

Renville's Soldiers and the Renville Rangers The "Tokadantee" or "Prairie Dogs."



Compiled by Lawrence J. Barkwell
Coordinator of Metis Heritage and History Research
Louis Riel Institute

In the early 1800s, Joseph Renville II maintained a squad of 15 to 25 guards for his farm and trading post and Reverend Williamson's Mission at Lac Qui Parle, Minnesota. These guards were known as Renville's Soldiers also known as the "Tokadantee". Joseph Renville II adopted Gabriel Renville after Gabriel's father was killed in 1833 leading a Dakota war party against the Ojibwe.

Later, his nephew Gabriel Renville would evolve the "Tokadantee" group into what became known as the Renville Rangers. The Renville Rangers, largely made up of Daskota-Metis men, worked on the government side during the great Sioux outbreak of 1862.

Joseph Renville II. (1779-1846)

Joseph was the son of a Mdewakaton Dakota woman, Miniyehe, and a French Canadian fur trader, Joseph Renville Sr. (Joseph de Rainville or Renville). Joseph II married Marie "Tonkanne" Little Crow, a daughter of Chief Little Crow's sister. He was a Captain with the British forces in the War of 1812. He later established a fur trading post at Lac Qui Parle where he resided until his death. He maintained a squad of 15 to 25 guards for his post and Reverend Williamson's Mission. These were known as Renville's Soldiers. Later, his nephew, Gabriel Renville would evolve this group into what became known as the Renville Rangers. In 1822, Joseph along with other experienced traders and trappers formed the Columbia Fur Company with Joseph as the firm's leader. He is also known for translated the entire Bible into the Dakota language in 1837.

Joseph was born in 1779 at what is now St. Paul, Minnesota. In 1804, Joseph Jr. married Marie "Tonkanne" Little Crow, the daughter of Petit Carboneau and the niece of Chief Little Crow.

Joseph was educated in Canada. Before he was 10 years old Joseph was taken to Canada to receive an education, it was here that he became proficient in the French language. Upon the death of his father in 1795, Joseph returned to Kaposia village where

he was born. From then on he lived with the *Gens du Large* (Sioux of the Prairie). At age twenty-six he left Prairie du Chien and worked as a guide and interpreter for Zebulon Pike during his exploration for the source of the Mississippi. During the War of 1812, he attained the rank of captain while acting as an interpreter for the British. He was commander of the Dakota warriors at the siege of Fort Miego. After the war he traded for the HBC at the headwaters of the Minnesota or St. Peter's River. After the 1821 amalgamation of the HBC and NWC, he helped establish the Columbia Fur Company with headquarters at Lake Traverse in the Minnesota Territory.

In July 1823, Joseph joined Major Stephen H. Long's Expedition to the source of the St. Peter's River. He was highly valued and was chosen by Colonel Dickson to command the Sioux contingent of the expedition at the rank equivalent to a captain in the British Army.

By the time the American Fur Company bought the Columbia Fur Company, Joseph was established at Lac qui Parle and maintained an army of warriors known as the "Tokadantee" or "Prairie Dogs." This group later evolved into the Renville Rangers under one of his sons (i.e. Gabriel Renville, who he had adopted). The Lac Qui Parle Mission was established in 1835 largely through the influence of Joseph Renville. A Native Christian Church was established there in 1837. Renville's greatest work was in assisting the missionaries at Lac Qui Parle to translate the Bible, books of hymns and other material into the Dakota language. Joseph died at Lac Qui Parle on March 18, 1846 and buried on a hill by the stockade.

Gabriel "Tiwakan" Renville. (1824-1892)

Gabriel Renville was born at Sweet Corn village on the west shore of Big Stone Lake in April, 1825. He was the son of Victor "Ohiya" Renville and Winona Crawford. His father was the son of Joseph and Miniyehe Renville and his mother was the daughter of Tatanka-mani (Walking Buffalo). He spoke French and the Dakota language of which he was a recognized expert. He made several trips to Washington to assist the Dakota in their negotiations. He acted as a guide for General Sibley on his expedition to Devil's Lake and became a chief of the Sisseton Sioux.

