

The Indian Payment

A Menominee Indian Payment in 1838¹

By Gustave de Neveu

At the beginning of October, 1838, impelled by curiosity, I determined to attend the payment made to the Menominee. This tribe resided in the State (then the Territory) of Wisconsin, and had formerly been powerful and populous, redoubtable among the neighboring tribes, who for this reason sought its friendship. At the time of this event, however, it was reduced to less than 3,000 souls, having been decimated both by illnesses (of which smallpox was the worst) and by the immoderate use of the strong

¹ Translated from the French of Gustave de Neveu, who was born (March 11, 1811) at Savigny, France, son of François Joseph de Neveu, last knight of the royal and military order of St. Louis. Gustave was for eleven years at the military school of La Flèche, learning the army life for which he was destined—the calling of his ancestors for generations. Leaving there he studied law, then devoted himself awhile to art. His longing to come to America overpowered him, and in 1836 he visited this country with his only brother, Edward, who afterwards became commander of the French army in Algeria. After a winter at Batavia, New York, the two brothers returned to France, whence Gustave came back the following year to remain in America. He bought in 1838 several hundred acres of land in the present township of Empire, Fond du Lac County, and built there the fifth house in the locality.

He was married Jan. 4, 1840, to Harriet P. Dousman of Green Bay, by whom he had eleven children—five sons and six daughters. M. de Neveu died Dec. 27, 1881, while on a visit to Vancouver, Wash. He was a keen student and lover of nature, living quietly on his farm, and writing much; few of his manuscripts have been preserved. This makes all the more valuable the following word picture of his first experience with Western Indians. The French manuscript thereof was presented to the Society by his daughter, Miss Emily B. de Neveu.—Ed.

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liquors which traders had brought among them. The fatal smallpox, spreading from the white people, had the preceding year cut off nearly half of the tribe.

The Menominee formerly occupied the greater part of the region which now comprises the state of Wisconsin. Their territory had an extent of about seventy leagues north and south, by fifty or sixty from east to west. It comprised all the land drained by the Fox, Wolf, and Menominee rivers, which all pour their waters into the Green Bay arm of Lake Michigan.

The Menominee had, the preceding year, ceded to the government of the United States for an annuity of 150,000 francs (\$30,000) for thirty years, all that portion of their domain extending east from Wolf River, comprising several millions of acres of fertile land, of which one part, on the border of the river, was covered with vast pine forests of great value. Wolf River is navigable for steamboats for nearly a hundred miles above its junction with the Fox.

The payment took place that year, for the first time, on the reservation the savages had kept for themselves, that is to say on the west bank of Wolf River, at a place called Wahnekoné,² where a great number of persons were drawn, some by curiosity, but the greater part by hope of gain.

A Voyage on the Fox

Having left Green Bay in a bark canoe, with two friends and four Indian boatmen, we ascended Fox River, whose course is obstructed by considerable rapids, which obliged us to disembark from time to time; while the boatmen, leaping into the water up to their waists, pushed their frail skiff before them, until the rapid was passed. At one time, at the Grand Chute (where is now Appleton), they were forced to unload all our baggage and to carry the canoe on their shoulders, and then returning, to carry our packages in the same way.

The Grand Chute, which the Indians in their language call Matcho-co-nomé, is about six feet perpendicular, and is caused by a barrage of rock which extends across the river. It is, however, a place that the canoes leap in descending the stream; when

² Near the site of the present town of Winneconne, Winnebago County.—Ed.

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I went back to Green Bay, ten days later, I jumped it without accident, although against the representations of my Indian boatmen. However, it was an adventure which I should not care to repeat. For five or six minutes, which nevertheless seemed long to me, we passed with the rapidity of an arrow within one or two feet of black-crested rocks, against which the water dashed with fury. If our frail craft of birchbark had touched these rocks, we should have foundered in a moment, and must inevitably have perished. The deftness, intrepidity, and presence of mind on the part of the Indians, in this dangerous place, are beyond all praise. I must admit, however, that during the brief passage, I could not but recall these lines of Horace:

*"Illi robur et aes triplex
Circa pectus erat, qui fragilem truci
Commisit pelago ratem
Primus."*

The distance of Lake Winnebago from Green Bay, is about thirty-six miles by the river. In that distance the latter descends about a hundred and sixty feet. That portion of Fox River is ideally situated for those interested in water-power. I doubt if even Genesee River, in the state of New York, which has a great reputation in America, is equal to the Fox in this regard.

