

Adventures on the American Frontier

Resolute Men of the Illinois Country

Revised Edition



Edith McCall

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This book has been substantially edited, revised, and updated to retain the spirit of the original work but with a modern understanding of historical events and a more sensitive awareness of human equity.

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La Salle and Tonti Build Forts in the Illinois Country



The dark-haired young man frowned as he tried to see through the curtain of powdery snow that had begun to fall on a December day in the year 1679. He left a group of about thirty men who were huddled around the eight canoes that had been drawn up onto the bank of the St. Joseph River at about where South Bend, Indiana, is today.

As he walked along the bank of the river, running black now under the wintry sky, the young man struck a gloved hand against a bare one. The glove hid an iron hook, for he had lost his right hand a few years earlier, when he had been

a soldier in the Italian army and a grenade had exploded as he held it. The young man's name was Henri de Tonti, but people called him "Tonti of the Iron Hand."

"Tonti!" he heard, and he looked back. A large man was hurrying after him, pulling a gray robe close around his body to keep out the cold. It was Father Hennepin, one of the three priests who had come into this wilderness to teach the Native Americans about Christianity. Father Hennepin had to let go of his robe to keep from falling as he slipped on the muddy riverbank in his hurry to catch up with Tonti. "Tonti, don't you disappear, too," he said. "It's enough that La Salle has been gone for many hours now."

Tonti turned back. "I'm worried, Father," he said. "La Salle should have been back long ago. Something must have happened to him in the woods. I want to look for him, but the snow has covered his tracks."

Father Hennepin tried to peer into the dim wilderness up the river as the daylight faded. He shuddered. "Don't go. If you leave the men, they'll turn around and go back. All that La Salle has done so far will be wasted. Surely he'll find his way back any minute now, carrying news that he has found the path to the headwaters of the rivers of the Illinois Country." The Illinois Country was a vast region in what is now the Midwestern United States, primarily the area around the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers in the present states of Illinois and Missouri.

Tonti turned and walked back toward the cluster of canoes and the men who sat nearby wrapped in blankets. The slender boats were heavily loaded. Along with blankets, cloth, and an assortment of other goods for trading with

Native Americans, they held an iron forge and blacksmith's tools; saws, hammers, and other carpenter's tools; guns, lead, and gunpowder. All had been brought almost the full length of Lake Michigan from a French outpost at Green Bay in what is now Wisconsin.

Big, handsome Robert Cavalier de La Salle, the man Tonti waited for now, had brought the canoes this far. He and fourteen other men had weathered terrible storms on Lake Michigan. They had lived through days when the men could find nothing to eat but the remains of a deer already picked over by buzzards and some wild berries that had made them ill. They had met unfriendly Native Americans, and it had taken all of La Salle's skill as a leader to convince them that the explorers meant no harm and should be allowed to go free.

Now, after being joined at the St. Joseph River by Tonti and seventeen more men, La Salle was trying to find the way to the land of the Illinois tribes of Native Americans, hoping to get there before winter blocked the way. There, in what is now the state of Illinois and some of the land surrounding it, La Salle planned to build a chain of forts and start a fur-trading business greater than all that the French had built in Canada. And he, Robert La Salle, would go all the way to the mouth of the great Mississippi River, as no Frenchman had yet done. There he would begin to build a city that would make the heartland of North America a monument to the glory of France.

In the morning of this day in early December, La Salle had taken his trusted friend Tonti aside when the men had reached a sharp bend in the St. Joseph River.

“This is as far as we should follow the St. Joseph,” La Salle had said. “We need to go westward from here to the headwaters of the rivers of the Illinois Country, but I’m not certain of the trail. I’ll go find the portage and be back in an hour or so.”

A portage is the part of a river journey in which the men carry the canoes and all of the goods overland from one river to another. La Salle had brought with him a Mohican tribe member who knew the portage route, but the Mohican had gone off to hunt wild game for food.

Hours had passed, and La Salle had not returned.

“Make camp for the night,” Tonti ordered as he reached the men. He appointed some to stand guard while the others slept. “Fire three rounds each hour,” he said. “If La Salle can hear the shots, he will be guided back to us.”

A gray dawn broke at last. “Now he will come,” Tonti thought. But the hours dragged by with no sign of La Salle. Tonti knew that soon he must lead the men onward himself. The Mohican hunter had returned and could show the way to the portage.

Noon came, and still Tonti did not order the men to start. He told Father Hennepin, “I’ll wait out the day. If La Salle does not return, we’ll be on our way with the first streak of daylight tomorrow.”

It was about four o’clock when one of the men saw a dark figure approaching the camp, coming along the riverbank.

