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By Fred Landon

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When Rev. James Evans was sent in 1838 as a missionary to the Indians on the Canadian shores of Lakes Superior, he faced a long and perilous canoe journey, for in no other way could he reach that far-off region and its primitive people. He was then serving as a missionary of the Wesleyan Methodist Church, to the Ojibway Indians resident at Port Sarnia on the St. Clair River just below Lake Huron.

Evans was already an experienced missionary among Indian tribes, having served in that capacity at Rice Lake and Mud Lake and for one year at the Credit River, all in Upper Canada. At these stations he had displayed a remarkable talent for discovering the construction of the languages of these native peoples. He had been able to mark the position of the Red Man's vocal cords when he formed different sounds. It was from these observations that later, when he was in the Far West, he invented an alphabet of nine syllabic characters with thirty-six positions. The Western Indians were thus provided with a written language, one of the greatest contributions ever made to the advancement of Canada's Western Indian tribes.[1]

When Evans came to Sarnia in 1834, the work among the Ojibways resident there had already been under way for two years, with Rev. Thomas Turner in charge, and much progress had been made. Evans continued his study of the language at Sarnia and was soon able not only to preach in the Ojibway tongue but also to make translations of portions of Scripture, which in 1837 were printed under his direction in New York. By the middle of November of that year he was ready to return to his family, but before he arrived at Sarnia that place had become a centre of military activity. It was the year of the uprising in Upper Canada against misgovernment and the Huron County militia had been summoned to Sarnia. There, in the absence of proper quarters, they were housed in the Methodist mission house for some weeks, as Evans found on his return. (Considerable damage was done to the building for which the church later received recompense.)

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At the meeting of the Methodist Conference a few months later Evans received his marching orders. He and Rev. Thomas Hurlburt were selected to go to Lake Superior, a field as yet almost untouched by the Methodist Church. The two men were an excellent choice. Both were good linguists, had studied the grammatical construction of the language, and were thoroughly conversant with the customs, habits and beliefs of the Ojibway Indians. Evans left his wife and daughter in Upper Canada (Ontario) but Hurlburt was accompanied by his family. They journeyed together as far as the Sault but later Hurlburt went on to Fort William where he continued at work until 1842.

The party left the St. Clair River on July 13, 1838, in a large birch bark canoe which had been procured from an American official at Fort Gratiot opposite Sarnia. Their course followed the eastern shore of Lake Huron. They were four days in reaching Goderich at the mouth of the Maitland River, contending with constant wind and water, wading to the waist in making landings, and sleeping through nights of rain. They had forwarded provisions and "necessaries" by a schooner to the Saugeen Fishing Islands farther north on Lake Huron. These they would take into their canoe when they came to that point.

They left Goderich on July 18th with a fair wind but in a torrent of rain, arriving at the Saugeen on the 20th. Writing to his wife the next day Evans says: "We arrived here yesterday in a beautiful southwesterly breeze. We found all well at Saugeen. The Indians are all absent at the Munnedoolin Island. They are doing well in religion and as to their habits of industry their extensive corn and potato fields speak volumes. Their fields which I judged at three hundred acres far exceed that quantity, their corn and potatoes are well hoed and present a beautiful appearance."

The Saugeen or Bruce Peninsula, stretching north toward Manitoulin Island, had been noticed by Champlain when he visited it while with the Huron Indians in 1615. "The country is fine and pleasant," he wrote, "for the most part solitary, shaped like Brittany and similarly situated, being almost surrounded and enclosed by the Freshwater Sea." Surrenders of the land were made by the Indians from 1836 onward. As early as 1831 the resources of the Fishing Islands had become known, enormous catches of whitefish and herring being shipped to Detroit. Evans says that sometimes four hundred barrels of herring were caught at one drop of the seine.

Of his canoe Evans wrote: "She is a first class sailor and almost water tight, we seldom bale out a drop of water although we are pretty well loaded down, and she rides in a swell with great gracefulness and ease, as we proved on Friday morning. When running about seven or eight miles an hour before a good gale from the southwest she never shipped a drop of water but rode like a duck and we went through the surf into Saugeen River with a splash about us but not a drop on the gunwale."

The night of the 26th was spent on Cove Island a little way from Cape Hurd and on the 27th the party crossed the open lake to an island near Manitoulin. There they dined on trout weighing up to twelve and fourteen pounds. Pigeons were also abundant. The next day they landed and camped in Hayward's Sound. Writing from this place on August 4th, the day of departure for the Sault, Evans says that he had been visited by Chiefs from the Sault who spoke of their bands leaving that point and going about forty miles up the lake to a fine bay of excellent land and good fishing. Evans evidently had in mind the establishment of a school at this place. The party arrived at the Sault on August 22nd.

"Sault Ste. Marie is a very handsome place," he wrote. "It will surprise you when I say that the waters of the St. Clair are muddy in the clearest time when compared with these waters, they are as clear as crystal and teem with fish of the very first quality."

