

HARRY
CURRAN

RLH MENARD,
FATHER

10051

FATHER MENARD

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF FATHER MENARD

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Some opinions concerning this event by Ray Bundkick, Trapper and Woodsman of Taylor County, Wisconsin *Wisconsin*

This all happened shortly after I retired. I had just finished my few chores when a strange car drove into my yard. The driver got out of his car and came up to me. He introduced himself as Father A. A. A. Schmirler, a priest from Enderlin, North Dakota, and the story he told me was fantastic.

I had heard a little about it earlier. I had heard of a priest being lost somewhere in the northern part of Taylor County. As Father Schmirler told it to me, sometime between 1656 and 1668, Father Rene Menard came to this country as a missionary. He spent some time with the Huron Indians around Lake Huron, converting many of them. Then he traveled on to Lake Superior, spending the winter on Keweenaw Bay, Upper Michigan, near the present day city of L'Anse.

At this time he heard of the Hurons being in Wisconsin. The Iroquois Indians had made war on the Hurons and were making slaves of them. The Hurons fled across what is now Michigan, passing through what is now Detroit and going on to Lake Michigan. Thence they went North along the shore to the Straits of Mackinac, down the East Shore to the vicinity of Sheboygan, West to the Wisconsin River, down the Wisconsin to the Mississippi, up the Mississippi to the Black and upstream to the headwaters of the Black River. This could be anywhere in a fifteen mile radius of Black Lake, Town 33 N., Range 2 E., Sec. 29, South one-half of the Southwest one-fourth.

(1) C. 1985 HARRY CURRAN RETIRED AS
MEADFORD POLICE CHIEF. HE " AT
HIS HOME ON WILDERNETT DRIVE R.L. DRR

During the winter of 1661, Menard heard that the Hurons were having a hard time with many of them sick and all of them starving. As soon as the spring break-up arrived, he decided to visit them and try to help them. His last letter tells of crossing a big lake that was still frozen over. This was the last report anyone had of Father Rene Menard.

Now we can but wonder how he got to what is now Taylor County. We know he had as a guide a Frenchman named Pierre Levassier. Levassier reported that they were traveling through a rapids. He was taking a canoe through while Father Menard followed the shore. They knew that at the head of these rapids they would find an Indian trail which would lead them to or near the Huron encampment.

The Frenchman who had taken the canoe through the rapids while Father Menard walked on land, waited a day at the head of the rapids, then started back. This was in the latter part of July or the first part of August in 1661.

Father Schmirler also told me that Father Menard was in his sixties and had very bad varicose veins in his legs.

Now as to the route he followed, no one knows. There are several routes he might have taken. I would say the easiest way would have been the one with the least walking. Recorded facts tell us that Father Menard knew that he would find a trail at the head of a rapids that would take him near the Huron encampment.

I will try to explain what might be encountered on such a trip. First one would inquire as to the country one would have to pass through.

History tells us that the waterways were highways well known to the Indians. First one would consider the rivers, then the Indians ... if they were friendly or not ... how far was the journey to be made. All they knew was that it was somewhere in the vicinity of the headwaters of the Black River.

This could mean within a fifteen mile, or larger, radius. I know personally of twelve encampments in this area, four of which were permanent Indian villages ... and there were many more. There should have been one at the head of the Rib River, where the village of Rib Lake now stands.

Starting from L'Anse they could have come directly overland. This possibility can be ruled out as Father Menard was known to be in poor physical condition. Also, in his last known letter, he speaks of a large lake being frozen over. This could only mean Portage Lake on the Keweenaw Peninsula, and which meant that he was following the channel through the Portage out into Lake Superior.

There are three routes he might have taken. He could have followed the shore to the Ontonagon River, then up to La Pointe. But from there it is 15 miles as the crow flies or twice that distance walking, to Lac Vieux Desert, the source of the Wisconsin River; then another walk from the vicinity of Goodrich to the neighborhood of Chelsea Lake, or a distance of nine direct miles. It is Father Schmirler's belief that one direct mile equals two miles walked.

The next route they might have followed would be up the Presque Isle. This would lead one to Chaney Lake, just over the Michigan line, and about forty direct miles. Thence less than a mile south to Lake Pardee, one of the upper branches of the Flambeau River. Of course the first four miles on these creeks would not float a canoe, but they would serve as a guide. From that point on for many miles the going would be easy. One could make fairly good time down the Flambeau until it joined the Chippewa ... a distance of about ninety direct miles from Pardee Lake.

Now let us go back and follow the shore of Lake Superior another fifty-five miles to the Brule River. Up the Brule fifty miles is Pine Lake; from there southeast to the Trude River is about five miles; then following the Flambeau to the Chippewa is about sixty-five miles.

From the Chippewa River to a point now called Big Falls on the Jump River is about thirty miles. This is a likely place where Father Menard could have walked along shore, letting the French guide navigate the river. At the head of this rapids he expected to find a trail. The trail is still there, in some places worn about a foot deep. It runs about seven miles southeast to a large Indian village on the Yellow River. This trail follows a natural ridge which we call the "Hogback."

Let me try to explain what this place looks like now. The rapids and terrain have not changed very much. Of course,

the big trees are gone ... nothing much left but brush and a few big pines badly scarred from spring ice. A mile down river is a very bad rapids, at the head of which are the falls. The falls is not just one drop-off, but a series of six for about a quarter of a mile; all told about a forty to fifty foot drop. To the north the land is slightly rolling. To the south it would be best for me to describe the directions the river follows: from the foot of the rapids to the foot of the falls is east by southeast; through two thirds of the falls is nearly due south the remaining third is east. To the south of the falls an outcropping of rock extends into a bog of more than two thousand acres. The rock is about one fourth of a mile wide and follows the river's course through the falls. If you were on the south side of the river, you could easily make the mistake of following the outcrop and lose the river. You would find yourself on the outcrop, with the river very difficult to return to except by back tracking. The woodsman doesn't ordinarily care to try to hit the river at an angle through such terrain, which would take one into swampy territory. Father Menard was an old man and sadly crippled. I am here attaching a quotation from Father Schmirler's article. He did not exaggerate the conditions.

