CHAPTER II

EARLY PIONEERING IN WISCONSIN

Wisconsin has belonged to three different nations. It belonged to France for a little over 125 years. Then it belonged to England for 23 years. Since 1783 it has belonged to the United States.

Three hundred years ago the Indian tribes of Wisconsin saw their first white man. He was a Frenchman, Nicolet, the son of a mail carrier in Normandy. Like most explorers in the west he had been sent to find the northwest passage to Asia. Expecting to reach China, he took along with him his clothes of state, and greatly astonished and awed the natives of Green Bay when he landed in a brilliantly flowered gown, making mysterious fire with a loud report to impress the expected Orientals.

This was in 1634. For over a hundred years the history of Wisconsin is the history of the adventures of French missionaries and fur traders—Raddison and Grosseilles, Father Menard, Father Allouez, Father Marquette, Joliet, the Langlades—and of the establishment of trading posts—Green Bay, Prairie du Chien, Chequamegon Bay, and others.

The English were established along the Atlantic coast and the French had crept in behind them and scattered trading posts all the way down the Mississippi valley. But the French did not develop agriculture, and when the English pressed them, they could not hold the country. It is not surprising that at the end of the long series of wars between England and France for colonial territory, France lost the St. Lawrence
and the Mississippi Valleys. Wisconsin, with the rest of the valley, was surrendered to England by the treaty of 1763.

It is hard to realize that for more than a hundred years Wisconsin was French; that it was the French language which sounded through the forests where the French woodsmen wandered; and French songs which the voyageurs sang as they paddled down the rivers in their canoes.

There are many descendants of the old French families still in Wisconsin. But they speak English, not French. About all that is left to remind us that our state was once French are French names of cities and counties, and rivers and lakes, and of some of our people: Flambeau, Cour d'Orelles, Pepin, Vieux Desert, Butte des Morts, Bois Brule, Eau Claire, Eau Plaine, Embarrass, Fond du Lac, La Crosse, Langlade, Marquette, Portage, Racine, St. Croix, Trempeleau, Prairie du Chien.

England really owned this territory only twenty years, from 1763 to 1783. But although she agreed at the close of the American Revolution to turn it over to the United States, she actually retained possession of it until the United States sent in regular army troops in 1816.

Before the American Revolution began, the French and Indians back here in Wisconsin had plotted against the British. Charles de Langlade, the son of a member of the French nobility and of an Indian woman, was one of the leaders in the French and Indian attack upon the English General Braddock and the young colonial soldier George Washington at Fort Duquesne, and is given credit for the defeat of Braddock. But when the colonies rebelled against England, these same French and Indians took the part of England against the colonies. Even after the territory was granted to the victorious colonies, they continued loyal to England. In the war of 1812 they assisted England against the United States.

After the United States took possession, this country was called the Northwest territory. After the state of Ohio was lopped off, the territory left became Indiana Territory; then Illinois Territory; then Michigan Territory. Finally, in 1836, when the states of Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan had all been cut out of it, what was left became Wisconsin Territory. In 1848 part of it became the state of Wisconsin.

The three problems which the early settlers had to meet were making a living, getting along with the Indians already here, and getting along with each other. The French had solved the first two problems together. They made friends with the Indians and made a living by trading goods for furs and selling the furs to Europe. A few French farmers supplied the needs of the French trading posts. But they never became so numerous as to frighten the Indians. The third problem, that of keeping the peace, was in the hands of the fur trader of the community.

The English and the people of the United States were different from the French. They came in to farm and mine the land. The way they met their problem of getting along with the race already on it cannot be considered at first as particularly successful.