The second day of our journey we camped on the borders of charming Lake Winnebago; and the following one, about three o'clock in the afternoon, we arrived at the place where the payment was to take place. Our Indians there set up our tent.

Wigwam building

Many of the savages had already arrived, and at each moment new canoe-loads increased the number. As soon as they disembarked, their first care was to go and cut long flexible poles, which they planted in the ground in a circular form. These they bent at the height of five or six feet, and fastened them together above, two by two, leaving at the top an orifice about three feet in diameter for the smoke to pass out. Then they fastened their mats all around on these poles, with bark cords, saving only one narrow passage between two poles, where one of the mats, fastened at its upper edge alone, performed the office of a door.

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Two forked sticks stuck in the ground held up the cross-bar which was to support the kettle. The fire was lighted, the baggage placed around within the cabin, and in less time than it takes to write this, their house was constructed, and behold, our Indians were *at home!*

It is really incredible with what rapidity the savages set up their wigwams. Their habits are such that they make no movement that does not advance the work. Once they have their poles, ten minutes is enough to complete a structure, which will sometimes lodge them all winter. Anywhere that he finds wood and water, an Indian is at home. The mats which cover these cabins, as well as form their beds, are made of rushes fastened together with cords of basswood bark. These they roll up and take with them whenever they change their domicile.

It should be said, however, that these cabins that they erect as a shelter from rain and wind, are extremely disagreeable because of the smoke that blinds and chokes their tenants. But the Indians are so habituated to this discomfort, that they never seem to pay the least attention to it.

The Council

Towards evening Colonel Boyd, government agent for the Menominee,³ and in charge of the distribution of their money, arrived with thirty boxes, each containing 5,000 francs (\$1,000) in small coin. A large board house had been built for his reception, and for holding the council.

The next morning the chiefs of the tribe were summoned there. But already the rapacious traffickers had sold whiskey to the savages, taking in pledge their guns, blankets, and other possessions, in order to make sure of their pay as soon as the Indians received their money; and the larger portion of them were already drunk. It was necessary, therefore, to postpone the council to the following day.

In the meanwhile, there arrived a detachment of fifty soldiers, under the command of a lieutenant. Colonel Boyd had a rigorous search made in all the tents, and wherever he found whiskey

³ A biographical sketch of Col. George Boyd may be found in *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, xli, pp. 266-269. He was Indian agent at Green Bay for the years 1832-40.—Ed.

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or any other spirituous liquor, it was poured out upon the ground. Every savage was forbidden to cross the river to the drinking booths, and sentinels were posted along the bank. These measures had the desired effect. The next day, the savages having meanwhile abstained from drink, the council was held. Each chief came and made an enumeration of the families composing his band, and the number in each family; their names were then written upon the registers.

That day I made Colonel Boyd's acquaintance. He must have been at that time about sixty-five, but still active and vigorous, and with very agreeable manners. He had travelled extensively, had visited a part of France, and spoke our language quite well. The post of Indian agent which he occupied, is not without its dangers. The preceding year, the payment being made without the presence of any military force, the savages wished to compel their agent to make the distribution of funds on a different basis from that for which he had received instructions from Washington. He refused their demand and the payment took place according to the agent's ideas. The savages, of whom the most part were then drunk, rushed to his tent with the intention of killing him, whereupon the good colonel, through lack of ability to resist, was forced to escape as best he might, and gained the woods. For fear of being discovered by his ferocious enemies, he was obliged to climb a tree and pass therein the greater part of the night. This year, thanks to the presence of troops, all took place in an orderly manner until after the departure of the agent and his escort.