A Biographic Sketch of Chief Gabriel Renville .

By Samuel J. Brown¹

The subject of this sketch was born at Big Stone Lake about April 1825, and died at the residence of the writer at Brown's Valley, Minn., on August 26, 1892, being in his sixty-eighth year at the time of his death. Gabriel's father was a full and only brother of the noted Bois Brulé, Joseph Renville (for whom one of the counties of the State is named), and was called in Sioux Ohiya, and in English Victor—the latter a translation of the

¹ Brown, Samuel J. "A Biographic Sketch of Chief Gabriel Renville," November 18, 1903. From *Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society*, Vol. 10, Part 2, 614-618.

Sioux name. Ohiya or Victor Renville was born and reared among the Sioux, and, though a mixed-blood, was, it is said, in appearance, language, habits, and feelings, a full-blood Sioux. He was a warrior of considerable note, and while on the war-path against the Chippewas was killed and scalped in the neighborhood of what is now Fort Ripley about the year 1832, shot dead in his canoe while coming down the Mississippi.

Gabriel's mother, Winona Crawford, also a mixed-blood, was the grand-daughter of Ta-tanka-mani, or Walking Buffalo, mentioned by Lieutenant Pike in 1805, and also described in Neill's History of Minnesota as a "Sioux chief who was the principal man at the treaty of Portage des Sioux [near the mouth of the Missouri river] in 1815," and was the daughter of a Sioux woman (Ta-tanka-mani's daughter) and a Mr. Crawford, a prominent British trader in the Northwest prior to and during the War of 1812. She was also born and reared among the Sioux, and, though married, always retained her father's name. She lived for some time with the family of the noted Colonel Dixon, the "red-headed Scotchman" and trader at lake Traverse, who figured so prominently among the Indians of the Northwest in the war with England in 1812. She was married about 1819 to Narcisee Frenier, a Bois Brulé and Indian trader at lake Traverse, who, shortly after his marriage went over to the Missouri river to look for a location for a trading post, was taken sick on the trip, and, as is supposed, died, for he never returned. By this union there was born a daughter, Susan, who became the wife of the late Joseph R. Brown, and who is still living, and now residing with her son, the writer, at Brown's Valley, Minn.

After Frenier's death, Winona married Ohiya, or Victor Renville, and by this union there was born a son, the subject of this sketch. About three years after the death of Gabriel's father she married Akipa, a full-blood, who later was given a white man's name and called Joseph Akipa Renville, and who was always prominent in the councils of his tribe, and who died at Sisseton Agency, South Dakota, in 1891. By this union there were born two sons, Charles Renville and Thomas Renville, both of whom have in late years added "Crawford" to their name, and who are now living at Good Will, South Dakota, the former being pastor of the Presbyterian church there. Winona Crawford died at Sisseton Agency, S. D., in 1897, aged about ninety-two years.

Gabriel Renville never attended school, except for about a month in Chicago, and except also when he was learning to read and write his own language from the missionaries. When he was about sixteen years old, my father, then living at Grey Cloud, after cutting his hair and dressing him in white boys' clothes, took him to Chicago and placed him in school there; but school-room confinement and association with strangers speaking an unintelligible and strange tongue did not agree with him or suit him, and in about a month he ran away and traveled on foot across the prairies of Illinois and through the woods of Wisconsin back to his home in Minnesota. He could never be induced to return, but in later years always upbraided my father for not giving him a sound thrashing and sending him back.

He spoke no English, but was a thorough master of the Sioux tongue. He possessed an unlimited command of the language, was an easy speaker, and was never at a loss for words. The writer was intimately associated with him for many years—acted as his

interpreter on many a visit to the Great Father at Washington, and had therefore ample opportunities for judging—and can say that in his opinion Gabriel Renville had no superior—no equal, even—as to ability in the use of the Sioux language. He knew the use of it so well and so completely that his every word was a sledge hammer, always clear, homely but strong, and to the point. The writer well remembers that on one occasion when in Washington he was asked by a high official if he would be pleased with an Eastern man for Agent. His answer was, “No, give us a Western man. Eastern men are wise and good, but they can't tell an Indian from a buffalo calf.”

