

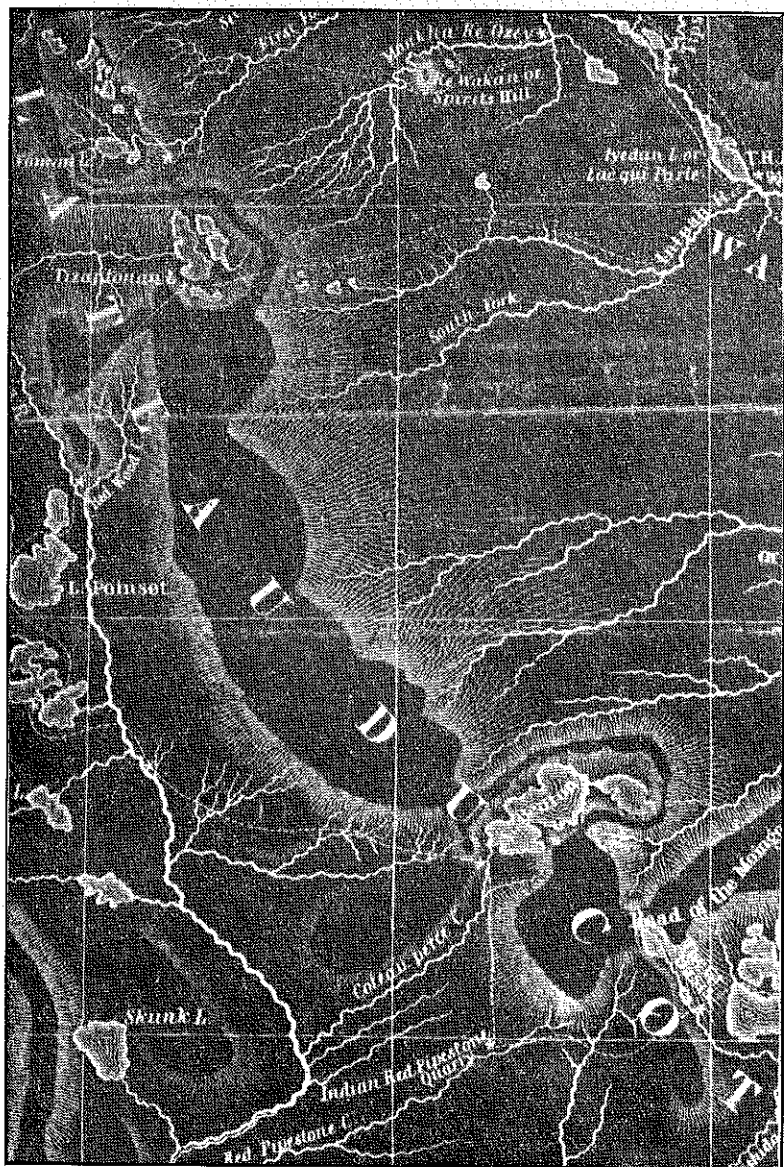
JOURNAL OF J. N. NICOLLET IN 1838  
As It Relates to the Present South Dakota  
Wm. H. Powers

The existence of this journal of Nicollet seems not to have been known until the Great War necessitated some housecleaning in Washington. Annie Heloise Abel, in connection with her Trudeau's Description in the Mississippi Valley Historical Review volume 8, on pages 149-51, listed the contents of a chest brought to light in Washington, including this journal and other Nicollet items. The writer tried to secure opportunity to read the translation of the journal which was said to have been made. Failing in this he secured from the Library of Congress, where the material is now preserved, a photostat copy of those pages of the Journal of 1838 covering the swing around a portion of South Dakota.

The fruits of this expedition have long been familiar in the map and report which were printed by the government in 1845 (Report intended to illustrate a map of the hydrographical basin of the Upper Miss. river U. S. Cong. 28<sup>4</sup> H. Ex. Doc. No. 52, 170 p.).

This map has been called one of the greatest contributions ever made to American geography, G. K. Warren. The text account of his journeys however is very brief. So brief indeed that Robinson in his account of Nicollet's work (S.D. Hist. Col. v. 10, pp. 69-129) states that the journey of 1838 was made in May and June. The party was in South Dakota July 7 to 14. Thus to the local historian at least the preservation of the journal is a happy event. For we can thus date with precision the first visit of a white man to Brookings, Hamlin and Deuel counties of which we have record.

