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A page from French-American history.

The first settlements of the French west of the Mississippi

We published in our edition of the 3rd of November, 1946, an article on the French origins of Oklahoma and about its founder Jean Pierre Chouteau. A subscriber of St. Joseph, Missouri, was inspired by that article to prepare for us an article appearing herewith which brings back the adventurous epoch of the first French in the virgin region west of the Mississippi.

Pierre Chouteau, as he was familiarly known, was the founder of a celebrated French family in St. Louis, and vastly wealthy too. Their fortune having derived from the fur trade with the Indians; and later from lines of river steamboats. Some of the Chouteau family later lived in St. Joseph, and a city directory of 1860 shows that one of the Chouteau family still lived here at that date. All of them were Roman Catholics and some were Free Masons as well.

When Joseph Robidoux opened his fur trading settlement in 1826 at the present site of St. Joseph in northwest Missouri, he settled first at the mouth of Roy's Branch, named for Louis Roy a Frenchman. He soon moved southward about a mile to the mouth of Blacksnake creek and his trading post became known among the Canadians or Mountaineers as Le Postedu Serpent Noir.

He selected the site because the hills were used by the Sacs, Fox and Iowa Indians for peaceful councils and meetings, and also as a place to bring their dead to be buried atop the hills.

The early trading posts in the Indian country were generally surrounded by wooden stockades which protected the store houses and supply rooms, and the homes of the traders and the 15 or 20 helpers, mostly French. The post Robidoux founded was a stout log building one and one-half stories high, six rooms down and three rooms above, with a covered porch extending along the front which faced south. In addition

a lean-to on the north side was divided into three rooms in one of which Robidoux slept. The building was built to withstand Indian attacks, but Robidoux spoke several tribal dialects and was always liked by the Indians. Chief White Cloud of the Iowa Indians with whom I talked some ten years ago and who was then 98 years old, told me that Joseph Robidoux was his grandfather.

There were no white women at the early trading posts. Joseph Robidoux's family resided in St. Louis during the early trading post years. A negro slave named Poulite, who spoke French, looked after them. Angelique Vandry of St. Louis became Robidoux's wife, and they had six sons and one daughter. Their names were Faraon, Jules, Francis, Felix, Edmond, Charles and Angelique. The principal streets of St. Joseph were named after these children and still bear those quaint names.

Robidoux was very generous and thoughtful of his children. One of the finest examples of early French-American architecture still exists. It is a two story house built as a gift to his daughter and son-in-law (Beauvais).

In 1837, the boundary of Missouri was extended west by the purchase by the government of a large area of land owned by the Indian tribes. The Indians were then moved across the Missouri River into the territory of Kansas and white settlers poured in. Robidoux Landing, as they now called the settlement, became a larger and busier community. Most of the newcomers were southerners of Anglo-Saxon heritage and many brought their negro slaves with them. The French people then lost their dominance, though little islands of them remained in the old part of the town until very recent years. The last time this writer remembers hearing French language spoken by a large group was at the funeral of Angelique Croteau Boder, my step-grandmother, about 45 years ago.

In the early days on the Missouri River the men who did the errands

for big fur traders such as Joseph Robidoux and Pierre Choteau were mostly French who came from St. Louis, a few from New Orleans and others originated in Canada. Some traced their ancestry to Vincennes, Indiana, their forebears having moved west of the Mississippi river when the British took possession after the French and Indian wars.

Perhaps, because the headwaters of the Missouri river are in the mountains, these men were frequently called mountaineers. They were also spoken of as Canadians. They laboriously pushed by poles, or drew by ropes while walking on the banks of the great river, assisted by crude sails, the keel boats in which they carried bright cloth, knives, beads, ammunition and other merchandise for the Indians.

Moving downstream to Robidoux Landing or on to St. Louis, they used Mackinac boats, huge logshollowed out and flatbottomed. In these they could even build fires in the center for cooking or warmth. They depended on the force of the current to carry them along to St. Louis where the boats were converted into commercial lumber.

Due to the absence of white women, there were sketchy "marriages" between the white fur traders and Indian maidens as late as the latter 1840's. R. F. Kurz, a young Swiss artist who came from Switzerland to St. Joseph to depict the Indians in their native haunts, made one of these marriages with Witthae, the daughter of an Iowa Chief named Kirutsche, who, by the way, when younger, had visited King Louis Phillippe in Paris as his guest. Kurz told of the marriage in his hournal, which is on file at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, in the following words:

"So, when Witthae came with her mother on January 10, I received her as my wife. Her mother served hot coffee, fried meat, and bread. White Cloud, chief of the Iowa, came as guest to witness our union. Next day I purchased her outfit that she might clothe herself in new garments throughout. I bought the usual short skirt or blouse of red calico, a woollen underskirt and pantalettes, a red blanket, a choice of large beads for necklaces, and many colored bands for her hair and for her costume. Later I bought wool for knitting and smaller beads for girdle and garters. Though Witthae herself would rather have adopted the European mode, I preferred that she dress

as an Indian girl. I liked the Indian style of dress both for its charm and its utility."

He goes on to say that "soon Witthae began to feel like a captive bird and became homesick for the Indian life again. One morning Kurz related that to his astonishment the bird had flown. So ended his marriage. Out of such marriages there grew quite a large number of half-breeds.

An interesting side-light on the life of the French-speaking citizens in the early days of St. Joseph very recently came to my attention in looking over the abstract of title to certain pieces of real estate. It appears that a Frenchman by the name of Alphonse Gerard de Pindray was in St. Joseph in 1845-46 and purchased sundry lots from Joseph Robidoux. On leaving, he gave Isadore Poulin power of attorney to convey the same. Forty or more years later a legal statement was required concerning de Pindray. Of the three French-speaking citizens who had known de Pindray in 1845, and who made the statement regarding him, my grandfather, Henry Boder, was one.

In 1859 when the construction of the Hannibal and St. Joseph railroad was completed, it was Joseph Robidoux, founder of the city, who presided at the ceremony of the inauguration of the mixing of the waters of the Missouri and those of the great lakes.

St. Joseph became a year later the headquarters of the famed Pony Express. It was here that it had headquarters and from where mail was carried on horseback to California, a distance of 2,000 miles. The usual time was ten days, though on one occasion the mail was carried in 7 days. That mail contained Abraham Lincoln's inaugural address. In 1849 the gold rush to California found 40,000 fortune hunters camped around the town waiting for spring, and for grass for their animals, to make the long journey.

And though the French language is no longer spoken by the descendants of the French pioneers, the narrow streets of this opulent old city, and the architecture of some of its old buildings remind one that this country was once French and part of the French Louisiana. Its site on the great river, ringed about by beautiful hills, gives one no cause to wonder why the French pioneers loved it and made it their home.