Chasing beeves

At midday on the same day as the council, it was announced to the savages that twenty fat beeves, which had been brought from Green Bay as part of their provisions, had arrived on the opposite bank of the river. This news produced the most lively excitement in camp. To run to their cabins, to seize their carbines, powder, and balls, to launch themselves in their canoes, was an affair of a moment. In a few minutes the river, half-a-mile wide, was covered with more than two hundred canoes, rivaling each other in swiftness, propelled by skillful oarsmen in the midst of cries of joy. It was truly an animated and inter-

esting spectacle to see so much movement and life in a place ordinarily dominated by the wild and silent majesty of nature.

The whites, soldiers, women and children, alone remained in camp, but all came forth from their tents to be witnesses of the scene presented on the opposite bank. Some of the white men had even joined the savages, to enjoy their part in this new species of chase. As soon as they arrived, they changed their paddles for carbines, and mounted the bank at a run without discontinuing their cries.

The twenty beeves, which were in the centre of a field of about two hundred acres (cleared the previous summer by savages who had there cultivated maize), frightened by the cries and the appearance of the savages, commenced to scatter in all directions, each pursued by several men, and for more than a quarter of an hour shots from the guns succeeded one another without interruption, resembling the noise of a volley on a field of battle. About fifteen beeves were slain before they reached the neighboring woods; two or three were pursued and killed in the forest, and two, each wounded with more than ten bullets, escaped their persecutors and fled back to Green Bay.

It was strange that no accident occurred. From my standpoint, seeing the confusion of the beasts and the men in pursuit firing in all directions, apparently without troubling themselves where their bullets flew, it seemed utterly incomprehensible that no one was hurt. Several, they told me, heard the bullets whistle by their ears in a fashion little agreeable, and one savage had his blanket shot through.

As soon as an ox fell, ten or twelve savages cut its throat, and set themselves at the task of taking off the skin. Such was their experience, acquired in hunting deer, bear, and buffalo, that the animal was carved and divided in a few minutes; and let it be said, the distribution was made with a justice and equity that would have taken much more time among civilized people.

By two o'clock the Indians had all returned to the camp. At three in the afternoon occurred the distribution of the other provisions furnished by the government according to the terms of the treaty—namely, about two hundred barrels of flour, one hundred of salt pork, twenty-five of salt, two hundred hectolitres of maize, and a thousand kilogrammes of tobacco. This last was

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of a detestable quality, if not entirely unusable by delicate persons; but the Indians did not examine it very closely. This distribution also took place very promptly, each chief of a band taking the eighth of each article, and subdividing it among all the families of his tribe in such manner that each appeared to me to be satisfied with his portion. Taken all together, I believe there was enough to support each family for about three months. But the savages, having little liking for salt meat, almost immediately exchanged with the traders their pork for merchandise, of which there were great quantities at hand. The salt was likewise almost all sold; but those savages who possessed horses carefully kept their share.

The Dance

As soon as night fell, five savages (three men and two boys) went through the camp, stopping before the tents of the whites to dance. Two of the men carried a gun apiece, to which they had fastened sticks in the guise of a bayonet. The third had a tomahawk, a kind of small axe which they use in war, and whose head is formed into a pipe. The handle is perforated, and they use this instrument to smoke *kinnikinnick*—the bark of the red willow, which, when they cannot procure the tobacco of commerce, serves as a substitute therefor. The boys held in their hands, one a tomahawk and a pike, the other a simple trough of red willow, whose bark had curled up here and there. Two other savages accompanied them with a kind of tambourine of Indian manufacture. They were all in the finest of savage costumes—that is to say, entirely nude, except for the breechcloth; their bodies and their faces were tattooed and streaked with all imaginable colors, and in the most bizarre patterns.

Their dance consisted simply in leaping around in a manner quite inelegant, keeping time with the tambourines. At the same time they sang, and made all kinds of hideous contortions; and at the end of each refrain, which occurred about every two minutes, they uttered great cries of joy.

