Bob Douglas as Joseph Nicollet
Interview Transcript 11/07

Bob Douglas, Professor of Geography at Gustavus Adolphus College, has performed extensive research on Joseph Nicollet’s journeys, maps, and accounts. Here, he impersonates Nicollet, bringing him to life on the banks of the Minnesota River at Traverse des Sioux in St. Peter, Minnesota.

Minnesota River at Traverse des Sioux
44 degrees north, 21 minutes 15 seconds north latitude; 93 degrees 58 minutes 0 seconds west longitude. That is the latitude and longitude location here at the Traverse des Sioux on the Minnesota River. My name is Bob Douglas. I’m out here this morning trying to portray Joseph Nicollet, French geographer and cartographer who came here in 1838 on an expedition to map the river, to map the river valley, and to map the upper Mississippi drainage basin. Maybe some of you are familiar with the name. Most people pronounce my French name Nicollet as “Nicollet” -- so it’s Nicollet mall, Nicollet Island, Nicollet Minnesota. If you want to be a purist, it’s Joseph Nicollet.

I was born in France and went to school to study math and astronomy and I was able to put those two together in terms of land surveys and mapping which is using instruments like the sextant and back compass like that little telescope to measure sun angle with reference to the horizon. This is how you determine latitude at least that’s how we did it in 1838. For longitude, Nicollet also used the North Star. On a very clear night when the North Star was directly overhead you could use that as a reference point where he was in terms of degrees north of the equator. This is how he derived this 44 degrees, 21 minutes and 15 seconds at this location.

The 1838 survey team rendezvoused in St. Louis, Missouri and assembled the crew members. One of the most notable was a young John C. Fremont who learned the trade from Joseph Nicollet. Nicollet was only in his thirties at the time -- he was not at all old. They came up river on the Mississippi River to St. Paul and down the Minnesota River (which was called the Saint Pierre River) to this point and then they headed westward on their surveying and mapping expedition.
Another instrument they had was a chronometer, which is like a clock. This clock was set in St. Louis knowing the exact longitude west of Greenwich, England and then every fifteen degrees was an hour of time. They essentially went 93 degrees 58 minutes to this point. So the chronometer was just like a clock, a very fancy clock they used to measure the longitude.

What’s really incredible about Nicollet is that he did eleven thousand of these measurements in order to make this famous map of the upper Mississippi hydrologic basin. It was the most famous map of its time. It was used as the primary map for people settling and coming up into the upper Mississippi region. So they had a good idea where the landforms were, where the rivers and streams were located, the land formations, occasionally what the elevations were, but more particularly where they were exactly in terms of latitude and longitude. So the importance of Nicollet’s map can’t be over-emphasized.

As a geographer myself, I have always been interested in how he could be so accurate. Using the little telescope, the North Star, and the compass. A few years ago I started to test out Nicollet’s measurements using GPS, Global Positioning System. I have one down here (at Traverse des Sioux) that I have set. To test Mr. Nicollet for latitude, I have 44 degrees 15 minutes and 15 seconds. This is remarkable that he is only 5-6 minutes off in terms of latitude north of the equator. For longitude he’s at 93 degrees 58 minutes, and for the GPS, I have 93 degrees 56 minutes. He’s only two minutes off. So this is remarkable and I was astounded by this and have made this a project to go around, following Nicollet’s expedition and then at specific places where he takes latitude and longitude, I try to find where he was standing, such as a place like this on the banks here of St. Pierre River in 1838 and test them out.

I’ve waded into the confluence of the Blue Earth River and the Minnesota River today and as you can see I survived. I have been at the mouth of the Cottonwood River where it comes in, I have been to Pipestone Quarry and I have been to a place called Hole in the Mountain and it’s just an exciting, fun thing to do. If you have a GPS, follow Nicollet around and test him. You could be standing in his shoes. It’s a wonderful way to get into the history of the area and the history of the river. I’m off now to do some eating.

