

OBERLIN COLLEGE

*and the
Beginning
of the*

RED LAKE MISSION

William E. Bigglestone

IT WAS DEEP into the winter of 1842-43 when three men slowly worked their way through the frozen swamps and forests to the west and northwest of Lake Superior. They followed Indian trails and each evening at sundown stopped to make camp. Logs 8 to 10 feet in length were cut to feed an all-night fire, and balsam fir branches were gathered for the foundation of a bed. After the snow had been cleared away with a snowshoe there was room for a fire, a bed, two dogs, and the loaded sled that the dogs pulled. When twigs or dry grass had been laid atop the branches of the bed, the three put on dry leggings and moccasins, ate supper, sang a hymn, and united in prayer. Then they lay down together on the one bed, sometimes wearing caps, coats, and mittens because they had not room to carry sufficient bedding for the extreme cold. If the wind blew too fiercely they put up a row of branches to break its force and hoped the fire would not have to be renewed often during the night. They arose before daylight for a breakfast of rice or boiled corn meal thickened with flour and sweetened by a little sugar, and, while preparing it, they also baked bread cakes which served as a noon meal that could be eaten while walking.¹

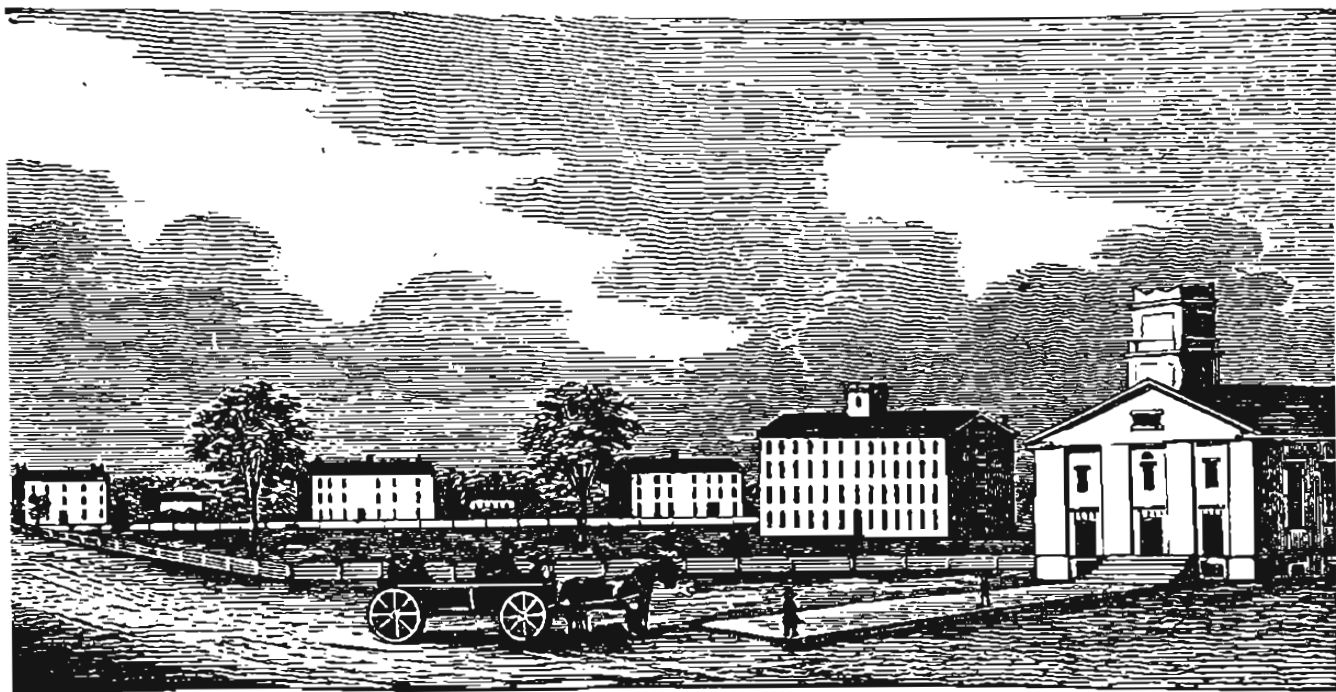
The leader of the three was Frederick Ayer, a thirty-nine-year-old missionary and teacher. His associate was David Brainerd Spencer, a former student at Oberlin College and a friend of Oberlin's renowned professor of theology, Charles Grandison Finney. The third person, the party's guide, was a Chippewa youth named Yellow Bird. Ayer and Spencer had left the village of La Pointe on Madeline Island, off the south coast of Lake Superior, on December 19, 1842. Yellow Bird had joined them at Fond du Lac, near present Duluth, Minnesota, and between that time and late February, 1843, when they arrived at Pokegama Lake in the St. Croix Valley, they had traveled hundreds of miles among the lakes and streams of the Mississippi headwaters area. Their destination was Red Lake in what is now Beltrami County of northern Minnesota, where they spent seventeen days.²

The purpose of the trip was to locate a missionary station among the Chippewa Indians, and it resulted in a

¹*Oberlin Evangelist*, May 10, 1843.

²*Oberlin Evangelist*, May 10, 1843; Elizabeth Ayer to Robert Stuart, February 23, 1843, National Archives Microfilm M 1, roll 54, originals in Michigan Superintendency of Indian Affairs and Mackinac Agency, Letters Received, National Archives Record Group (hereafter NARG) 75; Spencer to Finney, August 13, 1843, January 1, 1845, Charles C. Finney Papers, in the Oberlin College Archives.

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OBERLIN COLLEGE as it looked in 1846, according to this drawing by Henry Howe

mission that lasted until 1859, including posts not only at Red Lake, but at several other places in the Upper Mississippi region and the Red River Valley. To support the seventeen-year effort a new missionary society had to be created, and a number of dedicated people, most of whom were involved because of their association with Ohio's Oberlin College, endured innumerable hardships to spread their interpretation of God's word.