Thus ended the day. Towards ten o'clock at night, profound calm reigned in camp. American sentinels and the savage dogs alone remained awake. These latter, however, had no idea of giving an alarm. With furtive step and watchful eye, these vile

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animals, which seemed both in appearances and habits a cross between a wolf and a fox, as soon as general silence gave assurance that all this little world was asleep, began their operations—with all the stillness and address for which the works of Fennimore Cooper have made their masters so celebrated. Sniffing and gliding under all the tents, with an address and audacity unheard of, they plunged everywhere into the provision baskets; and woe to the poor white men who had not taken the precaution to place their provisions beyond their reach!

As for us, we got off with the loss of an excellent cooked ham, scarcely touched, and seven or eight pounds of cheese. We considered ourselves fortunate to escape so easily. As for the savages, they are so accustomed to the habits of their dogs, that they rarely leave anything within their reach.

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The next day (Wednesday), about half-past eight in the morning, criers went about the camp, announcing that the agent was ready to pay the savages. The entire nation assembled in eight bands, who were to come forward one after the other, in order to avoid confusion. The money was all counted and laid out in piles of \$10 (50 francs), on large tables. The head of each family, being called with a loud voice, entered and received one of these piles for himself, another for his wife, and one for each of his unmarried children. Some, with numerous families, received as much as \$100. This done, the secretary of the agent presented his pen, which they touched with the end of their fingers. This was their manner of signing, since they did not know how to write, and each of this new kind of receipt was certified on the lists. A few half-breeds, who knew how to write, signed for themselves. This ceremony, quite monotonous in procedure, continued until all the savages were paid.

There still remained twelve or fifteen hundred dollars. The chiefs of the nation, to the number of ten or twelve, who had already received their pay like the others, were then recalled to the council chamber, and the residue was distributed among them—the principal chief, Oshkosh, receiving double what the others did.

During all this payment, the traders, lists in hand, watched at

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the door for the exit of the savages, in order to secure their credits. The poor devils had hardly drawn their money with one hand, when they were obliged with the other to give the greater part of it to those rapacious and insatiable men—veritable vampires that attach to them like leeches. Some Indians escaped among the crowd, followed by their avid persecutors, who often abandoned the pursuit for fear of meanwhile losing some other customer. Then one heard among the crowd great cries of joy, and that kind of chase had indeed its amusing side. All, however, took place without a quarrel and with the best nature in the world; for the savages, having abstained from liquor, were naturally peaceable and addicted to laughter. If they had been drunk, the chase would probably have ended differently; the actors would then have exchanged roles, and the hunted, knife in hand, would have quickly become the hunters.

The traders had previously obtained a written permit from the agent, authorizing them to sell, on the sole condition of not marketing spirituous liquors. Their booths were visited during the day by the savages, who bought guns, kettles, knives, cloth, parti-colored bead collars, powder and lead, blankets, calicoes, rings and earrings, and other objects for which they paid partly in peltries but chiefly in money. This traffic was prolonged into the night. However, the greater part of the savages carefully reserved a part of their money for another purpose.

An Orgy

The following day, about ten in the morning, the agent departed, accompanied by his escort of soldiers, who all embarked in their bateaux in the midst of profound silence. Scarcely were they out of sight, when cries of intelligence were heard from one bank to the other. Five or six bateaux shot out from the opposite shore and came to disgorge, in the midst of the camp, their cargoes of poisonous liquids for which the Indians have so ardent a thirst.

An hour later, one heard from one end of the camp to the other, a heavy sound like that which precedes the tempest. By sunset the storm had burst. There was then nothing but a fearful tumult of hoarse cries, savage howls—in fact, an infernal

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uproar, such as can only be produced by an entire tribe plunged into drunkenness. Then, the camp presented a scene of confusion and disorder difficult to describe. Let the reader picture to himself the men of an entire nation, with almost no exception, indulging in a profound orgy, staggering, singing, shouting, fighting one another, smoking, or lying in the dust; the women following, or at the most presenting the same spectacle; the maidens, running through the camp and inviting the whites, by gestures and speech, to partake of their favors. You can even then have only a very feeble idea of what passed under my eyes.