Traverse Des Sioux – At the Crossing
Well this is Joseph Nicollet again and on this crisp morning we were commenting on the gigantic size of this cottonwood tree. My guess it’s been around during the 1838 expedition and maybe before that. We are located where we think is the crossing of the St. Pierre River, or the Minnesota River, and this is where the French name Traverse des Sioux comes from. Traverse de Sioux is the crossing of the Sioux or the Dakota and right here is where we see the old channel of the river. Right here is where they think the Dakota people made a crossing of the river. These markers show that the crossing has been surveyed.

The question has always been asked “why is this crossing here?” You can look at in a geographical context, a broader picture, and a specific site location here. In the broader picture in terms of vegetation in the valley and vegetation in Minnesota, what is now Le Sueur County, this was once called the Big Woods in Minnesota history. It was a big deciduous forest and it had a particular wooded environment that was great for deer. The Sugar Maple trees were excellent for the Dakota people to make sugar, excellent grounds for hunting coon, fox, and all kinds of animals. When you crossed the Minnesota River here and headed west, you eventually got into prairie. In fact, old pictures of Traverse des Sioux showed the prairie right here. These old trees would not have been here. The prairie was a creation of the Indian people in attempt to drive buffalo into places where they could kill them for food. Once these prairie fires would get going, they would keep blowing east, from a westerly direction and would burn all the trees down so a prairie area existed to the west. A prairie that had buffalo, game birds, and pothole lakes with fish and lots of ducks.

For the Native American people, this was a great location because it was on the boundary of two different ecosystems. One the big woods and one the prairie, and to take advantage of each, they had to get across the river and most of the places it is impossible to walk across or take pulleys across. In the history of the valley, not here, this is where sand, solid, gravel bottom existed and you could get from one environment to the other. So this is a very site specific place and that makes fording or crossing possible.

Artifacts that are found here show that the Dakota village was here, probably soon after the last glaciers. They were using this to cross from one environment to the next. The Dakota people were here, then the French came to trade first with them, got the fur trade going. After that, the early settlement came here at the Traverse des Sioux. In terms of the history of the state, this is one of the most prime historical locations around. Great for the Native Americans, the French coming in as well and the early settlers. I think that in the context of today, crossing has a different meaning. In the old days it was the physical crossing of the river, a way to get across. If we expand that into the concept of a cultural crossing, a crossing of the Native American cultures with the French culture and with the Anglo-American culture coming in, you’ve really got a historical location.
Joseph Nicollet Sculpture
at Gustavus Adolphus College, St. Peter, Minnesota

On the campus of Gustavus Adolphus College a sculpture of Joseph Nicollet stands. A few things about this. See how young he was at this time and he has a little telescope like I had. This particular thing is called a back compass, so my understanding is that this would be zero degrees and he's looking through this little peep hole here to get a reading with the sun on his back as to approximate number degrees north of the equator. Another thing about it is on the back is the map that he made, or a portion of it, with all the Dakota Indian names which is a nice backdrop to this.

This statue was commissioned by Dean Melva Lind who was Dean of Students and professor of French for many years here at Gustavus Adolphus College. She wrote a book in French about Joseph Nicollet. I don’t think it has been translated into English but she was one of the people that really started people thinking about Nicollet and his expeditions. It turns out that he had a very difficult life and he got sick with, I’m not sure if it was maybe Tuberculosis when was surveying here. Anyway, he died a homeless man (I believe in Washington D.C.) before his map was ever made and he ended up in an unmarked grave in some cemetery in D.C. Dean Lind made it one of her goals in life to find where he was buried and put a proper tombstone and marking for him. She solicited the help of then Vice President Hubert Humphrey who got very interested in Nicollet. He had this staff go through the records of cemeteries in Washington D.C. until they found where he was buried and put a proper marker. She also commissioned the statue by Paul T. Granlund. He was the sculptor-in-residence of Gustavus for thirty some years and passed away a few years ago. This is one of his bronze casts. So there Nicollet is doing his latitude and longitude measurements over the valley.

For more information, contact: