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Historical Letters from Father De Smet

Father De Smet

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To make the situation more critical and alarming, the Indians having become in possession of the facts and taking advantage of them, they soon formed themselves into a war party and came upon us, painted in a manner most hideous to behold, frightening men, women, and children, ostensibly for the purpose of driving us from their land, but the real object was to levy a tribute upon the inhabitants. In this they were successful, as many of the old settlers can testify, to the tune of from five to forty dollars. But the order from the War Department was to go. Major Hepner requested us to call a mass meeting and pass resolutions that we would go and he would send them on with his report. This was done in order to stay proceedings, thinking that before Major Hepner could make his report, and the War Department learn the real state of facts (which were that we didn't intend to go) that the treaty would probably be ratified, and the territory opened up for settlement. Fortunately in this our hopes were well founded.

HISTORICAL LETTERS FROM FATHER DE SMET.

The following letters were written by Father De Smet, a Roman Catholic Missionary among the Northern Indians in a very early day. One was written to the St. Louis Historical Society, and the other to A. D. Jones, Secretary of the Old Settlers' Association of Omaha. They are valuable historical data:

ST. LOUIS UNIVERSITY, December 9, 1867.

Mr. N. Ranney, Secretary of the Historical Society of St. Louis:

DEAR SIR—I received your kind favor of the 5th instant. Your kind invitation of the 16th ult. I intended to answer by attending your meeting of the Historical Society of St. Louis, on the 7th; this being Saturday, I was much occupied at St. Francis Xavier's Church, and I regret I was unable to accomplish my desire on this occasion.

The question of locality which has arisen about old Fort Atkinson, or Council Bluffs, built in 1819, I think I can answer satisfactorily. During the years 1838 and 1839 I resided opposite what is now called the city of Omaha. In 1839 I stood on the bluff on which the old fort was built in 1819; some rubbish and remains of the old fort were still visible, and some remaining roots of asparagus were still growing

in the old garden. Fort Atkinson was located where now stands the town of Fort Calhoun, Nebraska territory, about sixteen miles, in a straight line, above the city of Omaha, and forty miles by river; Mr. Cabanne's trading post was ten miles, by land, above where now stands Omaha city. Manual Kisa had a trading post one mile above Cabanne's. I met Captains Joseph and John La Barge, and proposed the question of the former site of Fort Atkinson, in order to test the accuracy of my memory, and they confirmed it in every particular.

Most respectfully, dear sir, your humble servant,

P. J. DE SMET, S. J.

ST. LOUIS UNIVERSITY, December 26, 1867.

Mr. A. D. Jones, Secretary Old Settlers' Association, Omaha, Nebraska:

DEAR SIR—My absence from St. Louis has delayed my answer. You have the kindness to inform me that we are still entitled to a reserve of land, on which the old mission house and grave-yard were located in New Council Bluffs. All I could learn on the subject is: several years after the last missionary among the Pottawatomies left that location he was applied to by the Catholic bishop of Dubuque, and ceded to him all the right to the mission claim. How the bishop has acted upon this cession in his favor I have never been informed. I would feel obliged to you to obtain further information on this subject.

To the best of my own personal knowledge, and assisted by Capt. Joseph La Barge, the old explorer of the Missouri river, I will here answer your various queries: First. "Where was old Fort Calhoun located?" Fort Calhoun was never located; it took the name of Fort Atkinson, which was built on the very spot where the council was held by Lewis and Clarke, and was the highest and first military post above the mouth of Nebraska river. Second. "Where was old Fort Crogran?" After the evacuation of Fort Atkinson or Calhoun, either in 1827 or 1828, or thereabouts, the troops came down and made winter quarters on Cow Island—Captain La Barge states it was called Camp Crogran. The next spring the flood disturbed soldiers and they came down and established Fort Leavenworth. Col. Leavenworth was commandant at the breaking up of Fort Atkinson. Third. "There is an earthen remain of fortifications on the east bank of Omaha; do you know who built or occupied it?" The remains alluded to must be the site of the old trading post of Mr. Heart.

When it was in existence the Missouri river ran up to the trading post. In 1832 the river left it, and since that time it goes by the name of "Heart's Cut-Off," having a large lake above Council Bluffs city. Fourth. "Do you know of either soldiers or Indians ever having resided on the Omaha plateau?" I do not know. A noted trader by the name of T. B. Royce had a trading post from 1825 till 1828, established on the Omaha plateau, and may be the first white man who built the first cabin on the beautiful plateau where now stands the flourishing city of Omaha. I cannot call to memory the signification of the word Omaha.

My time is much occupied at present. Should I find later any point worthy of communication in reference to our old mission, the New Council Bluffs, the early history of Omaha and Nebraska, I shall take great pleasure in forwarding it to you.

Very respectfully, dear sir,

your humble servant,

P. J. DE SMET, S. J.

FIRST WHITE CHILD BORN IN NEBRASKA.

The following correspondence relating to the first white child born in Nebraska was published in the *Omaha Herald* at dates indicated therein:

BROWNVILLE, NEB., January 29, 1880.

Dr. Geo. L. Miller, Omaha:

DEAR SIR—The enclosed letter I have just received. Being of a historical character, I hand it to you for publication, hoping by that means Mr. Harnois may be able to obtain desired information.

I would ask, too, that any one being able to communicate any facts, would do so either through *The Herald* or direct to me, as President of the State Historical Society, that we may have them for file.

As Father Hamilton, now of the Omaha Indian agency, was, in an early day, connected officially with the Indian tribes named, he will be more likely to know of the matter referred to than any other person. Send him a copy of *The Herald* containing this correspondence, "marked," please.

Yours,

ROBERT W. FURNAS.