



"To Stand Alone in the Wilderness"

EDMUND F. ELY MISSIONARY

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FOR PROTESTANT AMERICA in the first decades of the 19th century the missionary impulse was strong, particularly in New England where humanitarian and reform groups reorganized their churches to support missionary efforts throughout the world. On June 27, 1810, four students from Andover (Massachusetts) Theological Seminary (or Divinity College, as it was then called) presented a petition to a meeting of Congregational clergymen. The document committed the students to missionary work among the "heathen," and the four men asked not only for clerical approval but also inquired how best their ideas could be implemented. The petition was referred to a general meeting of ministers from throughout the state and adopted unanimously. The clergymen also created a new church body to carry out the missionary work. This freshly minted organization was christened the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. The unwieldy title gave way almost immediately to the shorter "American Board" or "the Board" and was occasionally known by its initials, "the ABCFM."¹

From the beginning the American Board included several strains of New England orthodoxy which had united to found Andover as the leading seminary. Even the Presbyterians from the middle states joined their northern fellow Calvinists, at first to stem the growing

number of Unitarian liberals and then to add their strength to the missionary endeavor. Common to all these Protestant factions was the millenarianistic belief in the coming thousand-year reign of Christ. The millennium was an idea that long preceded the formation of the American Board, but the faculty and students of Andover seized upon it with a new sense of urgency. The two greatest obstacles that stood in the way of millenarian hopes were the Roman Catholics and the Asian religions. Protestant ministers at home and missionaries in foreign lands fortified themselves to combat these influences. In the Middle and Far East missionaries struggled to win converts to Christianity. And on the frontier of western Lake Superior the conflict between Catholics and Protestants was to have a profound effect on the missionaries of the American Board.

Sherman Hall and William T. Boutwell were among the first recruited by the American Board for assignment in the northwest. The two men were classmates at Andover and had been ordained on the same day. Hall had been the first to accept the role of missionary, and when the board encouraged him to find a companion he had convinced Boutwell to join him. The two recruits would now apply their efforts toward conversion of the Indians.

The mission chosen for Hall and Boutwell was La

¹ Here and below, see Clifton Jackson Phillips, *Protestant America and the Pagan World: The First Half Century of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1810-1860*, 1-31 (Cambridge, Mass., 1969).

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THE SETTLEMENT at La Pointe, sketched by an unknown Indian artist probably between 1841 and 1846

Pointe on Madeline Island just off the Bayfield Peninsula in northern Wisconsin. The island was the home of a large band of Ojibway, or Chippewa, Indians, and it was also the center of the American Fur Company's widespread operations in the western Lake Superior area. Lyman M. Warren, the company's chief agent whose headquarters was located on the island, had requested as early as 1831 that missionaries be sent to La Pointe, and that call had been answered by the American Board when it first dispatched Jedediah Stevens and then Frederick Ayer. The Stevens appointment had not worked out and Ayer was only a lay preacher. Sherman Hall and William Boutwell would provide strength and stability to the mission.²

The ABCFM's instructions to Hall and Boutwell contained a list of practical "suggestions respecting the kind of labors which you will be expected to perform." Formulated by the Prudential Committee, the executive body of the board, and delivered through its secretary, David Greene, the instructions impressed upon the two fledgling missionaries that their first and foremost objective, "never to be for a moment lost sight of," was to preach the gospel directly to old and young, with "the intention and earnest desire of being the instruments of their speedy conversion."³

Realizing that the missionaries would face a language barrier, the committee encouraged Hall and Boutwell to acquire the use of Ojibway as rapidly as possible. "To depend upon interpreters," the committee warned, "is expensive and embarrassing." The committee forbade establishing boarding schools as well as "secular establishments, agricultural and mechanical." Small schools at the missions, however, were permitted. Classes must be taught in English, the

committee recognized, at least until books in the native language could be prepared. In addition, the missionaries were to compile information about the Indians — their numbers, location, religion, and their receptivity to Christianity. As pioneer missionaries in the West their successful efforts might set an example for other missions that would extend all the way to the Pacific coast.

Bearing these guidelines and words of encouragement, Hall with his new bride Betsy, and Boutwell departed for La Pointe. Their route took them from Boston to New York and then up the Hudson River, through the Erie Canal to lakes Ontario, Erie, and Huron, and on to the first major stop at Mackinac. There it was determined that Boutwell should remain to engage in Ojibway language study under the instruction of Dr. Edwin James, post surgeon at Fort Brady on the island. On August 4, 1831, the Halls, with the parting strains of the hymn, "Yes, My Native Land I Leave You" ringing in their ears and hearts, departed Mackinac for their new home at La Pointe. Boutwell would join them the following summer.⁴

Even as Hall and Boutwell were en route to the

² Keith R. Widder, "Founding the La Pointe Mission, 1825-1833," in *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 64:181-201 (Spring, 1981).

³ Here and two paragraphs below, see American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, *Annual Report*, 163-166 (Boston, 1832). These reports, all published in Boston, are hereafter cited as ABCFM, *Annual Report*, with appropriate date.

⁴ ABCFM, *Annual Report*, 94-96 (1831); Widder, in *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 64:196. During his stay at Mackinac, Boutwell joined Henry R. Schoolcraft on his historic 1832 expedition to the source of the Mississippi River.



EDMUND F. ELY, probably about 1850

⁵ Greene to Schoolcraft, July 11, 1833; Hall to Greene, September 28, 1832, both in archives of the ABCFM, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Typescript copies of correspondence with the Lake Superior missions are in the ABCFM Papers, division of archives and manuscripts, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), St. Paul. All letters used in this article are taken from those typescripts; punctuation has been standardized by the author. Although there is no document confirming the appointment, Hall served as the superintendent of the Lake Superior missions. See, for example, Ayer, Warren, and Ely to Greene, March 24, 1835.

⁶ Biographical sketch of Ely, Edmund F. Ely Papers, Northeast Minnesota Historical Center (NMHC), University of Minnesota, Duluth. On Finney, see Allan Johnson and Dumas Malone, eds., *Dictionary of American Biography*, 3:394-396 (New York, 1936).

⁷ Greene to Ely, June 28, 1833. This letter is not an exact copy but is included with other letters under the heading, "Memoranda of letters written by Mr. Greene while on his journey to Mackinaw, and at that place, June & July, 1833," which gives Ely's role as a teacher; ABCFM, *Annual Report*, 125 (1833) lists Ely as "Teacher and Catechist."

west, the American Board decided to expand the missions far beyond La Pointe. All white settlement in Indian country must be approved by the United States government, and Secretary Greene wrote Henry R. Schoolcraft, Indian agent at Mackinac, outlining the board's intent to station a missionary and teacher and/or catechist at Yellow Lake on the western border of Wisconsin, at Sandy Lake at the western end of the Savanna Portage, and at Leech Lake about 60 miles northwest of Sandy Lake. Additional missions, however, would require more personnel; once established at La Pointe, Hall appealed to Greene, explaining that "We are very much in want of a teacher whose time shall be devoted principally to the instruction and care of the children."⁵

AS IF IN ANSWER to Hall's request, Edmund Franklin Ely, a young divinity student (he was 24) in Albany, had just made a decision to drop his studies and enter the missionary field as a lay worker. Ely, as early as 1827, had "professed religion" at Rome, New York, after hearing the sermon-orations of the Reverend Charles G. Finney, one of the most powerful and effective evangelists of his day. Ely began his training for the Presbyterian ministry the following year in Albany under the tutelage of the Reverend Edward N. Kirk. To defray expenses, the young student taught music and became the leader of the choir of the Fourth Presbyterian Church.⁶

It is not entirely clear how the American Board and Ely became acquainted or exactly what Ely's motives were in leaving his ministerial training before completion, but in the early summer of 1833, David Greene wrote Ely authorizing him to join the Lake Superior missions. A specific station was not named. The conditions of Ely's appointment were realistically blunt. He was engaged for one year with the understanding that at the end of that period he would receive — should he be found "a suitable person" — a regular appointment from the board. Greene informed him that he ought not go unless he expected to be "contented & permanent in spite of the hardships and discouragements." Ely's principal assignment, at least for the first year, was to serve as a teacher.⁷

