

An Interview

with

Robert Silbernagel



The Cadottes



*A FUR TRADE FAMILY
ON LAKE SUPERIOR*



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WHS Press In the epilogue, you allude to how seeing Michel Cadotte's grave marker for the first time started you on the journey to writing this book. Was the fur trade in northern Wisconsin an interest of yours before that, or did it come from discovering the Cadotte family?

I have long been interested in the fur trade in the Rocky Mountains, but I knew little

about its much deeper history in the Great Lakes region until after I visited Michel Cadotte's grave. After that, and when I learned he had been a fur trader, I began reading as much as I could about the fur trade around Lake Superior. In the process, I found more and more references to the Cadotte family and their involvement in the trade over multiple generations. It really sparked my interest.



WHS Press Were you at all surprised by how rich this history is? What parts of the research process did you find most interesting?

I was definitely impressed by the French-Native history in the region over several centuries, especially since I was raised in Southern Wisconsin but learned little about this critical period when I was in school. Of course, there has been much new research and writing since I attended school in the 1960s, but there was also considerable work done earlier. Before I began research

for this book, I had never heard of Reuben Gold Thwaites of the Wisconsin Historical Society. Now I am fascinated and so grateful for the work he and his crew of scholars performed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their translations of the seventeenth-century *Jesuit Relations*, which I was able to utilize online, provided a wealth of information about the early days of the fur trade. Reading through those and other similar documents, then visiting sites that were mentioned in the documents, was the most fascinating part of my research.





WHS Press There are very few documents regarding personal and familial facts about the Cadotte family. In what ways did that mystery make this story more important for you to tell?

Gaps in the written documentation of our history certainly make it more difficult to recreate what occurred in years past. But they also make it more important that writers and researchers look for other means to find information. In this case, because there was so little written specifically about the Cadottes

and, more generally, the French Canadian and Ojibwe alliances in early Wisconsin, and because those alliances were key in how the state developed, I thought it especially important to try to piece together as much information as I could. Although there were few Cadotte family documents, there were a multitude of references to the family in a variety of other sources. So, piecing together the family history was a bit like putting together a difficult jigsaw puzzle. It was time-consuming, at times frustrating, but very satisfying.



WHS Press Much of this book looks at the relations among a variety of groups in the region at the time, including the Ojibwe, the Dakota, and white settlers. Why did you feel compelled to include the disputes, attempts at diplomacy, and bonds among groups? How did they help tell this story?

Conflicts among Native groups and between Indigenous people and European Americans are a part of our history and need to be included in any detailed retelling of that history. But our stories also include repeated efforts by many people to avoid or alleviate such conflicts. One of the things that struck me as I conducted my research was how different the history of this region was from that of Latin America and the American

Southwest, where Spanish colonizers sought more of a command/control approach to Native people than the French in the Great Lakes region did when they, out of necessity, sought alliances with many Native groups. That's not meant to minimize the cultural devastation that occurred for many Native people in the Great Lakes region under the French, then the British, and finally the Americans. But it occurred in a much different manner than with the Spanish in the Southwest. And the story of the Cadotte family is, to a great degree, how they managed to navigate and survive through these conflicts and cultural transformations. Their story could not be told without discussing those conflicts and attempts to settle them.





WHS Press If there is one thing you'd like new readers to take away about this history, what would it be?

Survival and perseverance in times of immense social and economic transition. And the Cadotte family embodies those qualities. Popular movies and television shows have

often depicted the fur-trade era as a time of constant conflict and incredible brutality. Certainly some of that occurred. But, while they may have been engaged in hard, dangerous work, people like the Cadottes also built homes and communities, raised families, educated their children, and carved the way for future generations.



WHS Press The Cadotte family earned the trust of many groups that were in conflict during this time. Were you surprised by their ability to establish themselves as a leading family in the fur trade?

I was surprised by how the Cadottes were able to maintain their leadership over multiple generations. And, perhaps more than

anything, I was impressed by how much the Cadottes—Jean Baptiste Senior and Junior, Michel and Equaysayway Cadotte, and their descendants—worked to prevent conflict, even when it meant putting themselves at risk. In retrospect, it makes sense. They would not have been able to establish themselves as a leading family around Lake Superior if all they did was promote conflict.





WHS Press While this book focuses on one specific region, the reach of the trade extended internationally. Do you think it's still possible to see remnants of that time in our economy and trading practices today?

Certainly, beaver felt hats never went entirely out of fashion, and one can still purchase them today in a variety of styles. And, the Hudson's Bay Company still exists, the oldest

corporation in North America. But more importantly, I think the fur trade was one of the first industries that linked the western and eastern hemispheres, establishing global transportation networks, finance systems, and marketing venues. Although I am no economist, I think one could find roots of some modern global transportation and business systems in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fur trade.