“It’s La Salle!” he shouted. But the man who approached looked little like the French nobleman they all knew, the man who dressed as if for an appearance before the king even in

the heart of the wilderness. La Salle's face and hands were black with charcoal smears. He had two opossums hanging from his belt. He had killed them to save in case he needed more food.

"La Salle, my good friend!" cried Tonti. "I feared you were dead!"

"Dead? Not I," said La Salle. "I have too much yet to do in this world to move on to the next so soon."

He told Tonti how he had lost his way the day before, after being forced to circle a swampy area. In the snow, he couldn't find his way back to the river until he chanced upon it in the night. He had fired his gun but heard no answer from Tonti, so he had moved along the riverbank until he saw the gleam of a campfire.

"I was sure I had found our camp and hurried into it," he said. "To my surprise, no one was there. It hadn't been deserted long, for a heap of dry grass was still warm from some unknown sleeper whom I must have disturbed with my gunfire."

After his arrival in Canada in 1666, when he was just twenty-three years old, La Salle had learned much of the ways of the Native Americans and had learned to speak several of their languages.

"Not wanting to lose my scalp," he went on, "I called out in a few different languages but got no reply. So I shouted that I was about to make myself comfortable on that warm bed, built up a wall of brush around me so that no one could creep up on me in silence, rebuilt the fire, and went to sleep. Now let's get on with the portage."

The men shouldered the heavy loads and followed the Mohican. They walked all day, stopping to camp only when darkness forced them to do so. La Salle and Father Hennepin built a tent of reed mats for themselves. The cold was so great that they built a small fire inside the tent, but the wind whipped it into a blaze before daybreak, setting the mats on fire.

So began their day. The men tramped across five miles of dreary, flat land, half covered with snow and dotted with the whitened bones of buffalo. At last they came to the thread of water that was the beginning of the Kankakee River, the stream that would take them to the Illinois River, an important branch of the Mississippi River. At first the stream was so narrow that a man could leap over it, but at last the canoes were afloat once more. The river wound through marshy land, and the men were grateful that the weather was cold enough to give them frozen ground upon which to camp for the night.

A few days later, the land became a rolling plain stamped with the hoofprints of buffalo. But the Mohican hunter could find no buffalo to kill for food. The herds had moved south as the wintry weather came. He found only two lean deer and a few wild geese. The hungry, weary men began to grumble. For most of them, this was their first long trip into the wilderness. They were carpenters and blacksmiths, not woodsmen.

“I came to build forts and ships, not to starve or freeze at the end of the world,” one of them said. Others echoed his words.

La Salle heard the grumbling. “One morning we may find that some of the men have left us in the night,” he said to Tonti. Tonti began having men he could trust stand guard at night.

There had been little to eat for a week when the Mohican hunter came hurrying back to camp one day. “I need six men!” he called out. “I have found meat. A great buffalo bull caught in a swamp could not free himself to follow the herd.”

Spirits lifted as the men smelled the great roasts that were soon turning on spits over campfires. The sizzling of fat was music to their ears.



The countryside improved as they journeyed on. They reached the place where the Des Plaines River from the north joins the Kankakee to form the Illinois River. The men paddled along between grassy meadows broken by rises of land with groves of trees. There were wooded islands in the river with plenty of fuel for campfires. The men were in better spirits—all but La Salle himself.

“The real test is still to come,” he told Tonti. “The reports of Louis Jolliet and Father Marquette, who came this way six years ago, tell of a great city of native people just down the river from here. All of the people of the Illinois tribes have lodges there and plant corn in fields near the city. From there, they go out on long hunting journeys.”

“Why does this worry you?” asked Tonti. “You have plenty of experience dealing with the native tribes in Canada.”

“But that’s where the trouble lies,” answered La Salle. “You know that I made treaties with the Iroquois tribes south of the St. Lawrence Valley. The Iroquois are known as the fiercest fighters of all, and they’ve been sending war parties to the Ohio and Illinois Countries. The Illinois are Algonquian people—enemies of the Iroquois. They fear a great war with the Iroquois. The tribes in the city just ahead of us may have heard of my work to form a friendship with the Iroquois. They may look upon us as enemies sent by the Iroquois. If so, we’ll have trouble.”

“I understand,” said Tonti, “but you are wise in the ways of the native people. You will know how to meet the Illinois chiefs.”

“I hope so,” said La Salle. “Mind you, now: let no hint of my fears reach our men. After all, I’m sure the Illinois chiefs remember Father Marquette. They looked upon him as a true friend. Perhaps, because we are also French, they will welcome us.”

Tonti smiled. “Certainly. Our only concern is to keep our men’s stomachs filled. With full stomachs, they will follow where you lead them and obey your orders.”