He left Albany on July 5, 1833, bound by packet for Utica and then overland by stagecoach to Syracuse and Buffalo. From there he embarked by steamboat for Detroit. It was his first trip as a disciple of Christ, and he observed his shipboard fellow travelers with a supercritical eye. The ship's crew, to Ely's disgust, could hardly utter a word unaccompanied by curses and blasphemy. "Sabbath Breakers," he labeled them with "most of the Passengers . . . of the same spirit." At Detroit, Ely met Greene, who was returning from a trip to the west and who informed Ely of his assign-

ment to Sandy Lake where he would work with William Boutwell.⁸

Inclement weather delayed his arrival at Mackinac where Ely expected to meet Ayer, Boutwell, and others who were traveling to La Pointe. He was too late. The traders' boats and with them Ely's fellow missionaries had already departed for Sault Ste. Marie, the stopover point between Mackinac and La Pointe. After a two-day delay, the Reverend William M. Ferry found a French trader who was headed for the Sault, and he agreed to accept Ely as a passenger.⁹

If the trip so far had been trying, the passage from Mackinac onward proved to be an ordeal. The trader, his 21 employees, Ely, eight dogs and their puppies, and three cats and their kittens set out in a batteau for Sault Ste. Marie on July 24. Encountering rough seas, the dogs became seasick, making conditions, as Ely described them, "extremely loathsome."

At the Sault, Ely was informed that the missionaries had left for La Pointe, and, again, he must try to overtake them. Strong winds, however, delayed the advance party, and Ely caught up with them a few miles west of the Sault. There he met for the first time his colleagues for the next decade and a half. In addition to Boutwell and Ayer and his wife, they included Delia Cook, Hester Crooks (whom Boutwell later married), and John Campbell, the latter three lay workers at the La Pointe mission. They were surprised and delighted to see Ely. Since the brigade with which they were traveling was the last one west for the season, they had supposed that Ely's arrival would be delayed by a year, or at best, he would have to return to the East and re-enter the interior by way of the Mississippi River. Boutwell informed Ely that he would accompany him as far as Sandy Lake, but that he had instructions to proceed on west to establish a new mission at Leech Lake.¹⁰

The voyage across Lake Superior from Sault Ste. Marie to La Pointe was especially difficult. Days of bad weather forced the party ashore where they waited for calmer water. Ely had frequently been troubled by periods of illness (in fact, there is some indication that he had terminated his missionary training in order to recover his health), and now he came down with severe constipation. Relief was prescribed by Dr. Charles Borup, an American Fur Company employee traveling with the group. Corn boiled in lye to remove the hulls was the best Borup could offer, and the cure was worse than the ailment. Ely was beset by a painful attack of hemorrhoids, and he suffered for several days during which the doctor again tried to provide relief. La Pointe was a welcome sight on August 17.¹¹

It is impossible to determine how Ely envisioned the La Pointe mission before his arrival, but once there he pronounced himself "disappointed in the location &



ELY'S SKETCH map of Madeline Island, included in his journal for August, 1833

appearance of the place." The cluster of dwellings was located on the southwestern tip of Madeline Island overlooking a bay and beyond that the mainland. Ten or twelve bark-covered buildings constituted houses and storage sheds. The most complimentary Ely could be was toward Lyman Warren's wheat fields, which he allowed produced "as good Berry as any I have seen." On August 20, 1833, the missionaries and workers at La Pointe formed themselves into a church which Ely likened to "planting a tender shoot in the desert," where he hoped the "early & latter [sic] Rain [would] water its roots that it wither not." He was also moved by the historic moment to record, "This is 350 miles N.W. farther than any other Protestant Church to my knowledge."¹²

Boutwell and Ely did not linger at La Pointe with their fellow missionaries. Four days later they departed for Fond du Lac, the next leg of their journey on the way to Sandy Lake. Warren provided them with a canoe and crew, and they followed the south shore of Lake Superior to the western tip where the estuary of the St. Louis River empties into the lake. Following the serpentine channel upstream for 18 miles they arrived at the American Fur Company's post at Fond du Lac. Ely was impressed with the natural beauty of the setting. A ridge of hills rose on either side of the stream, and on the post side the banks widened out to form a natural amphitheater. Pierre Cotté, Fond du Lac

⁸ Here and below, see Ely, Journal, July 5, 12, 13, 15, 1833. The original journals are in the Ely Papers. NMHC, with typescripts in both NMHC and MHS. The typescript copies were used throughout this article.

⁹ Ely, Journal, July 24, 1833.

¹⁰ Ely, Journal, July 30, 1833. See also Stephen R. Riggs, "Protestant Missions in the Northwest," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 6:119-125 (St. Paul, 1894).

¹¹ Ely, Journal, August 2-17, 1833. Ely was a very descriptive writer, and it is possible to follow his course along the south shore of Lake Superior by the landmarks that he describes in vivid detail.

¹² Ely, Journal, August 17, 1833.

trader for the company, greeted them warmly as did Hugh Aitken, agent in charge of the Fond du Lac District whose home was at Sandy Lake. Cotté had planted a garden, and Ely envisioned great possibilities for future developments. "Have seen no soil like this since leaving Michigan," he wrote.¹³

Here for the first time Ely met some of the Ojibway who had come to the post from as far away as Leech Lake. Ornamented in grand style, the Indians sang and danced for the missionaries. Ely was impressed, and as he later told David Greene, "For many nights, the last sounds in our ears, was, *the Drum* — wild Song — whoop of the dancers." Ely had already begun to acquire a few words and phrases of the language, and the Indians were willing helpers. Learning of his interest, they crowded around him naming "every thing they could fix their Eye upon, in the tent — or about your person."

The Sabbath of August 25 was the strangest Ely had ever witnessed. The Ojibway performed the begging dance, and the white Sunday service was interrupted by whoops and shouts as the Indians gathered to dance first before Cotté's house and then Aitken's. They dispersed in an hour but only after they received gifts of corn and tobacco.¹⁴

The stay at Fond du Lac was brief, and traders and missionaries made ready to begin the last lap of their journey to Sandy Lake. The trail began with a seven-mile portage around the rapids of the St. Louis River. Called the "Grand Portage" (not to be confused with the portage of the same name on the north shore of Lake Superior), it rose steeply over a 60-foot hill and skirted the river along a trail that crossed savannas and swamps with mud up to the ankles. The travelers' baggage preceded them over the portage, and the men followed. The voyageurs who carried 150 to 180 pounds of baggage in a single load across the rough terrain won Ely's admiration as they made their way in "poses" to the far end of the portage.

After re-entering the St. Louis River the party made

¹³ Here and below, see Ely, Journal, August 22, 1833; Ely to Greene, September 25, 1833. The letter is an account of Ely's journey from Albany to Sandy Lake and amplifies the journal entries.

¹⁴ Ely, Journal, August 25, 1833. On the dance, see Frances Densmore, *Chippewa Music*, 2:228 (Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 53 — Washington, D.C., 1913). "Poses" was the voyageur term for rest stops from the French word for laying down.

¹⁵ Ely, Journal, September 17–18, 1833.

¹⁶ Ely, Journal, September 19, 1833.