Oberlin was a religious school — Congregational, but never formally so — which had been founded in 1833 by a visionary minister and a former missionary to the Choctaw Indians to educate people to work for God's cause as Protestant Christianity interpreted it. The founders' ideals had not flagged as Professor Finney, revivalist without peer, labored to spread the militant Christian reform movement throughout the world. And from Oberlin — "God's College" — students and townspeople alike went forth to minister to the benighted.³

With all its zeal Oberlin was not looked upon with favor by conventional religious leaders of the day. It espoused a singular brand of heresy that had been propounded by its first president, Asa Mahan. Under his doctrine it was believed that a person could reach sanctification before death, and Mahan's published work, *Christian Perfection*, had caused much debate and unfavorable reaction in numerous quarters since its appearance in 1839. Adding to Oberlin's disfavor was its espousal of fads such as Grahamism, a system of strict dietary observance and other health regimens advocated

as an aid to temperance and longevity. Both Mahan and Finney were ardent Grahamites. But probably the strongest objections to Oberlin stemmed from its belligerent antislavery posture. The leaders of the college spoke loudly against the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions because the board accepted donations from slaveholders and also allowed them membership in the organization.⁴

Confusion and misunderstanding have surrounded the story of Oberlin's connection with the genesis of the Red Lake mission. As recently as 1963 a historian of Minnesota wrote that Ayer and another missionary of the American Board, Edmund F. Ely, were at Red Lake and, upon their urging "the American Board encouraged a group of dedicated and cultured Christians from Oberlin, Ohio — the "Oberlin Band" — to go to the north country, as emissaries of the American Missionary Association." This statement is not correct, and it puts the American Missionary Association into operation three years before it was created.⁵

It has been suggested that the impetus for the mis-

³ For the founding and religious zeal of Oberlin, see Robert S. Fletcher, *A History of Oberlin College From Its Foundation Through the Civil War*, especially 1:207–235 (Oberlin, 1943).

⁴ Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 1:207–235, 316–340.

⁵ Theodore C. Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State*, 150 (Minneapolis, 1963). The American Missionary Association was founded in 1846.

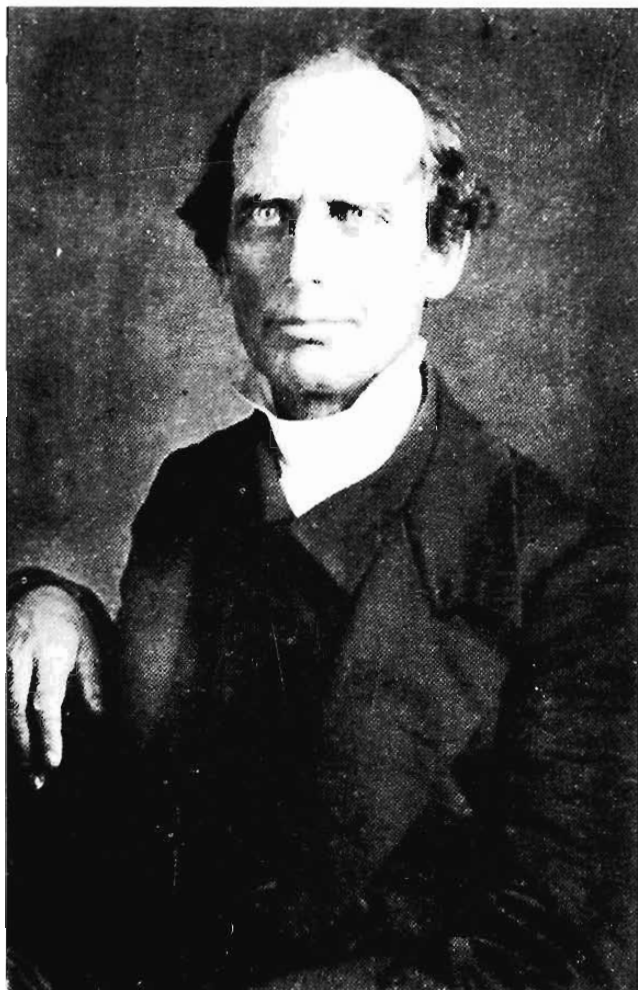
sion was a treaty with the Chippewa Indians of the Mississippi and Lake Superior bands, which was negotiated at La Pointe on October 4, 1842, by Robert Stuart, who was then superintendent of Indian affairs for Michigan. Under its terms the Indians ceded lands, upon which they were allowed to remain for the time, in present northern Wisconsin and the western part of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Part of their payment was in the form of money earmarked to hire blacksmiths, carpenters, farmers, and teachers for the benefit of the tribe. The theory that connects Stuart's treaty with the Red Lake effort does not hold, however, because Red Lake and the related mission stations were far outside the ceded area and involved Chippewa of wholly different bands. Nor is there evidence to suggest that any of the decisions concerning the Red Lake mission had reference to the contents of the treaty.⁶

An account accepted by several historians is that Stuart, while visiting Oberlin, "suggested that some of the pious graduates anxious to do Christian service ought to undertake the conversion of the Ojibway Indians." The idea was welcomed and several persons offered their services. This version rests primarily on the recollections of one who answered the call in 1843, Sela G. Wright. In 1890 when the seventy-four-year-old missionary dictated his reminiscences he said:

"In the Spring of 1843 he [Robert Stuart] suggested to the faculty of Oberlin College, at which his own son had been a student and become a christian, the idea of their encouraging young men to give themselves to missionary work among the indians. The faculty of the said College sympathized with this idea, and in order to accomplish this object made application to the American Board of Missions on behalf of some of their students who proposed to give themselves to this work. The application was not accepted by

⁶For the terms of the treaty, see Charles J. Kappler, comp. and ed., *Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties*, 2:648-652 (Washington, D.C., 1904).

⁷Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 1:217; Sela G. Wright, "Some Reminiscences of the Early Oberlin Missionaries in Northwestern Minnesota," 46-48, typescript copy in the Oberlin College Library. Wright dictated the story in eight sittings to Jacob Burgner, an Oberlin stenographer, who took it in shorthand, then transcribed it in longhand. The typescript is cited because of the fragility of the original, which is also owned by the college. A correct version of the mission's beginning is given in James Peery Schell, *In the Ojibway Country: A Story of Early Missions on the Minnesota Frontier*, xi, 5-6 (Wahalla, North Dakota, 1911). Schell's numerous other errors, however, may have caused scholars to discount his assertions. Accounts that follow Wright include Frank Hugh Foster, "The Oberlin Ojibway Mission," in *Papers of the Ohio Church History Society*, 2:3 (Oberlin, 1892); Delavan L. Leonard, *The Story of Oberlin: The Institution, the Community, the Idea, the Movement*, 329-331 (Boston, 1898).



