Mr. Renville was a man of vigorous mind, and he was remarkable for the energy with which he pursued such objects as he deemed of primary importance. His power of observing and remembering facts, and also words of expressive or simple ideas, was extraordinary. Though in his latter years he could read a little in translating, he seldom took a book in his hand, choosing to depend on hearing rather than sight; and I have often had occasion to observe that, after hearing a verse of Scripture and through - it might be long and one with which he was before unacquainted, he would immediately render it from the French into Dakota, (two languages extremely unlike in their idioms and the order of their words,) and repeat if over, two or three words at a time, so as to give full opportunity to write it down. If he wished to hear it read a second time, or omitted any circumstance or word, I almost always found that it was owing to his failing to hear it distinctly, or his not perceiving the meaning. He had also a remarkable tact in discerning the aim of the speaker and conveying the intended impression, even when many of the ideas and words were such as had nothing corresponding to them in the minds and language of those addressed. These qualities fitted him for an interpreter, and in rendering French into Dakota, and the contrary, and it was generally admitted that he had no equal.

He was equally remarkable for his hospitality and kindness to the poor. All strangers passing through the country, even traders of opposing interests were welcomed to the best which he had to give. His salary as an officer in the British Army and an agent of the Hudson's Bay Company, was large; and during some of the first years of this connection with the American Fur Company his profits from the trade must have been far more than sufficient for the support of his family. Yet, in the times of his greatest prosperity, such was his kindness to the poor, that he accumulated very little; and in his latter years, when the profits of his business were so reduced that he could purchase but little for his own family, he gave a part of that to the Indians. so that for several months of every year, he and his family suffered for provisions.

He possessed in an eminent degree that politeness for which Frenchmen are remarkable, and he was naturally very fond of applause. As this was the only return which he seemed to expect for his numerous acts of kindness, most of those with whom he was brought into contact, whether white men or red men, bestowed it on him far more liberally than missionaries could honestly do. From this also originated an anxiety to conceal his ignorance of anything which he might possibly be supposed to know, sometimes leading him to say and do things which could not be justified. Owing partly to this, but chiefly to the fact that all his education, habits, and manner of thinking were so entirely different from ours, and that till we learned to converse with him in Dakota and French, we could hold intercourse with him only through interpreters, who knew very little of the English language - and who, as is common with them, presumed to say rather what they supposed the speaker ought to say, than what he actually did say. During the first years of our residence here, frequent misunderstandings arose, and some unpleasant feelings on both sides.

The great powers of his mind, however, were restrained to certain classes of ideas. In respect to numbers, dates and proper names, his abilities were probably rather under than above mediocrity. Though he translated sentences with great accuracy, he could not explain or readily apprehend the explanation of single words. Immediately after translating a sentence correctly, if asked for the significance of the several words, he usually erred in regard to some, and occasionally in regard to most of them.

Mr. Renville was also credulous and often believed things on insufficient evidence. Hence he was sometimes deceived, and he deceived others without intending to do it. And his great accuracy respecting most things made those who were misinformed by him more ready to suspect his veracity.

We could never convince him that God required him to rest in his tent during the Sabbath when traveling, though out of regard to our feelings, he frequently did so. In other respects, his views and his practice in relation to the sanctification of the Lord's Day were very different from ours. Notwithstanding this, however, he and his family when at home, were very punctual in attending public worship with us on the Sabbath, even before we could conduct it in a language intelligible to any of them. Their conduct in this respect is the more remarkable to us, for several years after our arrival, he was strongly adverse to our communicating to the Indians some things which we were anxious to teach them.

In early life, conforming to the practice of his associates, it is said that he occasionally indulged freely in the use of intoxication drinks; but before our acquaintance with him commenced, he had nearly ceased to use them; and as soon as we made known to him the principles of the American Temperance Society, he immediately embraced them, and it is believed ever after strictly adhered to them. After our arrival here strenuous efforts were made to induce him to return to the Roman Catholic Church. For this purpose a priest visited him repeatedly, and on one occasion for weeks partook of his hospitality. The French language being the mother tongue of this priest, he had greatly the advantage of us in conversing with him. But Mr. Renville, after hearing his arguments declared his belief in justification by faith alone, in the right of all to read the Scriptures, his aversion to auricular confession and his determination on these grounds to remain a Protestant.

For the time were able to converse with him without an interpreter, his progress in the knowledge of the Gospel was rapid; and there followed a manifest improvement in his practice. Notwithstanding the defects of his character, perhaps in the eyes of Him who sees all things without partiality, he showed a more docile and obedient spirit than most of those in civilized lands, who have been taught all their lives, have had an opportunity of hearing it faithfully explained.