¹⁷ Ely, Journal, September 19, 1833; Boutwell to Greene, September 21, 1833. Woods' book had been published in 1829; Samuel M. Johnson, ed., *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, 420 (1st ed., New York, 1908).

its way upstream to the mouth of the East Savanna River. The distance between the East Savanna and Sandy Lake was spanned by going up the river to the point where the canoes could no longer support the cargoes, over the Savanna Portage through mud and water up to the knees for much of the way, and down the West Savanna River to Sandy Lake. It was strenuously difficult and slow traveling. Food consisted of "Rats [muskrats], fish, and smoked caribou," although Ely noted that "provisions are very scarce in the country — no 'monomin' [wild rice]."¹⁵

THE AMERICAN FUR COMPANY post at Sandy Lake which was to be Ely's home enjoyed a picturesque setting. Lush meadows extended on either side of the river as it entered the lake, and Ely anticipated the possibilities of a natural harvest of "thousands of Tons of Grass [which] might be cut from two to 3 ft in length." Ely would reside in Aitken's house where his single room must serve as living quarters and school.¹⁶

Ely's introduction to the problems of administering Christianity came early on with an incident involving Boutwell. The latter was scheduled to continue on to Leech Lake where a large group of about 700 Ojibway resided, but before he could depart one of the American Fur Company clerks, a Catholic, asked the missionary to baptize his sick child. The father feared that his child would die without receiving this holy ordinance. Boutwell patiently explained that in his church only children of members were permitted to receive this sacrament. The father did not understand and explained that although he was a Catholic, he knew only the Lord's Prayer. Boutwell struggled with this dilemma. Here might be a chance to win a convert, but at the same time he must violate the laws of his church. He consulted the Bible. He reread Leonard Woods' theological tract on infant baptism. He discussed the matter with Ely, and he talked it over with Aitken. But he could not bring himself to violate his theology. At last Boutwell invited the clerk into his room and explained that baptism "of itself" could not save the child. This explanation apparently satisfied the father, but Boutwell's conscience could not rest so easily. "Will you, or some one show me," he wrote Greene, "& from scrip[ture] the right or wrong." The question remained unresolved.¹⁷

While Boutwell made preparations to leave for Leech Lake, Ely turned to setting up the school. Structured training was not new to the Indians at Sandy Lake because Ayer had taught there during the previous fall and winter. His 15 to 20 pupils might be expected to return to Ely's classroom. "Am able to make myself understood in my school," he wrote Greene, "by using Phrases — although cannot Converse at all yet. It is a great trial — from whh[ich] in due time I hope to



THIS ENGRAVING of Sandy Lake appeared in an 1858 issue of *The Illustrated London News*.

be relived [sic].” Both adult men and women as well as children came to the school. Singing became a popular exercise, and here Ely’s musical background proved a valuable aid. “Nogomota” (let us sing), one of the Indians might cry out, and a group would join in as the missionary led them in a hymn followed by a Biblical lesson and prayer.¹⁸

An Indian medicine man and his teen-age son arrived from Gull Lake. The father showed some skepticism about the Bible and the “purity of our Book.” Was it, he inquired, really in the Ojibway language? He could tell, he assured them, if allowed to examine it. Aitken gave the man Ely’s spectacles, which the Indian put on and began his examination. The decision was rendered in Ojibway and unintelligible to Ely, but apparently the man was satisfied. The incident strengthened Ely’s determination to learn the language.¹⁹

The number of school children varied with the comings and goings of the parents. During the time Ely was at Sandy Lake the attendance went from a low of two to a high of 12 with an average daily attendance of six to seven. “They make tolerable progress,” he commented, but “They cannot bear confinement customary to Scholars in Civilized lands.” Indian children were unused to a scheduled school day and at the noon break wandered off into the surrounding fields and forest. Ely realized that lacking a bell or horn he had

no way to recall his pupils. When some of them returned in late afternoon, he informed them as best he could that they would resume the next day.²⁰

The magnitude of a silent landscape broken only by an occasional disturbance impressed Ely, and he referred to it several times in his early diaries. Except for Indians and a handful of company clerks Ely was left alone, and homesickness set in. He thought of his parents, his relatives, and his friends back in the states. “No one to mingle his voice with prayer & praise to the God of our Mercies,” he reminisced, “Sad retrospect — & lonely life to one, who for the first time breaks away from friends & privilage[s] — to stand alone in the wilderness.” And then, bracing himself to the life which he had chosen, he determined, “Yet, although my sympathies dwell on this subject I will not wish myself back. No, God has sent me here to ‘cast up an Highway’ for them.”²¹

Once adjusted to the isolation, Ely settled in to his life at Sandy Lake. Traders passed through the post,

¹⁸ Ely to Greene, September 25, 1833.

¹⁹ Ely, Journal, September 21, 1833.

²⁰ Ely, Journal, September 24, 1833; see also February 14, 22, 27, 1834, and many other places in the journals.

²¹ Here and below, see Ely, Journal, September 27, 30, 1833. The phenomenon of silence is a condition frequently referred to by travelers and occupants of the western frontier.

and one of them, Ambrose Davenport, decided to winter there with his family. The missionary would at least have the company of his own race during the long snow months. Ely divided his time teaching adults — both white and mixed-blood — and the children, some of whom were white and had been left in his care while their parents traveled about as their business demanded. He completed a set of alphabet blocks with which he taught spelling and arithmetic. For inspiration he read the Bible and various religious tracts that he had brought with him. He continued his language study and progressed in the taxonomy of the Indian tongue. While working on the declension of nouns he noted both the beauty and complexity of the language. "The word 'O-si-ma' — (Father) has twelve forms of declension — sing[ular] & plu[ral] to ea[ch] & is very beautiful. The most complicated use of the word is expressed with great brevity & exactness."

Indian customs, particularly their medical practices, held a morbid fascination for the missionary, and he described in great detail and with some disgust the cure applied by a medicine man to a woman who was afflicted with a facial ailment. Ely could only identify the malady as "Tic Douloureux." On another day Ely was summoned to relieve the pain in the infected cheek of an Indian boy. A simple poultice was all that the missionary could offer — and that applied only after the Indians promised to stop their drumming. Ely concluded, "A little Knowledge of medicine [would be] very desirable in this region — great suffering might be relieved."²²

One morning a Mr. Abbott, trader from the Hudson's Bay Company, his family, and a small entourage arrived with the intention of wintering at the abandoned company fort on Sandy Lake. Aitken informed Ely that problems would arise should Abbott's children be allowed to enroll in the mission school and suggested that he refuse to admit them. Ely agreed, noting that "the mission was under the dictation of the Am[erican] Fur Co. etc — the feelings of the Board, etc. etc., we dropped the subject." The diary entry is clear enough. The American Fur Company had befriended and encouraged the missionaries, and just as the company would have nothing to do with the opposition they expected the same conduct from the missionaries. When Abbott called about enrolling his children, Ely was diplomatically noncommittal. The missionary's conscience remained troubled, however, and two

weeks later Ely informed both Aitken and Abbott that admission would be allowed — providing both men agreed. The matter was concluded when Aitken "readily settled all objections." Eventually, as many as 16 people from the Abbott encampment intermittently attended the Ely school, and he in turn sometimes held classes in the old fort.²³

There were lighter times such as when the voyageurs and Indian girls held a dance in Aitken's room. Davenport played the violin for them. Although Ely did not join in, he watched with great interest. "Their feet," he observed with some apprehension, "are happily well inured to hardships — or Else, one would suppose, from the Modus operandi, that they would raise some blisters — not to mention the consequences to the floor on which they Jump."²⁴

On November 13, Ely was wakened a little before five o'clock by one of the men at the post. The stars were falling like hail, he informed the missionary. It was a massive meteorological shower, a phenomenon observed and later reported over much of central North America. At Sandy Lake, however, it was regarded with great anxiety as an omen of frightening consequences. A red Aurora Borealis of some years back had been followed by an outbreak of measles, and the Indians feared that the falling "stars" were a portent of an even greater calamity. The sky must have been spectacular. Ely reported that six to seven thousand "stars," each with its gaseous tail, streaked across the heavens within a half hour's time. The missionary tried to explain the phenomenon to the post residents but with little success. The occurrence, he thought, affected him physically, and two days later he recorded not only a drastic change in outside temperature but also an uneasy nervous sensation in his body. Several weeks later a letter from Ayer contained his account of the shower which he had witnessed from a vantage point on the Mississippi River while away from his station at Yellow Lake. In addition to the brilliant "falling stars," Ayer observed that directly overhead there appeared a luminous cross formed by the stars. This was not a figment of his imagination, he noted, but was also observed at Fort Snelling.²⁵ Ely did not ponder the obvious question: why had he not seen the cross?