The manuscript is well preserved, the penmanship neat, in general with no signs of the unfavorable circumstances under which it must have been made. There are it is true a few interlineations, a few erasures, and a very few slips



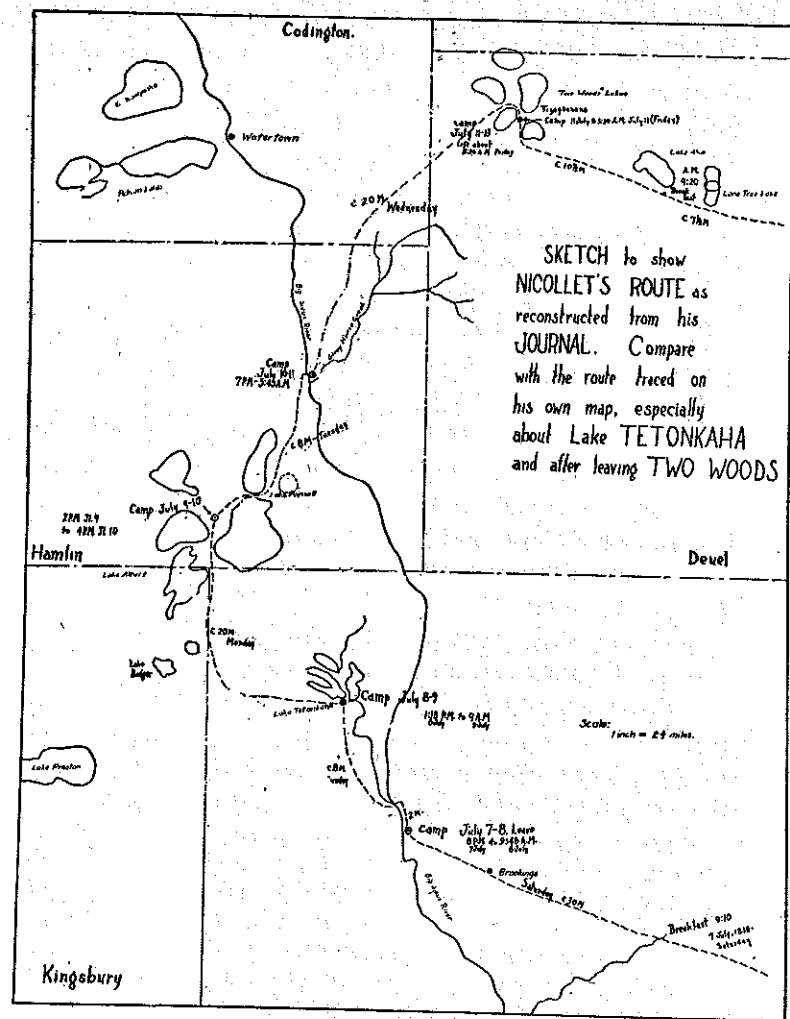
Portion of Nicollet's Map (1841) from Pipestone to Lac Qui Parle. In the extreme north appears a part of his route in 1839.

in spelling or form of word. The beauty of the sheet suggests that the author was an easy master of what he had to do.

Brief accounts of Nicollet are easily accessible. He was a French mathematician and astronomer, born in 1786 (a different date is also given), dying in Washington in 1843, 11 September, seemingly worn out by the strenuous life of exploration. Soon after coming to this country, he was appointed to make for the government a reconnaissance of the region between the Mississippi and Missouri rivers, which survey he made in the summers of 1838 and 1839 with John C. Fremont as his chief companion. Preparatory to this he had explored the upper reaches of the Mississippi.

The party entered South Dakota on the morning of July 7. They had left the Pipestone quarry the previous morning and spent the night near Lake Benton. It is interesting to note that when the journal was written they had not yet given names to the lakes; as Nicollet says they used the names they heard until such time as they should give others. Fremont seems to have been largely responsible for the names, one would judge from his interest in several of them, Benton for example after his father-in-law. They crossed Brookings county, passing into Hamlin on the line between Brookings and Kingsbury. They crossed Deuel a few miles north of Clear Lake and passed out of the state a few miles above Gary, where they made camp in the evening of July 13, spending just a week within our borders.

