

THE WINONA LEGEND

On September 17, 1805, Zebulon Montgomery Pike wrote the following in the diary of his exploration of the upper Mississippi River:

I was shown a point of rocks from which a Sioux maiden cast herself, and was dashed into a thousand pieces on the rocks below. She had been informed that her friends intended matching her to a man she despised; having been refused the man she had chosen, she ascended the hill, singing her death-song; and before they could overtake her and obviate her purpose she took the lover's leap! Thus ended her troubles with her life. A wonderful display of sentiment in a savage!¹

From this modest beginning there sprang one of the best-known legends of Minnesota, one which was recorded in more or less detail by almost every traveler and elaborated upon by many later writers. There are many "Lover's Leaps," but perhaps few have as authentic a legend as has Maiden Rock on Lake Pepin.² It may be interesting to see just how authentic the Winona legend is.

Although Pike appears to have been the first to mention the episode, Stephen H. Long, who made a voyage to the Falls of St. Anthony in 1817, first gave the story of Winona in detail. Long also was the first to relate the story of Black Day Woman and the Falls of St. Anthony.³ Long's

¹ Zebulon M. Pike, *Expeditions to Headwaters of the Mississippi River*, 1: 66 (Coues edition, New York, 1895).

² A name for this rock which appears to have been little used is "Cap des Sioux." David Dale Owen, *Report of a Geological Survey of Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota*, 44 (Philadelphia, 1852).

³ Stephen H. Long, "Voyage in a Six-oared Skiff to the Falls of Saint Anthony in 1817," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 2: 24-26, 37-40. The two legends are briefly retold from Long by Doane Robinson, in his "Tales of the Dakota," in *South Dakota Historical Collections*, 14: 526 (1928). The legend of the Falls of St. Anthony appears also in William H. Keating, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St. Peter's River*, 1: 310-313 (London, 1825); William J. Snelling, *Tales of the Northwest*, 197-212 (Boston, 1830); a poem dated 1849, in Samuel W.

guide, the Sioux Wazikute, or Shooter from the Pine Tree, gave the explorer the story of the falls, saying that his mother had witnessed the event. The Indian himself is the source of the Winona legend, and it seems probable that he had also told the story to Pike. Dr. Doane Robinson aptly remarks that "More reliance might be placed upon Wazacoota's entertaining romances, had they not been in some degree discounted by Major Long's relation of the effect produced upon him by imbibing the 'commissary.'" It should, however, be borne in mind, that Pike had heard the story some years earlier, if in an abbreviated form, and Long's commissary should not be held wholly responsible. Dr. Robinson also points out that the Indian guide did not tell his stories as tribal traditions, but as "actual events occurring within his own experience, or of that of his mother."⁴ When Long was on his second expedition in 1823 he again saw Wazikute at Red Wing's village, and again the Indian related his stories. William H. Keating, a member of this expedition, states that Wazikute was a witness of Winona's death when he was very young, but that he was very old in 1823 — so old, indeed, that he seems to have remembered neither Long nor his commissary.⁵

Pond, *Legends of the Dakotas*, 15-21 (Minneapolis, 1911); Charles Lanman, *A Summer in the Wilderness*, 62 (New York, 1847); Fredrika Bremer, *Homes of the New World*, 2: 29-31 (London, 1853); Mary H. Eastman, *The Romance of Indian Life*, 274 n. (Philadelphia, 1853); Eastman, *Chicóra*, 32-34 (Philadelphia, 1854); and Henry Lewis, *Das illustrierte Mississippithal*, 34-38 (Dusseldorf, 1858). In Lewis' work, "Ampata Saba" is correctly translated "der dunkle Tag"; but curiously enough, on page 90, after correctly translating "Wenona" as "die Erstgeborene," he gives, as a variation of the Indian maiden's name, "Oa-la-i-ta," which he translates also as "der dunkle Tag." Lewis presents the legend of "Der Mädchensprung" and a poem entitled "Der Wenona'sfelsen," on pages 90 to 99 of his work. Mrs. Eastman includes the story of Winona in her *Dahcotah, or, Life and Legends of the Sioux around Fort Snelling*, 165-173 (New York, 1849), but she does not relate the legend of the Falls of St. Anthony.