In early December the men of the post butchered hogs. Twice they asked Ely if they might have the blood, and he approved their request. To satisfy his curiosity, he inquired why they needed to ask and was told that Aitken had never allowed it. The men then processed the blood into sausage. "Black sausages," Ely called them, "composed of blood and lard, seasoned," and cooked. When he confronted one of the voyageurs eating some of the mixture, Ely asked, "How dare you Eat blood?" to which the man replied, "They Eat it at Montreal." Ely persisted, "But do not your priests

²² Ely, Journal, October 9, 16, 17, 1833.

²³ Ely, Journal, October 12, 21, 27, December 8, 1833, January 5, 1834. The presence of Hudson's Bay Company personnel south of the international border was illegal but not uncommon.

²⁴ Ely, Journal, November 5, 1833.

²⁵ Ely, Journal, November 13, 15, December 20, 1833.

Condemn its use?" The voyageur answered, "He eat em himself."²⁶

The ever-present Catholic religion was an irritant to Ely. He refrained from overt criticism, but in his diary he privately expressed his disapproval. "I am surrounded by Frenchmen," he wrote, "who seem to speak nothing but Cursing & blasphemy. The most Blasphemous company I ever saw, I think. They are Catholics — & believe that confession & pardon of the Priest is all that is necessary. . . . They understand scarce any English, & their superstitions shield them from all truth. It would seem they must perish." The antipathy was mutual. When one of the Catholics learned that Ely would leave for an extended visit to Leech Lake, the Frenchman remarked happily to a fur official, "Well! James, — one very good thing, — The little Minister is going away." Although interpreters were available among the traders, they were all Catholic, and Ely declined to use them knowing that whenever he contrasted Catholicism to Protestantism it would be embarrassing.²⁷

Aitken was transferred from Sandy Lake to Fond du Lac in the spring of 1834. This move called into question the advisability of Ely's remaining at his present station. The concentration of Indians at Sandy Lake would be broken up with the termination of the post, and the American Board had not approved an itinerant teacher following Indians about. Ely's availability as a mission lay helper was very much in demand. Ayer wrote the American Board that Ely's services could be utilized at Yellow Lake; Aitken requested that Ely be transferred to Fond du Lac; and Greene inquired of Boutwell if Ely should not join him at Leech Lake.²⁸

A Chronology of Ely's Missionary Stations

Sandy Lake	1833-1834
Fond du Lac	1834-1839
Pokegama	1839-1846*
La Pointe	1846-1849

*Includes 13-month period away from the station after the warfare in 1842

IT WAS TIME also for Ely to make some decisions regarding his future. Would it be prudent, he wrote Greene, to return to the states for additional training and eventual ordination? The board had held out this possibility when he first began. But, he continued, if this were to happen he would not be able to leave before 1836 and could not complete his training before 1840. Weighing the alternatives, the missionary freely admitted his theological deficiencies, but stated his



THE AMERICAN FUR Company post at Fond du Lac, as it appeared in 1826

firm belief that teachers, at least for the present, were more useful than preachers. "I have concluded to throw myself upon the advice of the board," he wrote.²⁹

As superintendent of the Lake Superior missions, Hall favored Ely's transfer to Fond du Lac not because he wanted to accede to Aitken's request but because he knew that the site was strategically located at the crossroads of travel, and he also warned that "If the place is not occupied by the Board, it will be . . . no uninviting field for Roman Catholics, should they commence operations up the Lake." The secretary concurred with Hall and advised him to help Ely make the Fond du Lac station "as efficient and useful as you can." The final decision, however, to remain in the

²⁶ Ely, Journal, December 3, 1833.

²⁷ Ely, Journal, January 18, February 14, 1834; see also December 20, 1833.

²⁸ Ayer to Greene, December 1, 1833; Boutwell to Greene, December 18, 1833; Greene to Ely, December 24, 1833; Greene to Schoolcraft, December 25, 1833; Greene to Boutwell, June 17, 1833.

²⁹ Here and below, see Ely to Secretaries of ABCFM, August 30, 1834; Hall to Greene, October 17, 1834; Greene to Hall, January 19, 1835.



field or return for additional training still remained with Ely.

To Ely, Greene wrote that the ABCFM would abide by whatever decision the missionary came to — providing his fellow missionaries concurred. "Still we supposed," Greene continued, "that a person of good common sense, of active, persevering habits, of a self-improving turn, with ingenuity & readiness to communicate knowledge & a good scriptural & experimental acquaintance with the Bible, & the human heart, may if he possess the piety of a missionary, be about as useful among such Indians, as the Ojibwas without a public theological education as with it. The Com.[mittee] have therefore, no desire that you should return to complete your theological education, unless it is your wish."³⁰ Ely decided to remain in the field.

Ely's move to Fond du Lac brought him into direct competition with the Catholics. Pierre Cotté, the trader who lived there, had been actively teaching

Catholicism to the Indians since 1818. Once Ely arrived, the two men lost no time testing and trying each other in their respective theologies. Although they held joint Christian services, the order and content of worship was frequently debated as each man attempted to demonstrate the superiority of his own faith.³¹

By the middle of September, 1835, a more amiable relationship had been established between the two men. A co-operative school venture was undertaken. Cotté would construct the schoolhouse and supply the wood; Ely would conduct the lessons. The difference between the religions, however, was not forgotten, and the two men continued their friendly sparring. When Cotté asked Ely if he believed that Christmas was a sacred occasion, Ely reminded the Catholic that there was neither precept nor example for it in the Scripture but that the occasion was based on respect for Christ. The Protestant declared, however, that he intended to dismiss school in recognition of the coming holiday.³²

At one point Cotté requested Ely to refrain from praying during their meetings and following a Bible reading. The Catholic protested that although Ely's prayers were very good, still he "did not *make the cross* — did not love it," and the Indians would not remain when he prayed. The missionary had previously observed that twice before the Indians left the room during prayer, but he did not know why. "They did not wish to learn any other prayers," he concluded. After the meeting that evening Ely declined to pray and instead "left them to make Catholic prayers."

Ely was inwardly pleased when in February Aitken informed him that Cotté's contract with the fur company would expire in the spring, and Aitken anticipated that Cotté might become an independent trader. "If this arrangement takes place," Ely speculated in quite an elated fashion, "it may have a very important bearing on the Prospects of our Mission here. The *Pillar of Catholicism* will be removed." And he added hopefully, "Let me see and acknowledge the Hand of God in it, if it takes place — if not — let me not be discouraged." Cotté did not leave, and Ely wrote dejectedly, "I am driven in distress, to my God. What will He do with such feeble and vile means — is indeed a mystery. 'The Wicked (Catholics) are Spreading themselves like a green Bay tree.'"³³

Cotté was not the only Catholic thorn in Ely's side. Father Frederick Baraga arrived to minister to the spiritual needs of the Indians in the Lake Superior area. Dispatched by Bishop John B. Purcell of Cincinnati, Baraga, after working for a time in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, settled at La Pointe in July, 1835, where he intended to establish a mission. In early September, Baraga visited Fond du Lac and was pleasantly surprised and pleased with the work of

³⁰ Greene to Ely, February 19, 1835.

³¹ Anna Mary Kennan, "Pierre Cotté," in *Acta et Dicta*, 6:86-96 (October, 1933); Ely, Journal, June 8, 1835.

³² Here and below, see Ely, Journal, September 27, October 15, 1834; Kennan, in *Acta et Dicta*, 6:90.

³³ Here and below, see Ely, Journal, February 15, 26, 1835; Kennan, in *Acta et Dicta*, 6:91.