CHARLES G. FINNEY, from a daguerreotype taken in England in 1850

the Board. Their objection to it was that the students had been taught certain theological views by Mr. Charles G. Finney, and others, which were generally condemned by the Churches, and presuming that the students had endorsed these views it was not considered safe or wise to send any students from Oberlin, as the churches would not willingly give their funds to support them."

Wright concluded that the applicants were rejected "solely on the ground that Oberlin views were not popular in the churches," and in response an independent missionary society was formed by the people of Oberlin. Authors following Wright, while varying in a number of details, have adhered to two of his points: first, that Stuart proposed the mission to Oberlin and, second, that due to Oberlin's peculiar views the American Board would not accept Oberlin students as missionaries.⁷

There is no question that Robert Stuart was well acquainted with Oberlin people, that he was a strong supporter of missionary work, or even that he assisted the

Oberlinians who went among the Chippewa. Stuart had been born in Scotland in 1785 and emigrated in 1807 to Montreal where he entered the fur trade. An extremely able person, it was he who led the little group of American Fur Company men that worked its way from Astoria to St. Louis in 1812–13. After this epic journey Stuart remained in the fur business, and from 1817 to 1834 he was agent at Mackinac for the American Fur Company. During that time he materially assisted the Indian mission on Mackinac Island, was “converted,” and became an elder of the Presbyterian church. In 1834 he left the fur trade and moved to Detroit where he engaged in the land business. He was state treasurer of Michigan in 1840, and from 1841 to 1845 he served the United States government as acting superintendent for the Michigan Superintendency of Indian Affairs.⁸

The views of Stuart and his wife Elizabeth toward missionaries and slavery were in harmony with those of Oberlin. Before the college was founded they had contacts with some of the people who were to go there, and by the late 1830s Stuart had been involved with Oberlin in land negotiations and in antislavery activities. The affection he and Mrs. Stuart felt for Oberlinians was evident in their correspondence.⁹

It is understandable, therefore, that forty-seven years after the event Sela Wright connected Stuart’s activities with the beginning of the mission, but other persons who were on the scene at the time have left no evidence to support this. In September, 1843, the president of Oberlin College did not mention his friend Stuart but credited Frederick Ayer and another missionary named John Seymour in explaining how the mission had begun. James H. Fairchild, the main historian of the college for its early years, whose residence in Oberlin was almost unbroken from 1834 to 1902, noted that interest was “awakened by a visit from Mr. & Mrs. Ayer” who “Represented the Miserable case of the Indians.” More important, missionaries on the scene did not name Stuart. In March, 1843, William T. Boutwell, Edmund Ely, Frederick Ayer, and Sherman Hall wrote that “Mr. Ayer’s visit to Oberlin, Ohio, last summer, awakened a deep interest there in behalf of the Ojibwas. There are now several men there who are ready to enter this field. . . .”¹⁰

FREDERICK AYER had been born in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, in 1803, the son of a Presbyterian minister. While he was very young his family moved to central New York state where he spent his youth and attended academies at Clinton and Lowville. Poor health forced him to abandon his plan to study for the ministry, and instead he engaged in business in Utica and other places. In 1825 he made a profession of religion and four years later left Utica to become a teacher in the mission school which had opened on Mackinac Island in 1822. There, at

the center of the Great Lakes fur empire of John Jacob Astor, Ayer began his work among the Indians. In 1830 he was invited by one of Astor’s agents to go to La Pointe, where he spent the winter of 1830–31 teaching the children at the trading post while he studied the Ojibway language. In 1831 the American Board sent the Reverend Sherman Hall and his wife to establish a mission at La Pointe, and Ayer, who had by then returned to Mackinac, met the Halls and went back to La Pointe with them. In 1832 Ayer wintered with trader William A. Aitken at Sandy Lake near the Mississippi River and ran a little school there for the children of the trader and his employees. In 1833 he married Elizabeth Taylor, who had been a teacher at Mackinac since 1828. Miss Taylor, born in Heath, Massachusetts, in 1803, had studied at Sanderson Academy in Ashfield, Massachusetts.¹¹

Under the auspices of the American Board, the Ayers went to open a new mission station at Yellow Lake on the Wisconsin side of the St. Croix River, where they were to extend the work begun at La Pointe with the Chippewa (Ojibway) Indians. The Chippewa were hunters and fishermen, some of whom practiced limited agriculture. When first encountered by French traders and Catholic missionaries in the mid-1600s, they had inhabited the forested lands about Lakes Huron and Superior, but by the early nineteenth century many had moved westward, and the main center of Chippewa strength was by then in the area around the headwaters

⁸Three sources of biographical information about Stuart are Philip Ashton Rollins, ed., *The Discovery of the Oregon Trail: Robert Stuart’s Narratives* (New York and London, 1935); *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, 3:52–65 (Lansing, 1881); Helen Stuart Mackay-Smith Marlatt, ed., *Stuart Letters of Robert and Elizabeth Sullivan Stuart and Their Children, 1819–1864* (n.p., 1961).

⁹Stuart sent his daughter to an academy conducted by Zilpah Polly Grant, who was a cousin of two Oberlin professors; he forced his son to enroll at Oberlin in 1835 after the boy had been expelled from Amherst College for taking part in a prank. Letters in the Oberlin College Archives relating to Stuart’s business activities span the years from 1837 to 1843. On November 10–11, 1836, Stuart served as chairman of an antislavery convention held at Ann Arbor, Michigan, with the support of Oberlin people. The convention is reported in the *Friend of Man*, December 22, 1836, January 12, 1837.

