

## Frenchmen Gave Black River Its Name

An inquiry in a recent issue of the Banner Journal regarding the naming of Black River Falls and description of the falls had led to considerable research by several Jackson County Historical society members.

French explorers in 1659-60 traversed the river and named it "La Riviere Noire", meaning "The Black River." On Franquelin's map of 1688, he has the Black River correctly placed and named. The dark color of the river caused by tannic acid from drainage over areas containing oak and tamarack trees and sphagnum moss. The Indian name for the River is "Neosheprah" meaning "Dark River" according to Frances Perry and Bernard Eagle.

One of the earliest recorded accounts of life in the Black River Valley is found in a diary kept by Willard Keyes. Keyes and a party from Prairie du Chien arrived on the Black River in January of 1819, and arrived at "Black River Falls", on January 16. His entry on January 31, 1819 states: "I judge the river (at the falls) descends 20 rods, 25-30 feet. Another early description of the falls at Black River Falls is found in the works of Increase Allen Lapham, (an early Wisconsin scientist), "Wisconsin – It's Geography and Topography" published in 1846. He stated, "The water dropped over the rocks in a fall of 22 feet in a distance of 100 yards."

The above two descriptions locate the falls at the present site of the eight-gate power dam.

A writer in the May 5, 1885 issue of the Badger State Banner commented: "Black River Falls, has never made any pretensions as a summer resort yet it can undoubtedly present as great attractions as some villages that do make considerable claims like this. "Pretty scenery is no rarity in Wisconsin and this place is not without it's share."

"The rapids from which our city takes its name cannot by any flight of the imagination be compared to Niagara or Yosemite, but they are not lacking in impressiveness and would be considered a fortunate by your Wisconsin watering places." "During high water ,the flood pours over and past the rugged and angular rocks, gurgles and bubbles and swirls and eddies and seethes and foams and rushes and roars, angrily, madly, tumultuously, et cetera, in quite the orthodox manner."

"The interest in the spectacle is of course much increased when the river is filled with logs, whose antics when plunging wildly over the falls are sufficiently striking to hold the attention of even old residents, while the chances of a jam will attract a large crowd at any time."

There have been four types of dams at the falls. The first were brush dams, then log dams and, in 1908, the first concrete rolling dam, then the present dam, (the first to have the gates) was built in 1912. On the early dams, an opening was left where logs and boats could go through, only the most experienced and venturesome log drivers and bateau operators "ran the rapids" as it required considerable skill and nerve.

After the main drive had passed, "clean up" crews had to come back to remove the logs from the rocks and skid them into the main channel. Many of the logs became hung up on the rocks and were cumbersome nuisance to the log drivers. The rocks had been dynamited extensively to furnish fill or for various projects along the river and down river. The gentle boulders now seen below the dam were much larger in the early days.