The journal entries of camps and distances do not exactly correspond to the route as marked on the map. The writer has had made by a student of engineering from the best modern maps a sketch map of the region including Pipestone and Lac qui parle; on this has been traced the route with camps and distances taken from the journal. From comparison it appears that the journal is more accurate than the map. One infers then that when the map was made camp sites were located and the connecting route dotted in without confirming the direction by the journal. Two striking cases may be noted: On leaving Tetonkaha



the course is west northwest; on the map it is nearly northeast. On leaving the Two woods the direction is a little south of east; on the map the route is a little north of east.

The journal increases somewhat our knowledge of our Indians. Hodge's Handbook merely mentions the Tizap-tonans; here we have a lively picture with some account

of their origin and relation to the Sissetons. The portrait too of the chief Wahanatan (Waneta) is a real addition to the literature of the Indian; one would not lose it for a good deal.

The happy way in which Nicollet got along with the natives makes one question whether it was not mainly lack of tact and sympathy which brought on the friction and bloodshed; whether a few leaders, civil and military, of the stamp of Nicollet might not have blotted from our records the years of broken treaties, chicane, and massacre.

One may be disappointed at the relatively small amount of natural history on the pages of the journal. It must be remembered that the prairies were largely parched and brown and that before the advent of trees bird life was scant. Buffalo while not in the picture are always in mind as the chief subsistence of the Indians. The feeling with which the hills, the prairies, the lakes are described is worthy of a poet.

In the preparation of this translation it is pleasant to acknowledge interest and help from many. Doane Robinson has been kind enough to read most of the manuscript. Mr. J. F. Jameson, chief of the Division of manuscripts, Library of Congress, and Miss MacLaggan, Professor of Foreign languages at State College, have each aided by suggesting the meaning of certain words and passages.

As the manuscript breaks off in the midst of a sentence soon after reaching Lac qui parle it has seemed advisable to translate to the end of manuscript.

#### NICOLLET'S JOURNAL

Saturday, 7 July, 1838

Broke camp about 5:15 as we wished to reach the Crooked River Crooked River. (p. 66, 37)<sup>1</sup> We take the general course to the north of west; we keep that direction, almost all day except when in deviation, that is, to ease the march for our horses in the passing of the coteaus and the

<sup>1</sup> Some pages of the manuscript have two numbers.

intermediate valleys which lie across our route. Between six and seven, for example, we strike on one of these irregularities of ground and we see in each chief ravine, water assembling and descending to the southwest to carry their waters united in streams into the Crooked River". I am not trying to write more precisely about these diverse irregularities. They are all set down in the book of drawings of the route kept by Fremont which we examine together every night with Mr. LaFramboise. We enter therein all observations on the physical geography during the day. The lack of living water on the prairies which we cross, forces us to run ten or eleven miles before we can have breakfast. We stop at ten after nine on the bank of a little river, the water of which is excellent although warm. At \* \* \* we take up our route in the same direction. M. LaFramboise says that he is reaching about the end of his knowledge of the country, but he is guiding us like a skillful man and an excellent observer. On the height of the prairie, the grass isn't more than two or three inches high and is always thick with *amorpha canescens*<sup>2</sup> which gives a striking (p. 67) character, with its gray green color, to the prairies of the Northwest. On the slopes the wild roses charm our eyes and the strawberries in prodigious abundance, growing in tufts form flower-beds, perfume the air, and refresh the party, tired out by the heat of the day. Very few birds give life to these solitudes. Some little sorts appear about the streams or where flowers and grasses appear more luxuriant. The beccassine (snipe), which Americans name plover, appears to be at the same time the bird of the prairies and the pond. In this region where they breed, they are very abundant and the air echoes with their cries as frequently as it does in Europe with the call of the lark when the fields are ripening. Our presence occasioned much alarm and lamentation for their families. It is the moment when the little ones escape the nests and the poor mothers flutter uneasily about the heads of my hunters who make them pay with their lives for the tender-

<sup>2</sup> Sioux River.