Pierre Cotté. Baraga set about his missionary labors, but Ely barely acknowledged his presence.³⁴

The continued development of Ely's school at Fond du Lac was affected not only by his conflicts with the Catholics but also by deteriorating conditions at La Pointe. Both Reverend and Mrs. Hall had been ill for some time. Hall worried constantly about his wife, whose health was especially poor and demanded a great deal of care; by the late fall and early winter of 1836 he considered resignation from the services of the board. La Pointe had long been the center of missionary operations in the western Lake Superior area, and it seemed only expedient to replace Hall with another missionary, probably Ayer. Surely the board could find a replacement for Ayer at Yellow Lake, and in the interim teacher John L. Seymour, Ayer's helper there, could take over.³⁵

While the decision regarding the future of the La Pointe mission was pending, Ely was a frequent visitor to the island station. Obviously, he was concerned about the Halls and interested in a resolution to the matter of replacement, but his trips to La Pointe take on a new meaning with the diary entry of August 30, 1835. "This P.M. I was married to Miss Catharine

Bissell, of the Mackinac Mission Ceremonies in Church — by Br. Boutwell."³⁶

When the decision was made regarding the La Pointe mission it partly involved Ely's new bride. In view of the Halls' inability to keep up the work of the station, Hall, Boutwell, Ayer, and Ely agreed to discontinue the plans for Fond du Lac in favor of Ely's transfer to La Pointe. He would serve as a lay assistant to Hall, who agreed to remain, while Catharine would "sustain the office of interpreter for the station." There was an additional reason for adding staff to La Pointe. "A Roman Catholic priest [Baraga?] is now stationed at this place [La Pointe], to counteract whose influence it is necessary to prosecute our work with as much vigor as possible. He operates also at Fond du Lac, who, together with the trader [Cotté] stationed at that place. . . . will be likely to counteract much of the influence Mr. E[ly] could exert there, unless sustained by more labourers. Neither place ought to be without an interpreter, if both are sustained, and we have only one for both places."³⁷

The letter with the decision concerning the two missions was hardly on its way east when unexpected reinforcements arrived at La Pointe from Mackinac. Joseph Town and his wife, Grenville T. Sproat, and Susan Bennett (a close friend of Catharine) made it possible for Ely and his wife to return to Fond du Lac.³⁸

CATHARINE GOULAIS ELY, about 1865



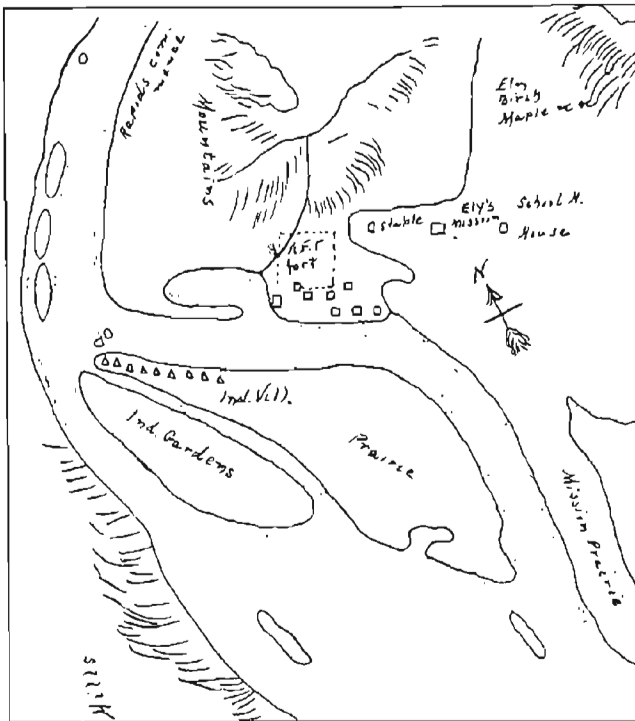
³⁴ Sr. Mary Aquinas Norton, *Catholic Missionaries in the Northwest, 1818-1864*, 46-56 (Washington, D.C., 1930); P. Chrysostomus Verwyst, *Life and Labors of Rt. Rev. Frederic Baraga*, 102, 173-179 (Milwaukee, 1900); Frederick Baraga to Leopoldine Foundation, August 9, September 28, 1835, and June 17, 1836, Baraga Papers, NMHC.

³⁵ Ayer, Warren, and Ely to Greene, March 24, 1835. It is interesting that the American Fur Company trader at Madeline Island, Lyman M. Warren, acted as a full participant in these discussions and decisions, clearly indicating the close relationship that existed between the board and the fur company. This letter is really two letters under one date but with two sets of signatures. The first letter regarding the removal of Hall is signed by Ayer, Warren, and Ely; the second letter regarding the replacement of Hall by Ayer is signed by only Warren and Ely. Undoubtedly, Ayer did not want to be part of a decision that would make him a superintendent.

³⁶ Ely, in later life, insisted that his wife's maiden name was Goulais. She was of mixed blood, and one name may have been her father's and the other her mother's. In a letter to Greene, August 26, 1841, Ely refers to "Jos. Goulai[s]" as the son of Mrs. Ely's father.

³⁷ Hall, Boutwell, Ayer, and Ely to Greene, September 12, 1835. Ely noted later in a letter to Greene, December 31, 1835, that his wife's command of the Ojibway language was "rather limited." On Baraga at La Pointe, see Verwyst, *Baraga*, 177.

³⁸ Hall to Greene, September 24, 1835 (the second part of this letter is dated October 12, 1835); Ely, Journal, October 11, 1835. Research failed to uncover the name of Town's



ELY sent this sketch of Fond du Lac to ABCFM secretary David Greene in January, 1837.

BACK AT FOND DU LAC, Ely found the once cordial and friendly relations with the Indians changed. The first challenge came when the missionary attempted to negotiate with the Indians for a site upon which to construct a permanent dwelling. The Indians charged that the land where Ely had been living was stolen by Cotté; Ely might remain for the present, they granted, but they would inform him at a later date for how long. Another Indian voiced what was perhaps the real concern of the group. "We wonder," he began, "much to what end you came here & why you are so anxious to stay. . . . We have been told that the Americans wish to do with us as they have done to other Indian Nations — They first get possession of a little land, then claim much & finally drive the Indians away entirely.

wife; the usual listings in ABCFM reports said merely, "and wife."

³⁹ Ely to Greene, January 9, 1837; ABCFM, *Annual Report*, 137 (1838); Ely, *Journal*, entries from February to May, 1836, include the land and building controversy. Ely's concept of land ownership was not the Ojibway view of communal property; see, for example, Edmund J. Danziger, Jr., *The Chippewas of Lake Superior*, 11 (Norman, Okla., 1978); Timothy C. Roush and Larry P. Aitken, eds., *Information Relating to Chippewa Peoples from the Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico*, 145 (Duluth, 1984).

⁴⁰ Ely, *Journal*, May 29, 1836; Ely biographical sketch, 4, NMHC.

⁴¹ Ely to Greene, January 5, 1838; Boutwell to Greene, July 23, 1838; Hall to Greene, October [24], 1838.