¹⁰*Oberlin Evangelist*, September 27, 1843; undated manuscript for a talk, Box 26, James H. Fairchild Papers, Oberlin College Archives; Boutwell, Ely, Ayer, and Hall to David Greene, March 6, 1843, in Papers of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

¹¹For biographical information on Ayer, see [Elizabeth Ayer ?], “Frederick Ayer: Teacher and Missionary to the Ojibway Indians, 1829 to 1850,” in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 6:429–437 (St. Paul, 1894); Chauncy Hobart, “Religious Movements in Minnesota,” in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 1:63–66 (St. Paul, 1902).

of the Mississippi River. The tribe was made up of autonomous bands which were in turn divided into informal village groups and family clans. Those served by the new mission were known as the Folle Avoine (Wild Rice) or St. Croix band.¹²

In 1836 the mission was moved across the St. Croix to Pokegama Lake, near present Pine City, Minnesota, where the Ayers continued for six years. Although they received active support and were assisted at various times by a number of other missionaries, including John Seymour, William Boutwell and his wife Hester, and Edmund and Catherine Ely, they were unhappy with the lack of progress, which they blamed on Indian resentment of the missionaries and on Chippewa-Sioux warfare. Pokegama was close to territory controlled by the Sioux, and warfare was endemic where the two groups came into contact. As early as 1838 Ayer had thought that perhaps they should move to Leech Lake, located south and east of Red Lake, where he had once been for a short time and where Boutwell had recently given up a mission attempt.¹³

Events came to a head in May, 1841, when Sioux attacked the Chippewa settlement at Pokegama and the band fled, leaving no one behind but the missionaries. The future of the mission looked bleak, for it was not known when or if the Chippewa would return, and, by the fall of the year, Ayer still had not made up his mind what to do. In 1837 the territory which included the mission had been signed over by treaty to the United States and was therefore open to white settlement. For a while there appeared to be a possibility that the Mission



MAP OF northern Minnesota area traversed by Ayer and others who set up early mission stations

Institute, a manual labor school near Quincy, Illinois, might locate a colony near Pokegama. The institute had Oberlin connections and was headed by antislavery people whose purpose was to educate young men for the gospel ministry. Seymour, who had served at Pokegama from 1836 to 1839 and had then left to enroll in the Mission Institute, had revisited Pokegama in 1840 and taken two Indian children back to Quincy to be educated. Not long after the Sioux attacked Pokegama, a representative from Quincy selected a nearby site for the colony, but the fear of renewed warfare caused the attempt to be abandoned before actual colonization began.¹⁴

By December Ayer made up his mind to go east as soon as navigation opened on the St. Croix and Mississippi rivers in May, 1842. He told officials of the American Board that he wanted to find a home for his sons where they could obtain schooling and that if he could locate the proper type of family to care for them, he would return to the Chippewa. He claimed he could leave without detriment to the Indians since none were living at Pokegama and there was no indication that they would return. But the letter he wrote asking for permission to leave did not reach the American Board until March, and whether the board agreed to his proposal was of little consequence, since long before an answer could be received, the Ayer family had begun the trip that would lead them to Oberlin. At about the same time the Elys went to Fond du Lac to stay with the St. Croix Chippewa who had taken refuge there, and the Boutwells were left alone at Pokegama.¹⁵

¹²For the Chippewa, see George I. Quimby, *Indian Life in the Upper Great Lakes, 11,000 B.C. to A.D. 1800* (Chicago, 1960); Harold Hickerson, *The Southwestern Chippewa: An Ethnohistorical Study* (American Anthropological Association, Memoir 92 — June, 1962). Chippewa and Ojibway are variant spellings of the same word. The missionaries generally used "Ojibway," often spelling it "Ojibwa" or "Ojibue."

¹³Ayer and Ely to Greene, October 31, 1838, American Board Papers; Boutwell to Henry H. Sibley, July 2, 1838, in Sibley Papers, Microfilm Edition, roll 2, frame 70, original in the Minnesota Historical Society; Harold Hickerson, "William T. Boutwell of the American Board and the Pillager Chippewa: The History of a Failure," in *Ethnohistory*, 12:1-29 (Winter, 1965).

¹⁴Ayer to Greene, October 29, 1840, August [?], September 20, 1841; Seymour to Greene, August 4, 1839, January 21, 1840, American Board Papers; [Ayer], in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 6:434. For the Mission Institute see Leonard, *Story of Oberlin*, 113-117; William A. Richardson, Jr., "Dr. David Nelson and His Times," in *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 13:433-463 (January, 1921).

¹⁵Ayer to Greene, December 15, 1841; Greene to Ayer, March 4, 1842; Hall to Greene, May 16, 1842; Boutwell to Greene, September 15, 1842, American Board Papers; Boutwell to Samuel W. Pond, June 29, 1842 (copy), in Grace Lee Nute, comp., *Manuscripts Relating to Northwest Missions*, in the Minnesota Historical Society.

Ayer's acquaintance with people who had become a part of the Oberlin movement probably went back to the latter half of the 1820s, when Charles Finney's revivalism had swept the central New York area where Ayer had lived. Like Seymour, Ayer was a perfectionist and a Grahamite. Still another link to Oberlin, in addition to Seymour and his associates at the Mission Institute, was Orrin A. Coe, a native of Geauga County, Ohio, who had worked for a year on the mission farm at Pokegama. Coe had left Pokegama in September, 1841, to enter Oberlin College with the intention of returning later to missionary duties. Ayer held Coe in the highest esteem.¹⁶

After the Ayers left Pokegama on May 23, 1842, they traveled by way of Quincy to pick up Seymour and continued to New York state to visit old friends and raise support for their work among the Indians. Meanwhile Seymour stayed at Oberlin until August, when he was ordained, and then left for a mission among the Winnebago in Iowa Territory. About September 1 the Ayers returned to Oberlin to plead the needs of the Chippewa for missionary aid. They stayed at the home of Chauncy T. Carrier, who was in charge of the college farm and its agricultural manual labor program. On October 5 Ayer wrote to David Greene, secretary of the American Board, that he was undecided whether to return to the Indian country that fall or spend the winter visiting churches to spread the word of the Indians' plight. He was also debating whether to ask for ordination by some church body, because the need for persons to perform the sacraments among the Indians was great, and both Ely and Hall had urged that he seek ordination as a gospel minister. Only one day later, however, he seemed to have made up his mind to rejoin the Indians while leaving his family behind with the Carriers until spring. Writing again to Greene, he reported that there was awakened interest in behalf of missionary work among the Chippewa and that he himself was returning because he expected Hall to be in the east that winter, and the two of them should not be gone at the same time. Ayer's decision was probably based on a belief that others would soon come to assist him. Apparently he was also ordained at this time.¹⁷