<sup>3</sup> Lead plant.

ness and devotion which they show in order to save their little ones. Their flesh is delicate and it is all we have had for some days to relieve us from salt meat.

Towards four o'clock we discovered on the horizon to the west scattered woods which shaded some parts of the course of the Crooked river. It seemed to us that we were going to arrive there in a half hour. Men and horses renewed their strength and made good time sustained by a lively freshening breeze as the sun got low. (p. 68, 38) One hour, two hours slipped away one after another in this manner and the trees which were for us a beacon did not change either their size or their form in their confused mass; an hour more and the outlines began to be defined with more precision; at last the masses subdivide, the trees stand out one from the other, a beautiful setting sun gilds the intervals which separate them. The coteaus grow small in the distance and at eight o'clock we plant our tents on the banks of a river of limpid water quickly flowing and serpentine across an immense prairie where the vegetation is more abundant and varied and the earth seems disposed to satisfy every farm need of a society civilized. But the mosquitoes are there, by myriads to every square foot. For some days we have had some doubt of their existence on the high sterile plains; today the suffering which they make us endure in the midst of this fertility, puts to us the question, where then on this earth can it be well for man?

For the last four hours we expected at every instant to fall in with the bison; the traces of their presence in this district appear everywhere. But later we arrive at that which is called un chemin du loge, a way of tipis, all recently marked and this circumstance shows us that some families of Sioux are in pursuit of these animals. The distance covered today is about thirty miles.

Sunday, 8 July, 1838  
(p. 69) The Riviere Croche of which I have been speaking for some days and on which we camped last night is called by the Sioux: Watpa (blurred) ipakshan—the

river which crooks as the Canadians say, that is to say, which makes a detour or crook which is characteristic enough to give a name to the river. (Insert) It flows for a long time from the North to the southeast and makes a crook to the southwest.

We have all passed a wretched night. The mosquitoes have overwhelmed us. As we have only a short run to make today I let the men and the horses rest later than usual. I intend to visit a group of lakes which lies to the northwest of our camp which we leave at nine forty-five, following the left bank of the river for two miles, then we cross the river running rapidly over a gravelly bottom with water clear containing mussels and molluscs<sup>4</sup>. The width, where we camped and also where we crossed, is fifty and sixty feet, with two feet and one and one-half feet of water. Leaving the river at our right while we journey on to the north we are able to follow its windings by the scattered trees on its bank for about six miles. (p. 70) We lose it from sight and at 1:15 after 8 miles of travel in all we reach the summit of a pretty bare hill situated in the midst of a magnificent group of lakes, eight in number and all of beautiful proportions. We pass the rest of the day in studying them and in the evening we determine the geographic position of the camp at the top of the hill. Wood is not so rare here and it is found on every tongue of land which separates the lakes from one another and by which they communicate their waters with one another. The landscape is full of grandeur and beauty, the soil excellent, the trees of a pretty growth and several villages could be established on their shores. But there is no soul expanding its life here. The Sioux come here only at certain seasons of the year to live on the fish and on the game which here abounds. They name the lakes: ti tanka he, there where is the great camp (lodge). The French name them Lakes of the lodge of summer, or of the lodge of bark, because ti means a bark lodge or a lodge for summer and when the Sioux speak of their lodges of travel made of the skin of the bison they

<sup>4</sup> desunion et des anodontes.

say wakea. (At a different time). We let stand all these names until we give others if we think fitting.

Monday, 9 July, 1838

(P. 71) We leave the Lakes of the Grand lodge about nine-thirty and we go west northwest intending to go to visit other lakes which are at a certain distance which we do not know. Our route is always across a country agreeable, of which the soil appears more fertile than on the high prairies of the plateau of the coteau of the prairies, of which we are crossing the western slope, as I think. About noon the surface of the country is more broken by short coteaus such that it is difficult to say which is the principal coteau and which the branch. Up to this region gently intersected, our route has been about west; now we turn a little more to the northwest, leaving three little lakes<sup>5</sup> which we pass near and another lake<sup>6</sup> farther back which must be pretty large (10 miles about), if we judge by the pretty wood which borders it and which hinders our seeing the water. By the different directions we take near this lake we are able to put it on the map without being able to give its shape. About two we reach a sight of the lakes of our search. But we need much time to separate them, their size and their forms.