In personal appearance Chief Renville was a striking figure—broad-shouldered, tall, straight, sinewy, and athletic looking. He would command attention anywhere. As to his services and conduct during the Sioux outbreak of 1862 and the war following the outbreak, as well as the estimate placed upon his character and worth by prominent men who knew him, the writer can do no better than to give extracts of letters and papers from Gen. H. H. Sibley, Major Joseph R. Brown, Gen. John B. Sanborn, Senator C. K. Davis, all of Minnesota, and Prof. C. C. Painter, formerly of Fisk University, Tenn., and afterward agent of the Indian Rights Association at Washington, D. C.

General Sibley, in a communication to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, dated June 22, 1868, said:

Mr. Renville was among the most trusted and reliable of the mixed-bloods employed by me, while I was prosecuting the campaigns against the hostile Sioux in 1864 and 1865. Indeed, so well pleased was I with his fidelity, energy, and intelligence, that I appointed him Chief of the scouts to whom the outer line of defences of the frontier of this State, and of Dakota Territory, was entrusted; and he signalized himself by unremitting and distinguished services, in that important position.

Mr. Renville was instrumental in saving the lives of many white captives, taken by the Indians in 1862, by his influence and determined efforts in their behalf; and he lost a large amount of property, including horses, appropriated by the hostile savages, or destroyed, in consequence of his opposition to their murderous course.

In fact he was reduced from a position of comfort and comparative opulence, to depend upon what he could earn by his daily exertions, for the subsistence of himself and his family, and he was not included in the award of the \$7,500 appropriated by Congress to be apportioned among those who had remained faithful to the government, by some strange and unaccountable omission.

I have appealed many times to the Interior and War Departments in behalf of the Indians and mixed-bloods who exposed life and property in defending the whites against the outrages and massacres to which so many were subjected, during the outbreak referred to, but no one individual is entitled to more consideration than Gabriel Renville, and I trust it will be in the power of your Bureau to make ample amends to him for the losses he has sustained, and the sacrifices he has made, in maintaining the power of the government against the

organized and almost universal disaffection and violence of his own kindred and people.

Major Brown, in a communication to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, dated March 5, 1870, said:

Those organized for an armed resistance to the hostilities of the hostile bands were largely of the relations of the Chief, and were organized and operated under his exertions and authority. By the exertions of those Indians hundreds of whites were saved, and many of the hostile bands were punished. During the month of May, 1865, thirteen men who were on their way to depredate upon the whites were killed at different times by those friendly Indians, while acting as scouts for the protection of the frontier under the immediate command of Gabriel Renville, their chief.

Professor Painter, in a letter to Dr. Edward Everett Hale, of Boston, dated in September, 1888, said:

Renville is a fine specimen of the "noble red man;" stately, dignified, reticent, intelligent, straightforward and manly in his bearing, impressing those with whom he meets as possessing great reserved force which could easily be called into action if his good sense and perfect mastery of himself consented. During the winter I had many interviews with him, and was impressed always increasingly by the quiet dignity and greatness of the man. He told the story of his great wrongs in an unruffled, dispassionate calmness, which almost appeared to be indifference, but there were now and then flashes of lightning in his eye which revealed reserves of strength and feeling which were under the control of a master mind and will.

General Sanborn, in a note to the writer dated September 16, 1892, said:

Renville's death was a great loss to his people, and to all his acquaintances. He was one of the best, if not the best man I ever knew, if good and benevolent actions done from good and benevolent motives constitute true goodness, which I think all concede. He was also a man of great mental force, capable of doing a great deal of good or a great deal of evil. It was fortunate both for the Indians and the whites that his influence and power was always used and always found on the side of right and justice. The Sissetons cannot expect to see his like again.