But the Sault was not his destination. Up the north shore was the proposed scene of his labors and by October we find Evans and Hurlburt at the present Michipicoten. One of the first jobs undertaken was to lay in a supply of fish for the approaching winter. Snow had appeared as early as mid-September. A vessel from the Sault touched in on the 20th of October bringing letters and papers. Mr. Hurlburt about this time left for Fort William and Evans was alone. He had plans for going farther west in the spring, even as far as Lake Winnipeg.

"We expect," he wrote, "as we are furnishing ourselves with snowshoes, to visit the Indians during the winter. We have missed it much in not being furnished with good dogs as they cannot be obtained here without paying a high price from six to ten dollars and twenty each, and it is hardly possible to dispense with their services in the north. Had we some of the growling puppies from civilized life we'd teach them to be silent and industrious. Our prospects on Lake Superior are not by any means discouraging but many things conspire to make our mission tedious. First, we started too late by three months, as we should have left St. Clair in April at the latest instead of in July, and we are now consequently winter bound at this place instead of

being three or four hundred miles farther on. We have had some snow, about a fortnight ago it snowed nearly all day, however it has all gone except on the mountains."

At the first of November Evans set out for a visit to the Sault accompanied by two Indian boys, his objective being the establishment of a mission station at that important point. The weather by this time was extremely cold, the shores being covered with ice as were the oars and paddles used by the party. Describing this journey he says: "We were met by a heavy gale from the southwest. Several times we attempted in vain to land, the surf beat on the shore with too much violence and we were compelled to keep the lake, with a tremendous swell increasing every moment. The wind fell an hour before sunset and we got about dark within three miles of our landing place when the wind arose again with redoubled fury and we were tossing about three hours in the dark while the white foam of the majestic waves often threatened and sometimes even ventured into our little bark. We are now under the lee of a little island safe from harm. I have over head a good cloth tent, not quite airproof to be sure, on one side in front lies our little canoe and on the other side heaps of pine tops extending some distance in front as wind breakers, between these is our camp fire before which my moccasin soles are cooking while my back chills. My present stock of provisions consists of about two pounds of rusty pork, half a pound of worse butter than you ever found at St. Clair and a half a pound of good bread with fourteen potatoes and a little bit of tea and sugar. It still blows a hurricane and looks likely to blow on."

It was a four-day journey on Lake Superior's wild waters and at zero temperatures. "You may guess what kind of a swell we had," he writes, "when we ran on Friday sixty miles between eight in the morning and ten at night before a wind which had the whole sweep of Lake Superior from Fort William to the Sault. It was grand, with our little Indian blanket sail we mounted the towering and majestic waves and skimmed like a duck over their white capt [sic] summits."

Referring again to the abundance of fish in Lake Superior he says: "We have since our arrival caught four barrels of excellent fish, principally salmon trout with some whitefish—the fish here are all superior to any I have ever seen, the trout are not infrequently an inch thick with fine white fat resembling the leaf of a hog, and if hung in the sun will almost melt away leaving nothing save the skin and bones. They fry without anything to grease the pan and leave therein an abundance of fine pure sweet oil which is even good to shorten cake without leaving any disagreeable fishy taste."

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Evans spent the winter of 1838/39 at his lonely post on the lakeshore. He discovered that the Hudson's Bay employees had found it impossible to grow potatoes or other vegetables and his conclusion was that the Indians would never become farmers—they must hunt forever. Mission work must take this into account. It would be well, therefore, that schools be established so that children would learn to read and write before they were twelve. They would have to be boarded, or they would be absent with their parents eight months out of twelve.

Of the country in general he wrote: "We have no government here and consequently—blessed be thanked—no politics. The country is the most barren waste imaginable. This winter has been particularly unfavorable. The snows have been almost incessantly falling from the 19th October so that the poor fellows on their hunting grounds have in several instances been utterly unable to provide for their families. We much fear some may have hungered to death, a misfortune by no means of rare occurrence in this country. In fact we have no great supply for ourselves for in November the boat was lost with 16 barrels of fish on the bar entering the river and all went to the bottom, a poor fellow with it, and the season was so stormy that 30 barrels more with 300 dry white fish could not be sent down the lake to this post."

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Evans returned to the East in the spring of 1839 and was assigned to a post in Upper Canada for the next year. In the spring of 1840 he again went West, this time as superintendent of Wesleyan Methodist Missions in the territories of the Hudson's Bay Company. There he remained until 1846, covering vast regions in his missionary journeys and organizing the work of his church. He died on November 23, 1846, while on a visit to England where he had made a tour addressing missionary meetings and telling of his work in the Canadian West. His ashes were brought to Canada in 1954 and now rest at Norway House on Lake Winnipeg, his headquarters in the 1840s while working in the great company's territories.

[1] James Evans was born at Kingston-upon-Hull, England, on January 18, 1801. Coming to Canada as a young man he was converted at a camp meeting and at Kingston in 1830 was received as a probationer for the Methodist ministry, being ordained two years later. He was chosen at once by the Conference for mission work to which almost the whole of his remaining years were devoted. In 1840 he became superintendent of the Wesleyan missions in the territories of the Hudson's Bay Company and labored in these far distant regions until 1846.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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