....."Today hunters are said to follow the old Patawatomie Trail on the one hogback which rises near the Jump and continues uninterruptedly through miles of swampy plateau. Of all the places I visited, this is the only one where I felt the need of a guide. Ray Bundick of Westboro is an old trapper and hunter

who knows the north woods like a book. Together the two of us planned to walk four miles along the hogback, but after leaving the ridge momentarily, we became so enmeshed in brambles and tall weeds, willows and softening swamps that we spent an afternoon just getting back to the spot from which we had started."

My opinion is that we will never get closer to the resting place of the remains of Father Menard than here. Why Father Schmirler thinks Chelsea Lake was where the Hurons were, I do not know. These Hurons were in strange country among Indian tribes who were no doubt unfriendly to them.

This really was one of the reasons the Hurons were starving. They were being watched and were afraid to leave their encampment to hunt. It seems to me that they would seek some spot more secluded than Chelsea Lake.

Getting back to the head of the rapids on the Jump River, it is just one fourth mile to a trail which leads to a very old Indian village on the Yellow River. It is seven miles from the Jump to the Yellow River here. The trail is nearly impossible to stray from as both sides are swampy.

Three miles southeast of the village on the Yellow there was an Indian encampment that was very hard to find. It is situated two and one half miles from a fair sized stream which leads to the Black River. I call this the Huron encampment. It is on the shore of a very small lake not shown on any map.

Let us recount the actual mileage. The mileage I give is "as the crow flies." To walk or follow a stream is twice the distance. I will call the routes by the river names, beginning at Lake Superior.

From where Menard and guide entered Lake Superior to Ontonagon is 50 miles; up the Ontonagon to the head is 75 miles; then to the Wisconsin, a walk of 30 miles; down the Wisconsin to the mouth of the Rib, 160 miles; up the Rib to Goodrich, 50 miles; from Goodrich to Chelsea Lake, 18 miles. This includes 75 miles up the Ontonagon and 50 miles up the Rib which are upstream. Here one would have to pole, a very hard mode of travel. Also the 48 miles to be walked would not be easy for an old man. All told they would have to average five and one-half miles per day, which is possible barring trouble. I have not here added the 40 miles from L'Anse to Lake Superior, which makes a total for the Ontonagon route of 473 miles.

The next route is up the Presque Isle. Starting from L'Anse - 4 days, 40 miles; thence to the Presque Isle - 14 days, 140 miles; from there to Chaney Lake - 11 days, 55 miles; over one hill to Pardee Lake - 1 day walk, 5 miles; from Pardee Lake, a branch of the Flambeau River, down the Chippewa to the mouth of the Jump - 9 days, 180 miles; up the Jump to the rapids and the trail at the head of the rapids - 10 days, 50 miles; from there to Yellow River and Indian village - 1 day walk, 7 miles; then on to the encampment - 1 day, 3 miles. By this route one would have but 15 miles to walk and 110 miles to pole upstream.

The third route follows the Montreal River. From L'Anse to Lake Superior - 4 days, 40 miles; to the Montreal River - 19 days, 190 miles; up the Montreal to Pine Lake - 10 days, 50 miles; over to the Trude - 2 days, 10 miles; from there to

the Flambeau and on to the Jump - 8 days, 160 miles; up the Jump to the trail - 10 days, 50 miles; over to Yellow - 1 day, 7 miles; to Indian encampment - 1 day, 3 miles. Here we have a 20 mile walk and 105 miles of poling upstream.

Traveling upstream by canoe is much harder than walking. You can't paddle. You must pole, or wade the river, pulling the canoe along behind. Menard and his guide definitely knew where they were going and that at a certain point they would find a waterway going in the direction they wished to travel. They would have chosen a route on which they could use their canoe, knowing that another canoe would be hard to obtain as money was no use to the Indians of that era. The portages on either the Presque Isle or the Montreal would not be too bad. Traveling either route would allow them to keep their canoe.

If they used the Ontonagon route they would have to abandon their canoe on the 30 mile portage and to obtain another at the head of the Wisconsin River would be very difficult.

Of the two routes left, I would favor the Montreal River. The course is nearly due north and south. Either course would lead to the rapids on the Jump River.

The hardships Father Menard encountered were a normal way of life for those times. The worst he might encounter might be bad weather which would make necessary a lay up. As for food, there was plenty of fish and game and many edible plants along the route. Perhaps the worst hardship a man has to endure is lack of water, of which there was plenty. They undoubtedly found travel conditions exactly as they expected them.

One thing that mystifies me is why Pierre Levassier was not questioned more extensively as to the route they traveled and some record made. He is reported to have returned and told of a rapids where Father Menard disappeared. There is apparently no record of anyone finding lost articles belonging to Father Menard. The last known record is a letter he wrote reporting a large lake which was frozen over. This could only be Lake Portage as it is known today.

I have spent four years searching on and off for an Indian encampment in this area and finally found what I think to be the Huron encampment. Large trees grow on it now, but by examining it and studying the mounds, perhaps an expert could tell what tribe camped here and when. It would be interesting to know if this was the long sought-for Huron encampment.

HARRY CURRAN

R. B. LAKE

RFL 10/30/06