On October 11, 1842, when Ayer left to "itinerate" among the western Chippewa, he was accompanied by David Spencer, the first of the Oberlin contingent. About two weeks after they departed, letters arrived at Oberlin from Hall and Ely urging the Ayers to return as soon as possible and to bring as many people to work among the Indians as they could recruit. The two men had been inspired by the opportunity for workers and schools under the terms of the treaty Stuart had concluded on October 4 at La Pointe and by a belief that almost all of the various bands of Chippewa were now ready to receive missionaries. Hall also wrote to Greene,

asking for more help so that the mission at Leech Lake could be reopened and some new stations started elsewhere. In part Hall wanted to offset a projected Methodist effort in the area, because the Methodists planned to teach the Indians in English and Hall believed a thorough knowledge of the Bible could only be taught them in their own language.¹⁸

A month later Chauncy Carrier wrote to tell Greene he knew about the treaty and had visited Stuart to discuss it. Carrier admitted to being an abolitionist, but not a politically active one, and he bluntly asked whether the American Board would support Oberlin people:

"My wish is to ascertain whether that so unkind report which is abroad is true. — (viz) That simply because a young man, whose heart is filled with love of his fellow men — Comes to Oberlin and spends a short time here in study, that he may do more good to the Indian or Slave That for *this highly criminal offence* the American Board cannot send him as a laborer among the Indians."

He volunteered to go out under the board or obtain others to do so and requested that Greene write him fully and freely in reply. To this letter Elizabeth Ayer added one of her own in which she told Greene of her plans, of the requests for help from Hall and Ely, and of her high opinion of Carrier and his wife.¹⁹

Greene replied to Carrier that the prudential committee of the American Board believed it not advisable at that time to expand work among the Chippewa because of the unsettled conditions due to the Sioux warfare and because the board's finances were so shaky that some missionary enterprises already in operation might have

¹⁶For Finney's influence in New York, see Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (Ithaca, 1950); on Coe, see Newton H. Winchell et al., *History of the Upper Mississippi Valley*, 106-107 (Minneapolis, 1881); *Little Falls Herald*, December 8, 1905, p. 6; Ayer to Greene, April 4, September 20, 1841, American Board Papers.

¹⁷Boutwell to Pond, June 29, 1842, to Greene, September 15, 1842; Ayer to Greene, October 5-6, 1842; Elizabeth Ayer to Greene, November [26], 1842, American Board Papers, *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 31, 1842, March 1, September 24, 1843; Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 2:646. Hall had planned to go east that winter, and Ayer did not know he had changed his mind. From January, 1843, when Ayer baptized a child at Leech Lake, he carried on the functions of a minister, but the writer has been unable to locate any official record of when, where, and by whom he was ordained. Mrs. Ayer (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, 6:434) says: "In 1842 Mr. Ayer went with his family to the States, and in Oberlin was ordained preach[er] to the Ojibways." Before 1843 the American Board classified Ayer as a "catechist" and afterward as a "missionary." Also, beginning in January, 1844, Greene addressed his letters to "Rev." Ayer.

¹⁸Hall to Greene, October 12, 1842; Chauncy T. Carrier and Elizabeth Ayer to Greene, November 12, 1842, American Board Papers.

¹⁹Carrier and E. Ayer to Greene, November 12, 1842.

to be curtailed. In reply to Carrier's question about Oberlin he wrote:

"I am not aware of any thing that the Committee has ever said or done, on which the report to which you refer could be justly founded. What they would do, in case a person connected with the Oberlin Seminary should be brought before them as a candidate for missionary employment, in a department of labor in which they wished for laborers, and bringing suitable testimonials as to character & qualifications for the work, I cannot say. Nor should I think the question a proper one for me to ask them. When such a case shall occur and the state of the treasury will admit of his being sent forth, the Comm will decide the question, I presume, without much delay."

Greene suggested that, if Stuart's treaty should be ratified, Carrier apply to go under government auspices, whereby he could benefit the Indians as much as by going out under the American Board. The secretary wrote separately to Mrs. Ayer, referring to his letter to Carrier and adding that if schoolteachers, farmers, blacksmiths, and carpenters were employed under the treaty, then the board would probably send only religious teachers, since more lay helpers would not be needed.²⁰

There is some evidence that Greene looked upon Oberlin people with disapproval: indeed, it would have been odd if he had not. The pages of the biweekly *Oberlin Evangelist* proclaimed the theological views held at the college and the strong differences between Oberlin and the American Board over the slavery question. Yet the belief in Oberlin, which Sela Wright's statements reflect, that the board refused applicants from the college because of theological or political differences does not appear justified. Although Greene had stated in a talk the previous September that no one who, on the whole, had promise of making a good missionary had been refused for lack of funds, the reasons he gave Carrier and Elizabeth Ayer appear to be straightforward

under the circumstances. Nor did the Oberlin people who were turned away complain of unfair treatment. They merely reported that they had "been informed that in consequence of the embarrassed state of their [American Board] funds, they cannot be supported, and of course not counseled or directed by that body."²¹

IT TOOK Ayer and Spencer one month to get from Oberlin to La Pointe. They stayed about a week and then left with Ely, who accompanied them a short way before turning off for Pokegama. The two continued by themselves until they picked up Yellow Bird at Fond du Lac on December 30. After spending seventeen days at Red Lake and several days at Leech Lake, Ayer and Spencer joined Ely and Boutwell at Pokegama around the middle of February. Before the end of the month Hall arrived from La Pointe and, now that they knew the American Board would not help, the five decided jointly that Ely and Spencer should accompany Ayer to Red Lake and start a station. Since they expected others to arrive from Oberlin during the summer, they planned also for a Leech Lake station. To Hall they delegated the task of informing Greene of the plans, and on March 6 the three set out.²²