We believe you to be a *forerunner* of the Americans. We do not hate you — we hate those who sent you here." Undaunted, Ely continued the discussions. The building site problem was resolved only when Nindipens, the Indian who owned the land, agreed to let Ely occupy it and the adjoining fields for four years — and this only after the missionary presented Nindipens with a barrel of flour. Explaining all this to the American Board, Ely wrote, "It is very hard to convince them that every American is not fully aware of and accessory to all the policy, secret and avowed, of his government."³⁹

Until 1839 Ely spent the years at Fond du Lac a dedicated teacher and servant of the American Board. Delia Cook, who had been assigned to La Pointe as a lay helper, joined Ely in 1836. Catholics and Protestants tolerated each other in an atmosphere of strained but polite cordiality. Ely translated elementary schoolbooks into Ojibway, traveled occasionally to La Pointe and Pokegama (Ayer's new station on the Snake River), and kept school as best he could in view of the Indians' sojourns to the maple sugar grounds and fishing locations at the mouth of the St. Louis River. The number of scholars usually ranged from six to 18 with an average of 12. And the population of Fond du Lac was increased by one on Sunday, May 29, 1836. At about midday "Catharine was delivered of a *Daughter* both mother & daughter are doing well," the father reported. This was daughter Mary; between 1836 and 1863 the Elys had 13 children. Two were born at Fond du Lac, two at Pokegama, four at La Pointe, and the others after Ely left the services of the American Board.⁴⁰

Beginning with 1838 Ely's relations with the Indians at Fond du Lac once more took a tenuous turn. Incidents of petty thievery from his garden, a continuation of the suspicion that the missionaries were agents of the American government, and the fluctuation in school attendance caused by Indian migrations to the hunting grounds all produced a growing tension. The conditions were not unique to Fond du Lac. Boutwell wrote Greene that the situation had changed so much at Leech Lake that the whole mission community of western Lake Superior agreed that it was time to assess its positions. Leech Lake should be abandoned, Boutwell recommended, and he would join the mission at Pokegama, Ayer's new station on the Snake River. Despite Ely's discouraging reports on Fond du Lac, Boutwell hoped that the mission there could be maintained, at least for the present. Two months later Hall reported that Ely and Ayer (the latter now temporarily at Fond du Lac) felt "much disheartened," but had now resolved to remain at their present locations unless there were new indications of hostility from the Indians.⁴¹

In October, 1838, Ely and Ayer composed their own letter to Greene outlining their dissatisfaction and reasons for change. They described in some detail the hostile attitude and indifference of the Indians to their teaching, the general apathy of the school children, the prejudices against the Americans, the practices of the American Fur Company which drew the most industrious and enterprising Indians away from the mission, and the growing difficulty with which the Indians acquired food at Fond du Lac. Their transfer to reinforce Boutwell at Leech Lake was inadvisable, they thought, and the removal to Pokegama questionable. They would be grateful for some guidance from the board.⁴²

In a separate letter two months later Ely reiterated both his and Ayer's sentiments, but at the same time reopened the possibility of their removal to Pokegama. Dr. Borup, Ely explained, had offered to take the mission school at Fond du Lac for a year. To give up his school bothered Ely, and for a brief moment he weighed the possibility of remaining independently at Fond du Lac but quickly ruled out this alternative.

The geographical distance between missionaries in the field and the American Board in Boston made the decision process a lengthy one. The board, always ready to provide advice on policy and placement, took the position that decisions regarding missionary assignment to stations was a matter that should begin with the personnel involved. Their recommendations were then forwarded to the board for consideration and final approval. But mail between the two parties usually traveled by way of La Pointe, Sault Ste. Marie, Mackinac, and eastward by the Great Lakes to Buffalo, through the Erie Canal to Albany, down the Hudson to New York, and then by rail or packet to Boston. Sometimes it was quicker to send correspondence by way of the Mississippi and Fort Snelling and on out to New Orleans, but the northern route was the more heavily used.

Greene received three letters on the subject of transfer on February 12, 1837. The Prudential Committee met the same day, and its decision was ready for the first express west in the spring. "Both of you, with your families," the committee ordered, "should remove to Pokegama [*sic*]. . . . Indeed we hope that, if this letter should fail to reach you by the express, that you will have made the arrangement so as to take advantage of the coming spring & summer to plant and raise a crop, & to aid the Indians in doing the same."⁴³ It was not until 1839, however, that both missionaries were established at Pokegama.

THE YEARS of Ely's missionary residence at Pokegama were anything but tranquil. The most disturbing element was the intermittent and devastating war

carried on between the Ojibway and the Dakota, or Sioux, to the south. This open warfare had been going on since prewhite days when the Ojibway, pushed west by other Indian tribes, invaded the Dakota-held area of Lake Superior from the east. The Dakota had retreated south to settle finally along the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers from the Wisconsin to the North Dakota borders. But the Dakota ranged far north of their home settlements not only to hunt but also to wage revengeful war.⁴⁴

Ely had witnessed this Indian conflict when he began his first school at Sandy Lake, but the infrequent incidents there did not interrupt the work of the mission.⁴⁵ Even the Fond du Lac station had been relatively safe from Dakota incursions. The Pokegama mission, however, was another matter. Located much farther south than either Sandy Lake or Fond du Lac, this area on the shores of Lake Pokegama (just west of present-day Pine City) occupied by the Ojibway was also on the northern fringe of Dakota hunting lands and well within striking distance of war parties.

Ely's first encounter with the Dakota came a short time after his arrival at Pokegama. A party of Ojibway, returning from Fort Snelling, suffered 21 casualties in an encounter with the Dakota at Lake St. Croix. A short time later, while on a trip to the St. Peter's area during the winter of 1840, Ely discussed the running conflict with Little Crow (father of the Little Crow who led the Dakota uprising in 1862). He informed Ely that as long as the Ojibway stayed north of a line running from a point on the Rum River west to the St. Croix there would be no warfare. Little Crow had just received a communication from the Ojibway asking for an extended truce, but his people were wary. The Dakota leader did not believe that the Ojibway were sincere, especially since they had just suffered a great loss of life. However, Little Crow was reluctant, he assured Ely, to venture north of the line to pursue the war.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, on May 24, 1841, the combat was renewed ferociously at Pokegama, and Ely was an eyewitness. "While I write, the noise of *battle* rages without," he recorded. "Our settlement is attacked by

⁴² Here and below, see Ayer and Ely to Greene, October 31, 1838; Ely to Greene, December 18, 1838.

⁴³ Greene to Ayer and Ely, February 14, 1839.

⁴⁴ See, for example, William W. Warren, *History of the Ojibway People*, 249, 250 (St. Paul, 1984).

⁴⁵ Ely, Journal, October 23, 1833. The reference here to an Ojibway shot by a Dakota while on a hunt is one of the few cases of warfare mentioned by Ely.

⁴⁶ Ely, Journal, July 11, 1839, March 4-6, 1840. Little Crow undoubtedly had in mind the line established by the treaty of 1825. Pokegama is considerably to the north of this line.



a large party of Sioux — Nearly two hours since — the terrible scene commenced." The Ojibway, men and women both young and old, and children old enough to defend themselves, tried to hold off the attacking Dakota who decapitated and scalped their victims. Ely tried to serve as physician and later as mortician restoring severed heads and limbs from bodies of the dead. At last the Dakota gave up the attack, but not before scores of Indians on both sides were killed or wounded. Ely kept as souvenirs a Dakota headdress and the tomahawk that he had removed from the skull of one of the dead Indian girls. These artifacts were later forwarded to David Greene in Boston.⁴⁷

The following year war flared up again, and Ely and Ayer decided to leave the Pokegama mission temporarily. Only Boutwell elected to stay. Joining a large group of refugee Ojibway, the two missionaries made their way north to Little Portage at the head of Lake Superior, where Ely built a cedar bark shelter for

⁴⁷ Ely, Journal, May 24, 1841; Ely to Greene, August 26, 1841. Another account of the warfare is in ABCFM, *The Missionary Herald*, 37:501 (Boston, 1842).

⁴⁸ Ely to Greene, June 20, 1842. The Little Portage mentioned in this letter is located at the present site of the Duluth aerial lift bridge. See also Hall to Greene, May 16, 1842; January 23, 1843; Ely and Hall to Greene, August 20, 1842; Boutwell to Greene, September 15, 1842; Greene to Ely, November 26, 1842; January 18, 1844; Ely to Greene, September 21, 1843.