Senator Davis, in the course of a speech in the United States Senate, according to the Congressional Record of February 8, 1899, said:

I knew Gabriel Renville well. He first called my attention to this subject when I was governor of Minnesota, in 1874 and 1875. He was a great man in his way, and was a good man from any point of view. His men fought on our side in

the Indian war. He rescued many white women and children from the hands of Little Crow and his band, then waging war against us. He sent his young men into the armies of the United States during the war of the rebellion.

The writer is in possession of many other letters and papers from many other prominent men, among them Bishop Whipple, Dr. Daniels, and Major Rose, all of whom knew him well, all speaking in the highest terms of the man; but space will not allow of their reproduction here, and so will content himself by simply saying that he believes that the brains of Gabriel Renville saved many whites during the Sioux outbreak of 1862, that no person in the friendly camp made greater exertions for the preservation of the whites than he and that the combination of friendly Indians and mixed-bloods, through which the white captives were obtained from the hostile Indians and delivered over to General Sibley, originated with and was organized by him. So deeply and so thoroughly was the Department of the Interior impressed with Renville's abilities and general usefulness that at the close of the Indian war, at its suggestion, he was made Chief of the Sisseton and Wahpeton Sioux of lake Traverse, and remained as such chief until his death.

This rambling and imperfect sketch, already too long, must be brought to a close. But before doing so the writer would add that Minnesota owes much to Gabriel Renville, and that the least it ought to do for him would be to cause a suitable monument to be erected to his memory; and that in his opinion the shaft so to be erected should stand not only on the soil of the State he loved and served so well, but also on the spot where his forefathers lived, on the "old Sioux reservation," which was confiscated by Congress, and which he labored so hard to have restored to the scouts and soldiers of his tribe, on the spot where General Sibley camped for a week with his whole army in 1863, preparing for a dash across the plains to the Missouri, and where Renville was then consulted and advised with so often, and where he and his scouts were accustomed to bivouac while "chasing the Little Crow," and where the old chief died, between Big Stone and Traverse lakes. Let this be done that we may show to her sister states, and indeed to the world, that Minnesota can honor a worthy son, even though a mixed-blood Indian.

Brown's Valley, Minn., Nov. 18, 1903.

August 3, 1862: Gabriel Renville organized the Metis and other employees of the Sioux agency to form the Company of Civil War Volunteers known as the Renville Rangers.

August 13, 1862: The Renville Rangers began to march to Fort Snelling near St. Paul. Big Eagle was surprised that the whites had asked the Metis for help.

August 19, 1862 The Renville Rangers, composed mostly of Metis, rushed to Fort Ridgely from St. Peter. This increased the defending contingent from 22 untrained men to about 180 well-trained frontier men. Fifty men each, of company B & C, 50 Rangers and 25 citizens. Attacks on Fort Ridgely on August 20, 22 and 23rd were repelled.

Subsequently, the Renville Rangers, under Lieut. James Gorman, bore the brunt of the Ridgely, Birch Cooley (September 2, 1862) and Wood Lake battles.

September 26, 1862, Gabriel Renville secures the release of 107 white and 162 Metis prisoners.

Chief Little Crow, in a letter to Brig. Gen Henry H Sibley after peace overtures were made following the Battle of Birch Coulee, wrote:

For what reason we have commenced this war, I will tell you. It is on account of Maj. Galbraith. We made a treaty with the government, and beg for what we do get, and can't get that till our children are dying with hunger. It is the traders who commenced it. Mr. A.J. Myrick² told the Indians that they would eat grass or dirt. Then Mr. Forbes told the Lower Sioux that they were not men. Then Roberts was working with his friends to defraud us out of our moneys..."



Gabriel Renville 1824-1892

² On August 18, 1862 the war started at the Redwood Agency with the killing of James W. Lynd (he had abandoned his Dakota Sioux wife and two mixed blood (Metis) children for another Dakota girl), then they killed Andrew Myrick, the trader who was hated by the Dakota, especially for the infamous "let them eat grass or dung" when they were starving. Myrick had grass stuffed in his mouth.