Although their letters indicated that the five men agreed unanimously to the wisdom of the Red Lake mission, there is little doubt that Ayer was the instigator. Before the end of December, 1842, he planned to establish mission stations at both Red and Leech lakes, and he was the one who had convinced the others that Red Lake was the place to begin. Ayer had several reasons for selecting this thirty-eight-mile-long lake that was home ground for some 315 Chippewa. Of the major bands of Chippewa west of La Pointe only those at Red and Leech lakes were without missionaries and free from fear of the Sioux. The Indians at Red Lake could be supplied at less expense from the Red River settlements 300 miles to the north than Leech Lake could be provisioned from La Pointe. Above all, Ayer may have selected the remote spot primarily because he wanted to get as far as he could from white civilization with its attendant vices, especially whisky. He dreamed of sufficient time to shape the lives of at least some Chippewa before whites moved into the area.²³ Ayer was a conquistador after souls who found at Oberlin supporters willing, as followers elsewhere in the world had been willing, to suffer almost any privation in search of their own particular gold.

It is easier to understand what drove Ayer than to distinguish the nuances in his motives. The reason he gave for leaving Pokegama had been to provide his sons a proper education, yet all the training his boys received was one season at Oberlin. Moreover, there is evidence that he would have stayed at Pokegama if the Chippewa had remained there or even if the proposed colony from the Mission Institute had become a reality. Obviously

²⁰ Greene to Carrier, December 7, 1842; to Elizabeth Ayer, December 7, 1842, American Board Papers.

²¹ Greene to Harley Lord, January 10, 1843; to the Oberlin Postmaster, July 10, 1843; Ayer to Greene, July [?], 1843, American Board Papers.

²² Carrier to Stuart, February 22, 1843, National Archives Microfilm M 1, roll 34; Boutwell, Ely, Ayer, and Hall to Greene, March 6, 1843; *Oberlin Evangelist*, May 10, 1843.

²³ Elizabeth Ayer to Stuart, February 23, 1843; Boutwell to Greene, September 7, 1843; Ayer to Greene, June 24, 1844, American Board Papers; Mrs. Sela C. Wright to "Dear Brother and Sister Wright," [1849], Wright Letters in 30/28, Box 7, Oberlin College Archives. Estimates by traders of the number of Indians at Red, Leech, and Cass lakes in September, 1843, are on National Archives Microfilm M 234, roll 388, originals in La Pointe Indian Agency, 1840-43, Letters Received, NARC 75.



ROBERT AND ELIZABETH
SULLIVAN STUART

Ayer could not be entirely candid with Greene and the American Board and announce that he wished to go to perfectionist Oberlin to find helpers for a new and distant post which would be remote from other American Board stations. Premature disclosure almost certainly would have brought a negative reaction from his superiors. So when Ayer left Pokegama for the eastern states and again when he left Oberlin for Red Lake, the reasons he gave were plausible and he asked permission, but he did not allow time for the board to veto his move by waiting for an answer. Communication was infrequent, and Ayer was no doubt convinced that there was slight chance of his being recalled once he was established in the new place. He also astutely cleared the way by getting his fellow missionaries to agree that a move to Red Lake was the proper course of action. It was unlikely that the board would override the combined opinion of Hall, Boutwell, Ely, and himself.

Thus began a joint venture of two American Board missionaries and some Oberlinians that the leaders of the board certainly would have frowned upon had they been

given a chance. Greene, probably chagrined, questioned selection of the station, and wrote only one letter to Ayer in the year and a half after the missionary left Oberlin. Instead of recalling Ayer, however, he concluded that letter by saying:

"As to your fellow laborers from Oberlin . . . if their object is to publish the gospel of Christ in those dark parts, & do it in the spirit of Paul, we will certainly rejoice in it. If the Holy Spirit dwells in you all and descends with his renewing & saving influences upon the Indians to whom you minister, we shall have good tidings and rejoice. Without this all will be in vain."²⁴

While Ayer and Spencer were off on their travels, Oberlin's residents had also been busy. In January, 1843, the several persons who were by then panting to serve turned for advice to Mrs. Ayer and John Hudson of nearby Strongsville, a man who had spent time among

²⁴ Greene to Ayer, January 19, 1844, American Board Papers.

the Indians. When the Ayers had been in New York the previous summer, it was suggested that several churches together might support a mission if they raised sufficient donations of food and clothing that could be sold to purchase necessities and pay for passages and freight to the Indian country. Hudson, while on a visit in Oberlin, asked the "Parental Association" to appoint a committee to discuss the wisdom of the suggestion and devise a way to bring the matter before the churches in the area. In response a committee of five was formed that included Oberlin Professor Henry Cowles, one of the main contributors to the *Oberlin Evangelist*. The committee decided that Cowles should prepare the public by inserting in the *Evangelist* short articles calling attention to the needs of the Indians while Hudson and Elizabeth Ayer sought their friend Stuart's advice. This they did by letter, and Carrier even went to Detroit to talk with the superintendent.²⁵

Stuart was thus put into a dual role of advising them and of carrying out the terms of his October 4 treaty. Under that treaty the Chippewa were to receive annually for twenty-five years money to hire two blacksmiths, two farmers, and two carpenters plus \$2,000 for the support of schools. In March, after the treaty had been ratified, Stuart asked Carrier to suggest men for these positions. Carrier submitted seven names including his own. Six were students or residents of Oberlin, and the seventh was a brother of one. Accompanying his reply were recommendations for these men written by President Asa Mahan and Professors Charles Finney, Henry Cowles, and John Morgan. Stuart did not know how many of the appointees he would be allowed to select and so informed Carrier. He also told Carrier that the school fund money would probably be divided among the existing missions and that persons wishing to go as teachers had better apply to the American Board.²⁶