⁴⁹ Here and below, see Ayer to Greene, September 20, 1841; see also Delia Cook to Ely, August 5, September 24, 1840; Cook to Br. and Sis. Ely, September 26, 1841, Ely Papers, NMHC.

his family. Catharine was pregnant again — her fourth child — and it was decided to take her to La Pointe. Charles Milton Ely was born there on August 12, 1842. Leaving his wife and newborn at the La Pointe mission, Ely returned to his Indian charges and spent the next 13 months traveling with them to such places as Red Lake, Pokegama, and Mille Lacs, attending to their spiritual and secular needs. It was not until September, 1843, that he and his family could return to Pokegama.⁴⁸

In addition to the devastating Indian war, illness and death hovered like a constant specter over the mission families. Ely suffered periodically from various illnesses, but as the years passed he seemed to have grown no worse. He doctored himself and members of his family applying remedies made from pharmaceutical supplies acquired from the East. Like her husband, Catharine accepted her afflictions with a sense of resignation. The children suffered the worst, mainly from repeated attacks of diarrhea or dysentery, a dreadful attack of which struck Ely's daughter, Delia, at the age of three, and she died within a week. Boutwell's youngest child of 20 months died after ten days of agonizing intestinal pain.⁴⁹

It was not uncommon for missionaries to send their children out to "civilization," thus hoping to avoid the ravages of disease. Hall's daughter, Harriet, for example, was sent to New England to live with relatives. Ely entrusted his first born, Mary, to Delia Cook, who

WILLIAM T.
BOUTWELL, as he
looked in 1879



after 13 years had resigned in 1838 from the services of the board for reasons of health and moved to St. Louis. Unfortunately the refinement of St. Louis failed to shield the child; she contracted a childhood disease and died in 1840 at the age of four. No more Ely children were sent out.

White civilization, however, rapidly overtook the missionary frontier. The treaties of 1837 and 1842 brought changes of far-reaching significance to the Ojibway. By the former agreement the Indians ceded their land in Minnesota between the Mississippi and the St. Croix rivers and north of the old treaty line of 1825 up to a boundary running east and west above Mille Lacs Lake. Essentially, the treaty was designed to open up the watershed of the St. Croix to waiting lumbermen. Henry Dodge, governor of Wisconsin, feared that bloodshed would result if the government did not provide a legal base from which the invaders could begin their operations. Subject to removal only by the president, the Ojibway agreed to remain on the land, and they retained hunting, fishing, and ricing rights.⁵⁰

Even as the timber resources opened up by the 1837 treaty were cut, reports of copper deposits along the south shore of Lake Superior attracted a large body of miners. The land that they coveted lay between the northern boundary of the 1837 treaty and the south shore of Lake Superior. There was no alternative but to negotiate a second treaty, and on October 4, 1842, Robert Stuart, superintendent of Indian Affairs at Detroit, met with the Ojibway at La Pointe to conclude the agreement. Again, as in the treaty of 1837, the Indians were not removed and received promises of annual annuities of cash, goods, and provisions.

Both treaties had a pronounced impact upon missionary work. Ayer reported from Pokegama that the St. Croix Lumber Company would "purchase at a very fair price all the surplus produce of the settled Indians." This, he wrote enthusiastically, "seems quite an incitement [*sic*] to them to enlarge their fields."⁵¹ Despite the missionaries' encouragement, however, the Indians failed to develop as agricultural entrepreneurs.

The 1842 treaty contained two provisions of special interest. The first allotted \$2,000 annually for schools, and the second provided for a yearly grant of \$5,000 for livestock and agricultural equipment. Both amounts were princely sums compared with the allocations of the American Board, and the missionaries eagerly looked forward to the improved facilities.⁵²

Would the treaties end the Ojibway-Dakota warfare? Sherman Hall anticipated the answer with prophetic insight. Neither treaty, but particularly not that of 1842, he wrote Greene, would change the relationship between the tribes and thus bring peace to Pokegama. Will the missions be reimbursed for prop-

erty destroyed? Hall continued speculatively. Very likely not, he thought, but "Mr. Ely will probably get something for an animal [a bull] which the Indians at Fond du Lac killed a few years ago." But Ely received nothing.⁵³

Following the signing of the treaties, white lumbermen and miners, accompanied by the usual retinue of frontier entrepreneurs, swarmed to the valley of the St. Croix and the south shore of Lake Superior bringing with them that scourge of the missionaries — whiskey. The missionaries continually battled the influence of alcohol. Boutwell, for example, wrote to Hall that "the country is inundated with whiskey. Unless our Govt. revise the statute on the subject & make it criminal to traff[ic] in whiskey with the Inds. the Chips. will soon be as degraded as the Winebagoes [*sic*]."⁵⁴

Boutwell's discontent with conditions at Pokegama grew daily. His agitation was displayed in a quarrel with Ely. The dispute arose over the old question of whether first to Christianize or civilize the Indians. Ely charged that Boutwell spent too much time in secular activities — farming — and that the material accomplishments of the mission and not Christianization of the Indians were rapidly becoming Boutwell's first priority. In an exchange of letters with Greene, both men defended their positions.⁵⁵

In his letters Boutwell also suggested a transfer for

⁵⁰ Here and below, see Danziger, *Chippewas of Lake Superior*, [xvi-ixx], 87. On the treaties, see Charles J. Kappler, *Laws and Treaties*, 2:251, 482, 542 (Washington, D.C., 1904).

⁵¹ Ayer to Greene, April 4, 1841. The aim of converting Indians from hunting to agriculture went back to Thomas Jefferson; see, for example, Francis Paul Prucha, *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians*, 139, 142-144 (Lincoln, 1984).

⁵² ABCFM, *Annual Report*, 177 (1843), stated that the treaty boundary extended west as far as the headwaters of the Mississippi River, but in fact the western boundary ended at the western tip of Lake Superior; Danziger, *Chippewas of Lake Superior*, 87; Frederick Baraga wrote Monseigneur P. P. Lefevre in Detroit, October 5, 1842, that "A great treaty has now been made here at Lapointe [*sic*]; it has just been concluded; yesterday our Chiefs signed it. I beg you, Monseigneur, to present before the Secretary of War at Washington that it would not be just to give *all* to the Protestants and *nothing* to the Catholics, since it is certain that the Indians and the Catholic Half-breeds on the lands sold in this treaty are more numerous than the Protestants"; Baraga Papers.

⁵³ Hall to Greene, May 4, 1843.

⁵⁴ Boutwell to Hall, March 13, 1844.

⁵⁵ Here and below, see Ely to Hall, June 9, 1844; Greene to Ely, July 20, 1844; Greene to Boutwell, January 7, 1846; Ely to Greene, November 23, 1845; Hall to Greene, March 18, 1846. Boutwell's resignation from the American Board was accepted July 3, 1846; see Greene statement of this date; Boutwell to Greene, May 10, 1846; Greene to Boutwell, July 2, 1846.

himself. Pokegama, he thought, had been a difficult station from the beginning. Its proximity to the Dakota, the missionary explained, was only part of the difficulty. The advance of white settlement with all its attendant problems, the failure of the government to establish an agricultural station there, the indifference of the Indians to the work of the missionaries, plus the increasing evil influence of alcohol, all made the work extremely frustrating. Greene replied suggesting that Boutwell's removal was a decision best made by all members of the mission community. But Boutwell had made up his mind. Rather than wait for a joint meeting of the mission personnel, he informed Hall that he would leave Pokegama in the spring of 1846.