The number of Indians was really very small. There were probably only about forty thousand in the whole state; not as many as the population of Madison today. The few, poor Indian farmers might have lived peacefully side by side with the newcomers as they do now. But neither people knew how to do it. The Indians were nervous. They soon realized that the white settlers were supplanting them. They watched suspiciously as their chiefs signed away to the white people one great piece of land after another. The white people were nervous too. At the slightest suspicious movement of the Indians they would become excited and start trouble. Naturally there were scenes of horror and bloodshed.
Of the Indian civilization we have inherited little except geographical names, like Sauk, Waukesha (meaning fox), Sheboygan (Shaubwa-way-kum, a great noise was heard at the river), Manitowoc (devil's den), Neshotah (twins, now Two Rivers), Kewaunee (prairie hen), Muskego (cranberry), Koshkonong (the lake we live on). Some of our best known families, however, have some Indian blood. Josette Vieau who married Solomon Juneau in 1814 was French Canadian and Indian. Their youngest daughter married John Pierre Hustling. Paul Hustling, a son of this marriage, was the first man in Wisconsin to be sent to the United States senate by the direct vote of the people. He was greatly respected and admired by the people of Wisconsin for his conscientious attempts to protect their interests in the water power of the state and to curb corrupt practices at elections.

Beginning in 1816, the federal government established forts for the protection of the settlers against the Indians. One of these forts was at Green Bay; another at Prairie du Chien. At these forts, and in the conflicts between the settlers and the Indians, Zachary Taylor, Jefferson Davis, and Abraham Lincoln all served. Jefferson Davis is said by some authorities to have been the first white man to view the site on which the city of Madison is now located.

The Indians had guarded jealously the lead mines of Wisconsin, Illinois and Iowa. They finally let the French in, and worked side by side with them. But for many years no Englishman was permitted to come near the mines. The lead was brought out to the English by the French traders.

In 1816 John Shaw, a St. Louis trader, came to get some lead. The French traders had not brought it out, and asked him to wait. He offered to go to the mines and get it. The Indians objected, but he spoke French well and the French traders told the Indians he was French, and it was all right. So he got in.

He saw about twenty smelting places. He took back the news to St. Louis.

It was several years before migration of the Americans to the lead mines started. In 1822 the federal government sent troops to awe the Indians. The Indians submitted, and sold their claims to the United States.

People flocked to the lead mines of Wisconsin and Illinois and Iowa as they were later to flock to California and Alaska. Galena, Illinois, and Mineral Point, Wisconsin, were “boom” towns. They were much more important at one time than Chicago or Milwaukee. Welsh and Cornish miners came from the British Isles. When Charles Dickens made his famous visit to the United States in 1842, he was commissioned by a mother in England to be sure to see her son who was working in the lead mines of Wisconsin.

Life in these mining camps was rough. Mineral Point was a typical mining camp. It was a line of huts straggling along a deep gorge. Saloons and gambling houses flourished. Dancing and singing, drinking and gambling furnished the entertainment for the wilder spirits.

At meal time the cook would come out of one of the huts and shake a rag on a pole. This was to announce to the hungry miners who ate there that their meal was ready for them. So the town itself came to be called by the queer name of “Little Shake-Rag,” or “Shake Rag Under the Hill.”

There were other camps besides Mineral Point. They bore the suggestive names of Hardscrabble Diggings, Buncombe, Snake Hollow, Rattle Snake Diggings, Big Patch,

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1 See Indian Names by Joshua Hathaway, Wisconsin Historical Collections, v. 1, p. 116. See also Wisconsin Geographical Names by Alfred Bunson, same, p. 110.
and many others. They flourished until gold was discovered in California. Then many of the Wisconsin miners deserted for the west.

It was early in these lead mining days that the people of Wisconsin began to build good roads. A road was built from Mineral Point through Madison to Milwaukee. Another was built from Galena to Prairie du Chien. The lead was carried along these roads in great prairie schooners to lake and river boats. Lead and quantities of grain also went over the good road from Janesville to Milwaukee. Stage coaches left Milwaukee daily for Janesville, a distance of sixty-five miles.

Even after a few roads were built, most of the pioneer families lived far away from population centers and from each other. So far as the material comforts of life were concerned, they might as well have lived two thousand years ago. The early Wisconsin farmer had to raise his own food. He furnished his own sweets: maple sugar and syrup, sorghum and honey. He raised his own sheep and his wife spun her own woolen and linen thread and wove it into clothing. The family made their own candles, and most of their own furniture. They built their own log cabin. Often there was no bread, for the crops had to be planted and harvested before the bread could be made. The children had to pretend that the breast of the wild turkey was bread.

The great distances between families made government, at first, a small problem. It grew rapidly in importance. How this problem was met, the next chapter will show.