In the meantime, at a perfectionist convention held in Medina, Ohio, on March 15–17, Carrier and one of the men he had named, Peter O. Johnson, spoke for the

people interested in the mission and reported upon the American Board's inability to support missionaries due to its lack of funds. They asked for advice as to their own fitness for this work and upon means of getting to the proposed field of labor and of sustaining themselves while there. The convention's membership selected a committee of five, headed by Mahan, to meet in Oberlin early in April and consider the matter before reporting to another convention in Strongsville on May 17. There it was resolved to draw up a plan for managing the mission and present it for action at the June meeting of the General Association of the Western Reserve, the organization of Congregational churches in the Western Reserve.²⁷

By May 20 Stuart learned he had fewer posts at his disposal than he had at first presumed, so he asked Carrier for the names of one farmer, one carpenter, and one blacksmith. The farmer and blacksmith would each receive \$600 a year, the carpenter, \$500. The committee that had been created at Medina met May 27 and selected the names of Carrier (farmer), Cornelius Johnson (carpenter), and John P. Bardwell (blacksmith). Of the three, only Johnson was not a resident of Oberlin. Stuart forwarded their names to the commissioner of Indian affairs and they were approved, but since there were no immediate plans to remove the Chippewa, these men were assigned places near Lake Superior, not Red Lake.²⁸

Stuart's three appointments were not enough to satisfy the desire to serve, and at its June, 1843, meeting the General Association of the Western Reserve, after expressing approval of the work done thus far, created the Western Evangelical Missionary Society. According to the constitution there drawn the object of the society was "to prosecute missionary operations among the western Indians, and in other parts of the world, as God in his providence shall open the way and provide the means." Its board of managers, which included Robert Stuart, and its executive committee were dominated by Oberlin people. A number of ministers and lay members of the General Association pledged to solicit contributions of money and supplies, and so began the financing of the society's operations. Yet the Red and Leech Lake missionaries would not have been able to travel north if the American Fur Company had not taken them and their provisions on a go-now-pay-later basis, and a majority of the funds collected during the initial years, first by these volunteers and then by appointed agents, went to repay that debt. In addition, the society agreed conditionally to support John Seymour and some of his co-workers among the Winnebago. The condition was based upon "the ability of the Board to aid them after sustaining the other missions," and it is doubtful if God's providence ever extended the board's ability very far in that direction.²⁹

²⁵ Joint letter from Hudson (January 23), Carrier (February 22), and Elizabeth Ayer (February 23, 1843) to Stuart, National Archives Microfilm M 1, roll 54; E. Ayer to Greene, November [26], 1842.

²⁶ Carrier to Stuart, March 13, 1843, roll 54; Stuart to Carrier, March 16, 1843, roll 39, National Archives Microfilm M 1.

²⁷ *Oberlin Evangelist*, February 15, April 12, June 7, 1843.

²⁸ Stuart to Carrier, May 20, 23, 1843; to T. Hartley Crawford, June 2, 1843, roll 39; J. A. Thome to Stuart, May 27, 1843; Crawford to Stuart, June 23, 1843, roll 54, National Archives Microfilm M 1.

²⁹ *Oberlin Evangelist*, July 5, September 27, 1843, August 14, 1845; records of the General Association of the Western Reserve, June 14–15, 1843, in the Oberlin College Library. The word "Western" did not at first appear in the organization's title. It should not be confused with the Western Missionary Association sponsored by the Presbyterians.

No time was wasted. On June 26 religious exercises were held for those who were to leave and, as a part of the exercises, Bardwell and Alonzo Barnard were licensed to preach. On June 27 Elizabeth Ayer and her sons Lyman and Frederick, with the Barnards and bachelor Sela Wright, left Oberlin by way of Bellevue and Sandusky. At Detroit they found a representative of the American Fur Company and traveled with him to Sault Ste. Marie where they lay over for ten days.³⁰

When they arrived at La Pointe on July 18 Frederick Ayer was there to greet them. Accompanied by Ely and Spencer, he had returned from Pokegama to Red Lake, arriving on April 17, 1843. There he had remained until June 20, when he left once more for La Pointe. Ely remained with Spencer until August 3, when he, too, departed for La Pointe. Spencer, the neophyte missionary, spent a lonely ten days as sole occupant of the small bark hut which represented the new station until he was joined by Barnard and Wright, who had left La Pointe July 21 and reached Red Lake after twenty-four days of travel.³¹

During July and August the rest of the Oberlin volunteers, with and without government support, left from Cleveland on boats that also carried the supplies for Red and Leech lakes, so the Ayers and Mrs. Barnard waited at La Pointe for them to arrive. This second contingent finally reached Red Lake on October 7, after an ordeal by travel that lasted seven weeks from La Pointe. The Ayers and Mrs. Barnard were accompanied part of the way by Dr. William Lewis and Peter Johnson, who were destined for Leech Lake. By the summer of 1844, when Mrs. Lewis and Mrs. Johnson joined their husbands and Orrin Coe and his bride came to Red Lake, Oberlin had contributed ten people to Ayer's dream, with more to come as the years passed. Of these ten, all except Mrs. Lewis had been students at the college. In addition, Carrier and Bardwell were working elsewhere for the Chippewa under government sponsorship. God's College was fulfilling its role.³²

IN 1848 the American Missionary Association absorbed the Western Evangelical Missionary Society along with its responsibilities. After two years in government service Bardwell had given up his position in order to act as agent for the mission stations and he continued this work under the new organization. It was due mainly to his fund-raising efforts and his purchasing and forwarding of supplies that the missionaries received assistance, because they never were given regular salaries. They accepted what was contributed and built their own buildings, cleared and cultivated their own ground, and fed themselves from the fruits of their own labors. The only exception was Ayer who received \$250 a year from the American Board "exclusive of donations." The total money spent by the Western Evangelical Society and

American Missionary Association on this mission over the sixteen years it existed was around \$50,000. Approximately thirty-seven adults served at one time or another, although some were there for only one season. A minimum of twenty of the thirty-seven had attended Oberlin and five of those who had not were spouses of the Oberlin people. The peak year numerically came in 1852 when twenty-one adults were in the field.³³