(page 72) There are four of them separated, two by two, by a coteau which lets the waters pass from the two which are at the Southwest into that which is at the Northeast. The two lakes nearest the coteau are the most important and each is associated with another smaller. (See the adjoined drawing.) The large lake at the Southeast is well supplied with wood on its shores and on a pretty island. The other is almost bare. Taken together, the four lakes are worthy of the Chippewa country but life is lacking. The Sioux do not sail boats, either in bark canoes or in skiffs. They prefer to travel by land with their horses drawing their families and their baggage fastened to two poles sup-

<sup>5</sup> Probably Lakes Badger and Tisted.

<sup>6</sup> Lake Preston perhaps; the map shows Lake Preston.

ported on the back of the animal and they ride as master on their flanks letting their two other ends fall to the earth. The size is almost as great as that of our carts. It is on the two ends rested on the ground to which are fastened crosspieces and poles to carry the children. There is much melancholy in the reflection inspired by lakes and sites so beautiful and landscapes so charming. It is evident that the destruction of the timber by the nations who set fire to the prairies is one of the active causes of the destruction of the peoples themselves. Time is lacking to explain and develop this opinion.

(page 73) Our camp has been very gay this evening. My men lack tobacco and having often heard me express my surprise at the small number of savages whom we have met, have a fancy to fill up the lack by a perfect imitation of what the savages do in their situations. They daubed themselves and dressed like savages and began to dance the dance in which one strikes a post and asks for tobacco. The imitation was very perfect indeed. Almost all sing well and dance passably, etc. etc.

We traveled today 20 miles. For my part, I had marched ten of them not thinking the time so long nor wishing to hurry.

The Sioux name the lakes Ouktshe Otta', \* \* \* we have not been able to discover whether it has an outlet. This lake (page 75) is crowded with ducks and with snipe (plover). In this season when the birds are rearing their family it is on such little lakes that they keep themselves. One does not find them on large lakes until the return of autumn, the season at which they migrate with their young families more capable then of looking after themselves.

After leaving this lake at our right we cross the Little River which runs from the last lake of the group of Prickly Pear of which we are still discovering the length and the end.

About 6:15 we reach the Crooked River at the spot where the branch already spoken of enters. It is as far as we intended to travel today and we estimate the distance to

<sup>1</sup> Lake Poinset and its neighbors.

be about eight miles. We wish to cross Crooked River to camp on the point of rich prairies which the junction of the rivers makes. The carts succeed perfectly in making the crossing but the wagon of Mr. Rainville does not get out of it without breaking the front axle. Happily my men succeed in repairing it well enough so that we can continue our traveling until we find wood suitable for making another one, otherwise we should have had to send back some men, to look for some on the shores of the Prickly Pear. The time continues to be favorable, the evening is lovely and we profit thereby to determine the position of the junction.

Wednesday, Thursday, 11, 12, July, 1838

(page 76) We break camp about 5:45 in the morning and we follow almost the same course as yesterday North and Northeast, leaving Crooked River on our left and the Little River of the Red Wood on our right. After a few miles, we perceive that we are rising on the plains on the Coteau of the Prairies, that we are crossing its spurs and their spurlets on the western slope. Our way is much broken but it is not difficult because we follow the zigzags of the contour of the divide which unites the crest of the spurs and their spurlets. By this route we lose sight of the Crooked River but we perceive the course of the river of the Redwood which shows from time to time in its coulee like a silver ribbon which the sun goldens in our eyes. I give here a little sketch of the numberless little coulees which head the little streams running into the river of the Redwood. I am not inclined to follow it longer in the little details which cannot be entered in a general map, because we lose it so soon from sight, all the time however perceiving the continuity of the streams which go to increase its water.

Towards two o'clock we reached the Upper Plateau of the Coteau of the Prairie. The inequalities of the Western slope had given place to gentler undulations of the Coteau in an extended<sup>a</sup> group (p. 77) keeping about the same level.

<sup>a</sup> a groupe arrondie.