⁴ Doane Robinson, *A History of the Dakota or Sioux Indians*, 132 (*South Dakota Historical Collections*, vol. 2, part 2 — 1904).

⁵ Keating, *Narrative*, 1: 270, 290-295. Samuel Seymour, the artist with the Long expedition of 1823, made what is probably the first sketch

Winona's story was briefly retold by the explorers Stephen Watts Kearny, Henry R. Schoolcraft, James D. Doty, and Giacomo C. Beltrami.⁶ Schoolcraft gives the name of the heroine as "Oola-Ita (*Oo-la-i-ta*)"; Beltrami as "Oholoaita." The latter writer says that the girl was a Sioux, and that Anikigi, her lover, was "Cypewais." It seems probable that Beltrami's source, and undoubtedly Schoolcraft's, was Chippewa rather than Sioux. There was also, of course, some intermingling of Chippewa and Sioux blood, and it is possible that the Chippewa were concerned in the incident.⁷ Beltrami states that he met the Sioux chief, Tantangamani, who, he declares, was the unnatural father of "Oholoaita," and who in 1823 was seventy years old.⁸

A new version of the Winona legend was contributed by William Joseph Snelling in his *Tales of the Northwest*, published in 1830. These tales are semi- or quasi-historical,

of Maiden Rock; it is reproduced in Keating's *Narrative*, 1: 292. On page 295 of the same work, Keating states that Seymour also made a painting showing Winona singing her dirge, but this picture is not known to exist. Other early pictures of Maiden Rock are in Lewis, *Illustrirte Mississippithal*, 90; and in Eastman, *Dahcotah*, 90. The latter is a lithograph based upon a sketch by Captain Seth Eastman. His sketches also are followed in chromoliths depicting the legends of Maiden Rock and the Falls of St. Anthony in Mrs. Eastman's *Romance of Indian Life*, 185, 245. These do not, however, accompany the tales that they illustrate.

⁶ Henry R. Schoolcraft, *Narrative Journal of Travels through the Northwestern Regions of the United States*, 329 (Albany, 1821); James D. Doty, "Official Journal, 1820," in *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 13: 217 (1895); Giacomo C. Beltrami, *Pilgrimage in Europe and America*, 2: 183-185 (London, 1828); Valentine M. Porter, ed., "Journal of Stephen Watts Kearny," in *Missouri Historical Collections*, 3: 112 (1908).

⁷ The mother of the first Wabasha is said to have been a Chippewa captive. Frederick W. Hodge, ed., *Handbook of American Indians*, 2: 911 (Bureau of American Ethnology, *Bulletins*, no. 30 — Washington, 1910).