The mission was terminated in 1859 because the missionaries were worn out. Over and beyond brutal winters, isolation, and primitive living conditions, the hardships of travel alone were such as to make all but the most courageous blanch. There were two main routes by which the mission could be reached. One was by boat via Sault Ste. Marie to La Pointe and then by canoe in summer or on foot in winter. The other was from Chicago to Galena, Illinois, then up the Mississippi by boat until low water forced a resort to canoe. Canoe travel meant frequent backbreaking portages and sometimes bailing or stopping to calk with gum the holes that were too easily knocked in bark canoes. In 1846 Sela Wright made an especially arduous journey to Oberlin, where he married. That fall he took his wife back to Red Lake. The return trip was so demanding that by the time they reached Cass Lake, Wright was in extremely poor condition and badly in need of help, although Mrs. Wright was well. (It is interesting that in his "Reminiscences" Wright did not mention this, although he did relate how his bride's exhaustion almost prevented her from making it the final distance to Red Lake.) Another particularly grueling trip was made from Oberlin to Red Lake in the summer of 1849, when Bardwell headed a party of three men, three women, and some children. Among the obstacles they faced were cholera and other illness; flooding rivers; mosquitoes so thick they were almost inhaled when one drew breath; straying horses; portages with

³⁰Records of the Lorain County Congregational Association, 23-24, in the Oberlin College Library; *Oberlin Evangelist*, July 5, 19, 1843; Ayer to Greene, July [?], 1843.

³¹Ayer to Greene, July [?], 1843; Ely to Greene, September 21, 1843, American Board Papers; *Oberlin Evangelist*, July 31, 1844.

³²Carrier to Henry Cowles, July 7, 1843, Cowles Papers, in the Oberlin College Archives; *Oberlin Evangelist*, March 13, August 28, 1844. For information about the travels of Carrier, Bardwell, and Johnson, see Stuart's correspondence for July to October, 1843, on rolls 39, 53, 54, National Archives Microfilm M 1, and the *Oberlin Evangelist*, March 27, April 10, 1844.

³³Information here and below about the various mission stations, the names of the people who served, the deaths, the money expended, and the mission in general is found in issues of the *Oberlin Evangelist*, 1843-51; the *Missionary Herald*, 1843-49; and the *American Missionary*, 1847-59; also in published annual reports of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and of the American Missionary Association.

mud and water higher than boot tops; flies so thick their bites left a child's hair matted in her blood under her bonnet and her ear filled with clotted blood; high winds that almost swamped canoes as they crossed lakes; and summer heat that rose to a temperature of a hundred degrees. Sometimes the horrors of such a journey were made worse because a stubborn traveler insisted upon observing Sunday as a day of rest. It was fortunate for the missionaries that not all of them were so rigidly inclined. In addition to physical discomforts and occasional hunger, they had suffered from loneliness, isolation, and sporadic support. In one period of almost twelve months, Spencer heard only once from agent Bardwell, the Missionary Association, or a relative. The only other things he received during that time were a few issues of the *Oberlin Evangelist*.³⁴ It is little wonder they grew despondent as years passed and few new faces came to help. Meanwhile, in addition to infant deaths, Mrs. Barnard died of illness and Mrs. Spencer was killed by a Sioux bullet.

³⁴*Oberlin Evangelist*, March 13, 27, 1844; December 9, 1846; August 29, September 12, 26, October 10, 24, 1849; Wright, "Reminiscences," 2-9.

³⁵References to harassment of the missionaries and other difficulties can be found in American Missionary Association, *Annual Report*, 1856, p. 38-39; 1857, p. 32-34, 1858, p. 29-30; 1859, p. 27-30. Other examples are in Spencer to Finney, January 1, 1845, Finney Papers (Box 4); and in letters from Mrs. Wright, July 17, 1847, July 7, 1852, Wright Letters in 30/28, Box 7. For examples of acceptance of the missionaries' reasons for closing the mission, see Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 1:219; Foster, in *Papers of the Ohio Church History Society*, 2:24-25. For a discussion of the outcome of Protestant efforts among American Indians in general, see Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *Salvation and the Savage: An Analysis of Protestant Missions and American Indian Response, 1787-1862* (Lexington, Kentucky, 1965).

THE DRAWING of Oberlin College on page 22 is from Henry Howe, *Historical Collections of Ohio*, 2:127 (Cincinnati, 1907). The photograph of Finney on page 23 is from a daguerreotype in the Oberlin College Archives. The photograph of the Stuarts on page 28 is from the collections of the Michigan History Division. Alan Ominsky drew the map on page 25.

The mission had a variety of stations during its existence. Red Lake, the first and main one, operated until 1857, while the Leech Lake post existed less than three years. Other attempts at Cass Lake (at first called Red Cedar Lake), twice at Lake Winnepeg (present Winnebigoishish), a second position on Red Lake, and one at St. Joseph on the Pembina River in what is now the northeastern corner of North Dakota all lasted for varying periods. The real reason there were so many short-lived stations was that a majority of the Indians regarded the missionaries as intruders upon their land and forced them to leave. The produce they grew and the livestock they grazed were considered by the Chippewa to belong to all, and what was robbing a garden to a missionary was something else to the person he had come there to serve. At various times crops and livestock were destroyed, promising enterprises such as sawmills were sabotaged, and missionaries' persons were threatened. Chippewa kept their children out of schools and in the end told the white men they must first plow for Indians and build for Indians if they wished to enjoy the privilege of remaining. During the entire sixteen-year effort only twenty conversions had been made, and most of those occurred in the early years.

By common consent the missionaries remaining in 1859 agreed to abandon the effort, and it is no wonder they finally decided there must be more promising fields. Some may have agreed with Bardwell, who blamed Ayer for "buying" the privilege of establishing a mission at Red Lake with promises that the missionaries would plow for the Indians, supply them with lumber, and help the elderly and infirm. But the consensus — and one which Oberlin historians have generally accepted — placed the blame for the failure upon the heathen condition of the Indians, the missionaries' fear of venereal disease, the activities of unsavory whites, and especially upon alcohol, which was backpacked and sledged to Red Lake in generous amounts from the nearest frontier settlement 150 miles away. The real cause of failure was that they, like Protestant missionaries to other American Indian tribes, had attempted the impossible task of remaking a way of life.³⁵



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