



A PRAIRIE MEMORY

RARELY DOES A WORD PORTRAIT capture a scene for future generations as eloquently as that recorded by Mrs. Juliette McGill Kinzie in 1831.

Mrs. Kinzie's husband, John H. Kinzie, was the government agent to the Winnebago tribes and headquartered at Fort Winnebago in Central Wisconsin. Their route from the Kinzie homestead on the banks of the Chicago River followed the army trails out through the future Lake County, crossing the Fox River and through the future McHenry County over the border into Wisconsin.

It was summer, and the party, which included the Kinzie family, their guides, and an army officer, had ridden all day, until it was time to encamp for the night. Mrs. Kinzie described it in her book, "Waubun: Or the Early Day in the Northwest," published in 1855:


"One afternoon's ride was over a prairie stretching away to the northeast. No living creature was to be seen upon its broad expanse, but flying and circling over our heads were innumerable flocks of curlews. The accelerated pace of our horses as we approached a beautiful wooded knoll warned us that this was to be our place of rest for the night. These animals seemed to know by instinct a favorable encamping ground and this was one of the most lovely imaginable.

The ground around was carpeted with flowers and we could not bear to have them crushed by the felling of a tree and the pitching of our tents among them. The birds sent forth their sweetest notes in the warm, lingering sunshine; and the opening buds of the young hickory and sassafras filled the air with perfume. Nothing could be more perfect than our enjoyment of this sylvan and beautiful retreat

after our ride in the glowing sun."

The following morning Mrs. Kinzie continued her story: *"It was the work of a very short half hour to strike and pack the tent, stow away the mats and kettles, saddles the horses and mount for our journey. Lieutenant Foster had left us early in the morning, feeling it necessary to rejoin his command, and, now having seen us ready to set off, with a serene sky above us, and all things "right and tight" for the journey, our friend the Saganash ('Englishman' Billy Caldwell, a Potawatomi Chief) took leave of us and retraced his steps towards Chicago. We pursued our way through a lovely country of alternate glade and forest, until we reached the Fox River.*

The current ran clear and rippling along, and as we reached the steep bank to the water, the question, so natural to a traveler in an unknown region, presented itself: Is it fordable?"

When "A History of Lake County, Illinois" was published in 1877, the Section on Cuba Township included excerpts from Mrs. Kinzie's story. They were included based on the editor's research that the Kinzie party had traveled over or near the southwestern part of Cuba Township. Through the vision and dedication of our conservation organizations we can still share some of the wonder of Mrs. Kinzie's journey through the prairie in 1831. 

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Editor's Note: The Kinzies were the grandparents of Juliette Gordon Low, the founder of the Girl Scouts in America, and we included some of Mrs. Kinzie's story in our feature on Barrington's Girl Scout History for the Sept/Oct 2020 issue. It seems like a remarkable connection.