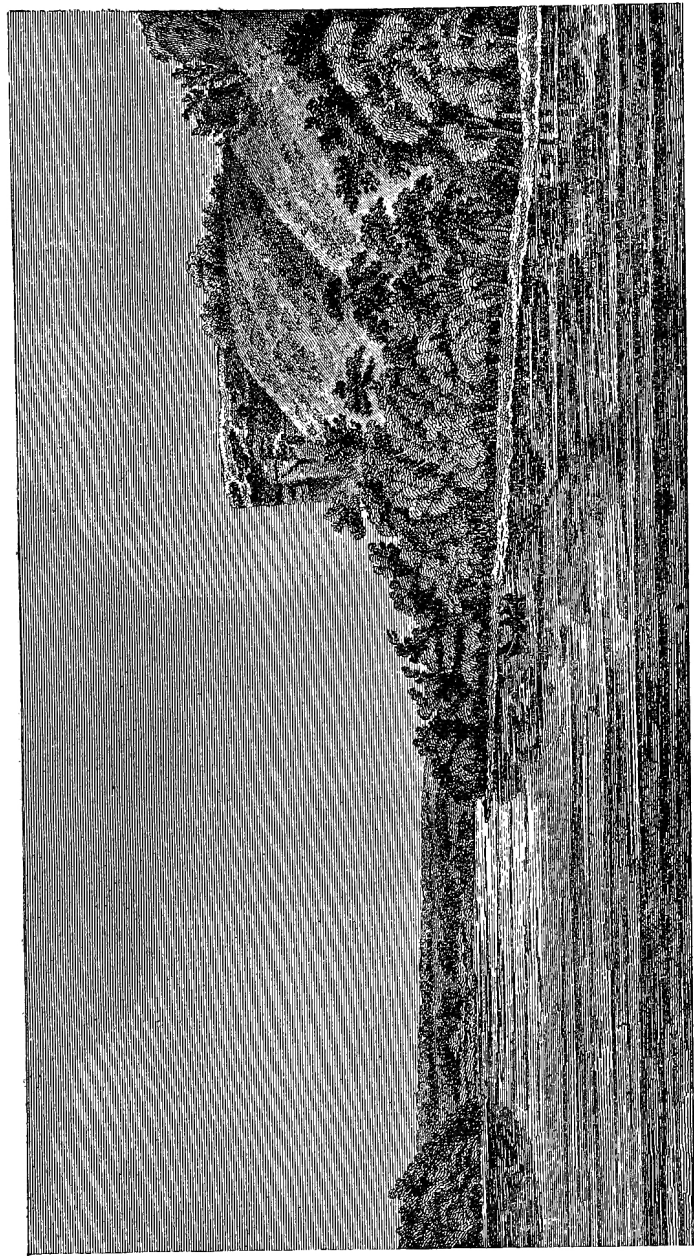
⁸ Beltrami, *Pilgrimage*, 2: 186. It does not seem likely that Tantangamani, or Walking Buffalo, who was about sixty years old in 1820, was the father of Winona. He was the son of Red Wing and was a signer of the treaty of Portage des Sioux in 1815. See Keating, *Narrative*, 1: 260; Edward D. Neill, *History of Minnesota*, 327 (Philadelphia, 1858). The latter writer presents his versions of the legends of Maiden Rock and the Falls of St. Anthony on pages 91 to 94 of the work cited.

and are mainly concerned with the relations of French, British, and Indians. In his story of "The Lover's Leap," Winona is still the heroine; her lover is "Chakhopee Doo-tah." A Frenchman is brought upon the scene — one Raymond, who offers valuable presents to Winona's parents. He it is whom she refuses, and there is an elaborate death song. There is little doubt that Snelling either altered the original to suit his literary taste or was told this version by some unknown French trapper who had done the same. It should be noted, however, that others have maintained that a Frenchman was concerned in the incident.⁹

In 1849 when Mrs. Eastman published her *Dahcotah*, she included the story of "The Maiden's Rock; or Wenona's Leap," and this made the legend more generally popular than had any previous publication.¹⁰ Her authority for her tales was a Sioux medicine woman, Mock-pe-endag-a-wiñ, or Checkered Cloud, who was seventy years old. Mrs. Eastman had read the legends of Maiden Rock and the Falls of St. Anthony, and had had the happy idea of getting original narratives from Checkered Cloud. The fact that the Indian woman's narrative was an original and

⁹ Lafayette H. Bunnell follows Neill's version of the tale, but he suggests that one "ask no Indian or old trader to verify the tale, or you will be told another not quite so romantic." See his *Winona (We-no-nah) and Its Environs*, 108 (Winona, 1897). Thomas M. Newson states that he learned from sources other than Long that Kaddaluska, the disappointed lover, also jumped into the river. See Newson's *Thrilling Scenes among the Indians*, 57 (Chicago, 1884). On page 60 this writer gives also another version of the tale as it was presented to him in a letter from John Bush, a man of eighty-three. Bush, who seems to return to Snelling's version of the tale, writes as follows: "Now, as for Maiden Rock being a legend, it is a mistake. It was a real thing and no legend. The man who wanted to marry the girl was a young Frenchman. He was killed by lightning. I saw him ten minutes after he was killed. He was a young man then. The men who knew about it are all dead but myself." Since Pike made a note of the incident as early as 1805 and Long told the tale in full in 1817, Bush, who did not arrive at Fort Snelling until 1825, could hardly have remembered the event. For a sketch of Bush, see *History of the Minnesota Valley*, 654 (Minneapolis, 1882).

¹⁰ The story was reprinted in the *People's Journal*, 7: 343 (London, 1849).



MAIDEN ROCK, LAKE PEPIN

[From an engraving based on a sketch by Samuel Seymour, in Keating, *Narrative of an Expedition*, 1:292 (London, 1825).]

nonliterary one, and at the same time so similar to that of Wazikute, supports the authenticity of the story. That Mrs. Eastman was herself somewhat concerned over its authenticity is clear from the fact that she criticized certain versions—she probably had Snelling's in mind—for representing the maiden as "delivering an oration from the top of the rock, long enough for an address at a college celebration." She also points out that, contrary to what had been said by some, Winona could not have fallen into the water, but must have fallen upon the less romantic rocks. Some had even said that Winona was a Winnebago maiden, which was obviously incorrect. She also notes, as does Keating, that the commonest method of suicide among the Sioux was strangulation, and that it is rather odd that Winona did not employ such means. She says that the Sioux firmly believed that the incident had occurred. "They are offended if you suggest the possibility of its being a fiction. Indeed, they fix a date to it, reckoning by the occurrences of great battles, or other events worthy of notice."¹¹ This date she gives as about a hundred and fifty years before her tale was written, which would be about the year 1700. As to the form of the narrative, she follows the spirit rather than the words of her narrator, but it is reasonably certain that the story is much as Checkered Cloud told it. It seems, hence, that of the extant versions of the tale, those of Long, Keating, and Mrs. Eastman are preferable to others. There are, in Mrs. Eastman's version, certain elements of realism which come from her familiarity with the Sioux, and her narrative is perhaps the best.

It is quite improbable that the events centering about Maiden Rock took place as early as 1700. Long quotes Wazikute as saying that "since his remembrance" a large

¹¹ Eastman, *Dahcotah*, 165, 166. Lanman, in his *Summer in the Wilderness*, 48–50, relates the story, probably following Keating. He states that the events described in the tale took place "about one hundred years ago."

party of Sioux of the band of La Feuille, or the younger Wabasha, went from the St. Peter's or Minnesota River to visit Prairie du Chien, and when on the way the incident occurred; Winona was presumably a member of the band. Wazikute was himself a subordinate chief of the band of the younger Wabasha, and probably of that of the elder Wabasha as well. This clue as to the period in which the Winona incident occurred, Mrs. Eastman does not mention. One could hardly expect Checkered Cloud to have known this bit of the narrative, since it would be of personal interest only to Wazikute.

Newton H. Winchell, in his volume on the *Aborigines of Minnesota*, states that Wabasha's famous band of Mdewakanton Sioux migrated from the region of Mille Lacs after the year 1744, first to the lower Rum River, later to the mouth of the Minnesota, then to the upper Iowa River, and finally to the present site of Winona. It is probable that this band was the "Mantanton" mentioned by Le Sueur in 1700, and that they were later known as the band of Pinnesshaw, or Pinchon, which in 1763 was located near the mouth of the Minnesota. There it was still found in 1773. At some date between the peace of 1783 and Pike's visit of 1805, and not long before the death of the elder Wabasha, the band removed to the upper Iowa River; and thence it went to Wabasha's Prairie, near Winona, where the younger Wabasha came to the chieftainship.¹²

Mrs. Eastman says that the village of the band of her story lived on the site occupied in 1849 by Good Road's band, and Neill locates Good Road's village about eight miles above Fort Snelling, on the south side of the Minnesota. The oldest band of the Mdewakanton was that of Black Dog. There was a tradition that all the Mdewa-

¹² Winchell, *Aborigines of Minnesota*, 539-544 (St. Paul, 1911). The county and the city of Winona were named for a cousin of the younger Wabasha, according to Warren Upham, *Minnesota Geographic Names*, 581, 584 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 17).

kanton formerly lived on the banks of the Minnesota near Pinchon's village, and within sight of the residence of Peter Quinn of Oak Grove. Stephen R. Riggs presents an interesting bit of folklore to the effect that the Mdewakanton thought the mouth of the Minnesota River was precisely over the center of the earth, and that they occupied the gate opening into the western world.¹³ Theodore H. Lewis, in the course of his mound surveys, described the site of Black Dog's village. He located it on the east half and southwest quarter of section 19, township 27, range 23, Dakota County, where he found 104 mounds visible, with indications of 14 others.¹⁴

Keating relates that Winona lived in the "village of the Keoxa, in the tribe of Wapasha, during the time that his father lived and ruled over them."¹⁵ Inasmuch as the band is said to have resided at the mouth of the Minnesota, which was at one time the site of Wabasha's village, this seems more than likely. Since Wazikute is said to have been a witness of Winona's death, and Wabasha is said to have died in 1806, one may suppose that the events connected with the legend took place about the year 1800.¹⁶ The fact that there apparently is no mention of the incident by travelers before Pike's time has some little bearing here; it is quite unlikely that had they heard the story they would have omitted all mention of such a striking tale from

¹³ Edward D. Neill, "Dakota Land and Dakota Life," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 1: 262, 263 (1872); Stephen R. Riggs, *Dakota Grammar, Texts, and Ethnography*, 164 (*Contributions to North American Ethnography*, vol. 9—Washington, 1893). Good Road is said to have been a grandson of Pinchon. See "Pike's Explorations in Minnesota," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 1: 380 n.

¹⁴ Winchell, *Aborigines*, 177-179.

¹⁵ Keating, *Narrative*, 1: 290.

¹⁶ Elliott Coues, ed., *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest; The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry and David Thompson*, 1: 273 (New York, 1897). Henry, who was on the Pembina River, does not give the source for his brief note on Wabasha's death. The chief is said to have died "about 1799," in Hodge, *Handbook of American Indians*, 2: 911.

their journals. George Catlin, in a note accompanying a sketch of the rock made during his visit of the thirties, speaks of the events as having taken place "some fifty years ago." The supposition that the incident took place about the year 1800 is probably as close to the truth as it is now possible to get.¹⁷

With all the corroboration of the above, doubt may still linger in the mind of the modern reader concerning the authenticity of the episode, and there is no definite answer that can be made to such an objection. It may, of course, be that the legend of Winona was no more than the product of Wazikute's imagination, if hardly of Long's commissary.¹⁸ It is certain, at least, from the above, that the events, if they did take place, have no great antiquity. There seems, however, to have been no doubt in the minds of such careful students of the Sioux as Riggs, Neill, and Robinson of the general authenticity of the episode. Riggs has given as much help as can now be had on the matter in the following statement concerning Sioux marriage customs:

Sometimes it happens that a young man wants a girl, and her friends are also quite willing, while she alone is unwilling. The purchase bundle is desired by her friends, and hence compulsion is resorted to. The girl yields and goes to be his slave, or she holds out stoutly, sometimes taking her own life as the alternative. Several cases of this kind have come to the personal knowledge of the writer. The

¹⁷ George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians*, 2: 143 (London, 1841).

¹⁸ George W. Featherstonhaugh thought it probable that the story was merely an invention suggested by the "perpendicularity of the precipice." See his *Canoe Voyage up the Minnay Sotor*, 1: 250 (London, 1847). Philander Prescott, who aided Mrs. Eastman in getting her stories, speaks of the Winona and Black Day Woman episodes as actual events in his "Reminiscences," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 6: 481. The Reverend Alfred Brunson expresses "grave reasons to doubt the truth of the story," in *A Western Pioneer*, 2: 74 (Cincinnati, 1879). Coues saw no use in raising the question of the fact or fancy of the event, though he thought it not improbable that the incident occurred. Pike, *Expeditions*, 1: 66 n.

legends of Winona and Black Day Woman are standing testimonies. The comely dark-eyed Winona wanted to wed the successful hunter, but the brilliant warrior was forced upon her, and therefore she leaped from the crag on Lake Pepin, which immortalizes her name. For a like reason, Black-Day Woman pushed her canoe out into the current, above the Falls of Saint Anthony, and sang her death song as it passed over. These are doubtless historical events, except that the years are not known.¹⁹

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¹⁹ Riggs, *Dakota Grammar*, 206. This writer appears to have relied upon Keating's narrative. Frank B. Mayer, an artist who visited Minnesota in 1851, states his belief that "Wenuna" had been dragged from a "virgin's feast" by a rejected lover; the "false accusation stung her to despair" and caused her to throw herself from the rock. Bertha L. Heilbron, ed., *With Pen and Pencil on the Frontier in 1851: The Diary and Sketches of Frank Blackwell Mayer*, 173 (Minnesota Historical Society, *Narratives and Documents*, vol. 1 — St. Paul, 1932).



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