



The Dakotas or Sioux in Minnesota as They Were in 1834

By Rev. Samuel William Pond

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"This book is written because in a short time none can tell what the Dakotas of Minnesota were when the first white mission for them began. This fragment of the History of Minnesota may be of more value at some future time than it is now. It may be thought strange that the writer, who was so many years a missionary among the Dakotas, has said nothing about the way in which they received or rejected Christianity; but he thought it better not to mention that subject at all than to treat it superficially, and justice could not be done here without too greatly extending this work. My main object has been to show what manner of people the Dakotas were as savages, while they still retained the customs of their ancestors." Looking for an evangelistic opportunity, the Pond brothers determined that the Dakota people, living in what is now southern Minnesota, would make an appropriate mission. They arrived at St. Peters (now St. Paul, Minnesota), on May 1, 1834, with no formal training or credentials and no financial sponsorship other than their personal savings. Marpiya Wicasta (Cloud Man), chief of a village living at Lake Calhoun (present-day Minneapolis) had requested assistance with farming, and Gideon took this role, intending to learn the Dakota language. The brothers believed that the ability to speak the language accurately was essential if their message was to be received. As they learned, they devised an alphabet suitable for recording the sounds of Dakota, and they taught this to their neighbors, thus bringing them the ability to read and write in their own language. They also began to compile a Dakota dictionary, to which later missionaries also contributed. The Pond alphabet and the Dakota-English dictionary are still in use. The Ponds also taught the Dakotas subsistence agriculture. Pond writes: "They were very sensitive to ridicule, and had a great dread of appearing in a ludicrous light. It did not always please them to have white visitors, especially strangers, enter their homes, ask impertinent questions, and scan too closely their clothing, furniture, etc. They were too courteous to resent what they considered the impertinence of their ill-bred visitors, but they did not speak very flatteringly of them after they were gone, and it was unpleasant for one who knew their feelings to accompany such visitors to their tents and interpret for them. They were not very confiding, but when they became thoroughly convinced that a man was honest, they would trust him with almost anything. "The Dakotas supposed that thunder was the voice of a bird,

which used lightning as a means of destroying enemies. Many of them really thought they had seen this marvelous bird. With a prior belief in its existence, it is not strange that a terrified imagination should discover it among the dark flying clouds of a thunder storm. This bird they worshipped. "Another object of worship was Taku-Shkan-Shkan, or that which moves. Stones were the symbol of this deity, and, sometimes at least, his dwelling-place. The Indians believed that some stones possessed the power of locomotion, or were moved by some invisible, supernatural power; and intelligent men affirmed that they had seen stones which had moved some distance on level ground, leaving a track or furrow behind them. The moving of the stone and the track behind it were doubtless the work of some cunning rogue, but some men of good common sense evidently believed that some stones could move or were moved by the god of which they were the symbol."

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