Boutwell's decision meant that Hall, Greene, and Ely must also make a decision with regard to Ely's future. All agreed he should not remain alone at Pokegama. "It is the wish of the missionaries here [La Pointe], that there may be some other place found for him [Ely] in this field if he leave P.[okegama]. We do not wish him to leave the service of the Board, or rather to lose his influence in the country," Hall advised Greene. In the spring of 1846, Hall and Boutwell, after a heartrending and emotional meeting, made the decision to close Pokegama. Ely was not present. He was on his way to New England to enjoy his first brief respite from missionary life.⁵⁶

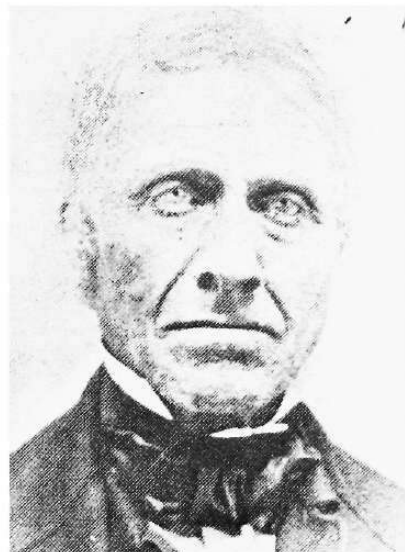
AN UNEXPECTED TURN of events returned Ely to La Pointe at the end of his eastern furlough. Grenville T. Sproat had joined the mission at La Pointe in 1836. All went well until 1844 when Hall began to suspect something was wrong regarding Sproat's moral conduct. By March, 1846, gossip had turned into substantial evidence, and Hall was forced to investigate. The result confirmed that Sproat was a homosexual and he was dismissed from the services of the board. Hall diplomatically described the problem to Greene by quoting from Paul's letters to the Corinthians: "And likewise also the men leaving the natural use of the woman, burned their lust one toward another; men with men, working that which is unseemly." The vacancy thus created at La Pointe left a need for an experienced teacher. Greene wrote Ely, still vacationing in Springfield, Massachusetts, to ask if he would take Sproat's place, and Ely agreed.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Hall to Greene, March 18, 1846; Hall and Boutwell to Greene, May 2, 1846.

⁵⁷ Hall to Greene, May 2, 15, June 10, 1846; Sproat to Greene, May 17, 1846; Greene to Sproat and to Hall, both July 2, 1846; Hall to Ely, April 30, 1846; Greene to Ely, June 4, July 3, 1846.

⁵⁸ Ely to Greene, April 1, 1847; Hall to Treat, October 9, 1848. On Skolla, see Grace L. Nute, ed., "Father Skolla's Report on His Indian Mission," in *Acta et Dicta*, 7:262 (St. Paul, 1936).

SHERMAN
HALL, Ely's
colleague at
La Pointe



The years at La Pointe were probably the most tranquil that Ely spent as a missionary. The station was removed from the Ojibway-Dakota conflict, and it was well staffed; alcohol was not the serious problem that it had become elsewhere; and Ely shared the school duties with another teacher, Abigail Spooner. Even when Father Otto Skolla's newly established Catholic school presented some competition, the Protestants did not feel particularly threatened. The Ely family occupied half of Hall's house, although as Hall described it, "our apartments are entirely separate, and families distinct." Ely's responsibilities included teaching school, preparing books, supplying wood for the mission, and providing the means of subsistence for his family. "This arrangement is . . . the most satisfactory among ourselves of any which we could adopt," Hall reported to Selah B. Treat, Greene's successor as secretary of the American Board.⁵⁸

In view of these improved conditions, Ely's letter on January 9, 1849, to Treat is surprising. "I have for some time past," he began, "been intending (at a suitable time) to request a dismission from the service of the Board, for reasons affecting my own personal good [*in the margin he added: 'i.e., the effect of the employment of Teaching upon mind and body'*], & that of my family, and it has occurred to me that perhaps it may be found as convenient to the Board, in the present year as at any other period." Miss Spooner had resigned, and the board was actively trying to replace her. Ely thought that one replacement (male, he hoped) would fill both vacancies. If the new person could arrive by May, Ely explained, he would return as an independent farmer to Pokegama where he thought he might "be useful to the six Native Church Members, who are left there as Sheep without a shepherd."

Hall supported Ely's request for dismissal. Moreover, Hall added in a letter to Treat, the board ought to supply the departing missionary with "such supplies, as are necessary to meet the wants of his family." Also, Ely should be permitted to take some time off "during the sugaring season . . . for making arrangements for his future settlement."⁵⁹

Before Hall's letter arrived in Boston, Treat dispatched a reply to Ely. "I cannot accede to your wishes in regard to a successor," he wrote. The rules of the American Board required that decisions of this kind must be approved by the whole mission, Treat explained. By early April, however, Treat had Hall's letter in hand, and the secretary forwarded to Ely the decision of the board. It was undoubtedly disappointing to the missionary. "[W]e wish you to reconsider the question of leaving the position which you now occupy," the Prudential Committee pleaded, "& see if you cannot in some way continue your labors." But Ely had already departed for Pokegama on the leave of absence recommended by Hall.

Ely's return to Pokegama was for the purpose of planting a crop for later harvest when his family would accompany him to their "new" home. He left La Pointe on March 1, 1849, fully intending to have his work completed and return by May 1, but the date came and passed without the missionary. When he finally returned it was almost mid-August. He had been detained at Pokegama, he explained, making arrangements for his family and putting in a crop. One thing led to another, and by that time the crop was ready for harvest. "There were added," he concluded with fatherly pride in a letter to Treat, "to my family during my absence (June 22d) a fine pair of Twin Daughters, making our number of children, six." Upon his arrival home the full mission gathered to enact Ely's severance from the American Board.⁶⁰

His resignation from the American Board was accompanied by other changes. Some of the missionaries with whom he had spent the last decade and a half had also made the decision to resign. Delia Cook and Boutwell had already departed; ill health had forced Ayer to terminate his services; and the Halls would remain only a few more years before they, too, asked to be released. There is little evidence upon which to speculate the motivation for Ely's resignation. His health was certainly no worse than it had ever been, he had no quarrel with the American Board or his fellow missionaries, and the conditions surrounding his last appointment at La Pointe were the best he had enjoyed during his tenure. Although he wrote several letters to his brother and to a friend inquiring about mining land speculation he did not follow up on this enterprise.⁶¹

ELY LIVED at Pokegama until 1854 when title to Indian lands at the tip of Lake Superior and along the north shore was extinguished by treaty. In that year he moved briefly to St. Paul but became interested in land speculation at the head of Lake Superior and acquired title to some property that eventually became part of Superior, Wisconsin. In 1855 Ely moved to Oneota, a community later incorporated into the city of Duluth. Here he was instrumental in building some docks and a sawmill, but the panic of 1857 devastated Ely's finances, and in 1862 he returned to St. Paul where he became actuary of Oakland Cemetery, a position he held until 1870. In that year he returned again to Duluth, but in 1873 the Elys moved to Santa Rosa, California. From there they moved in 1880 to Seattle, Washington Territory. Shortly thereafter, Catharine Ely suffered a paralytic stroke, and a decision was made to return to Santa Rosa. Catharine died in San Francisco while en route to southern California. Edmund Franklin Ely died in Santa Rosa on August 29, 1882, at the age of 73.⁶²

When Ely departed La Pointe for the last time he took with him \$250 (enough to purchase two cows, a stove, and clothing for his family), a few books, and some personal household items. The rewards of missionary life had been few indeed. Only a handful of Ojibway had been converted to Christianity. The Dakota-Ojibway war had produced a constant fear and uncertainty about safety. The migratory patterns of the Ojibway disrupted the continuity necessary for school training. Even when the Indians were in attendance, the pupils were unresponsive. During the last years the invasion of white lumbermen and miners had worked a debilitating influence on the native population. Despite the diligent efforts of Ely and the other missionaries, perhaps the American Board had undertaken a task beyond any realistic expectations.

⁵⁹ Here and below, see Hall to Treat, February 14, 1849; Treat to Ely, March 1, April 5, 1849.

⁶⁰ Hall to Treat, May 22, August 16, 1849; Ely to Treat, August 22, 1849. Treat was annoyed with Ely's extended absence from La Pointe and wrote Hall, saying that Ely's "conduct looks not altogether in keeping for a missionary"; Treat to Hall, July 24, 1849.

⁶¹ Albert W. Ely to Ely, February 14, May 28, 1846; Henry Blatchfords to Ely, March 18, 1846.

⁶² Biographical sketch, Ely Papers; Hall to Treat, August 16, 1849.

THE ILLUSTRATIONS on p. 267, 268, 274, and 275 are in the Ely Papers, Northeast Minnesota Historical Center, Duluth; that on p. 272 is from Thomas L. McKenney, *Sketches of a Tour to the Lakes*, 279 (Baltimore, 1827); the one on p. 279 is from the collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin; all others are in the MHS audio-visual library.



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