Then it was that I was able to see to what depths of baseness, and to what disgusting ideas the Indian nature could descend. But one must afford grace to the reader. Such scenes as this are too revolting to be described. Let it suffice to say that all the vices of the scum of the population of a great city had here their presentiments except one—that of swearing; but this is surely due to the lack of such expressions in their language, for as soon as they know a few words of English, they commence very energetically to articulate the “goddams.”

It is needless to say, that I sought in vain, that horrid night, for repose. Sleep in such a hell, was impossible. And how shall I describe the scene that unrolled itself under my eyes, when daylight came! Never has a more beautiful sunrise revealed a more shocking sight. The ground was literally strewn with men and women plunged in complete intoxication.

* * * * *

I could almost have wept at the state of degradation to which the white man had reduced the poor Indians, whose nature is so noble and so generous, when it has not been polluted by his pernicious whiskey.

Two human beings lost their lives in the midst of these orgies. The one (poor innocent!) was a small child, who was stifled under its brutalized parents; the other, a woman whose tender spouse had with his teeth torn off her nose to its roots. As to the cuts with knives, and heads cut open with blows of bottles, I could count a dozen of them; these were events so common, that no one appeared to notice them. Such little difficulties they regulate among themselves when they return to their senses. The price of such trifles has been by custom adjusted among them

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from time immemorial; so much for a nose bitten off, so much for an eye, so much for an ear. The customary price having been paid, our savages become again the best friends in the world. All this has its amusing side, but what can a philanthropist say?

I hastened to depart. I had wished to satisfy my curiosity, and had done so completely. I returned to Green Bay, as I had come, by water, descending Wolf River, Lake Winnebago, and Fox River in half the time it had taken to ascend.

That which we have recounted would seem to impute some blame to the American government for allowing such abuses; we hasten to proclaim to its honor, that none should be attached thereto. The strictest measures are adopted in entire good faith to hinder the sale of alcoholic liquors to the Indians, and those who are caught doing so are severely punished. But at the time that such scenes as we have described took place, the country now covered with industrious agriculturists, clearing off the forests, and redeeming the prairie soil was a wilderness. The rivers on whose banks are now cities visited daily by steamboats, then flowed through a country which had for inhabitants only the Indians themselves, who ranged the forests in pursuit of game, or glided over the river searching for fish, or the numerous aquatic birds, such as the duck or wild geese with which they were covered, and which still abound in those places.

On the borders of these rivers dwelt here and there certain traders, for the most part descendants of the French, or rather of the Canadians, who by their habits and alliances approached more nearly to the Indians than the whites. They found it easier to obtain their livelihood by trading with the Indians than by cultivating the fertile lands on which they were established. It was they, who for the sake of the enormous profit made on strong drink, furnished to the poor dupes that for which they have so powerful a passion. The government has never been able to stop the traffic of this kind, which occurs in places thus inhabited.

American policy, on the contrary, which is perseveringly followed, buys, it is true, of the savages a great part of their lands in order to open them to agriculture, and to reclaim them for civilization; but at the same time it founds schools to educate the

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young Indians. In these schools are taught reading, writing, elementary mathematics, geography, and history. The government provides for the savages oxen, plows, agricultural tools, and utensils; it sends them agriculturists to establish model farms among them, and to teach them the art of obtaining their living by the cultivation of the lands reserved for their use. These lands are to be divided equally among all the members of the tribe as soon as they are sufficiently civilized to appreciate their value. Finally, when by time and example they have forgotten their savage customs and learned the English language and the principles of republican government, they are admitted within the pale of the republic itself. Several Indian tribes are thus being redeemed, and the descendants of these ferocious cannibals are today peaceful and intelligent agriculturists.

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