

Travels in North America

In the years 1852 and 1853

by Dr. Moritz Wagner

and

Dr. Carl Scherzer

Volume II

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XIII.

The Niagara Falls. Sojourn at the Niagara. Geological Results.

When Father Hennepin saw the Niagara Falls for the first time 175 years ago, the shores of this stream offered a different view than today. No comfortable country road, no two-track railroad had yet broken through the old woods. No roaring steamers were bringing thousands of visitors across the land and waters at lightning speed, from the ocean to the edge of the cascades in only a few hours. The traveler was not lured by the choice comforts of Clifton House, where, for a daily sum of 2 ½ dollars, not even the most spoiled European will find anything to complain about during the luscious banquets and in the comfortable salons. Nothing was to be seen or heard of the grand hotels, boarding houses and elegant shops, of the bridges and footpaths, the walkways and

belvederes, of the saw and pounding mills and of all the noise of modern culture and hedonism, which today mingles with the grave thundering of the old stream.

All of the landscape between Lake Erie and Lake Ontario was a gigantic forest, which the deep riverbed, washed out by the might of the cascades throughout many millennia, divided into two parts. Thick-trunked sycamore and oak trees, which had not yet been touched by any kind of settler, were spreading their enormous leaf canopies out over the alluvial soil, and the fresh wind blowing from the upper lake was shaking the gigantic, green treetops of the hickory trees and Weymouth firs, high up above the eternal forests. In those happy days, the poor, honest redskins had undisturbed possession of their most beautiful hunting grounds here, and every day shaggy buffalo and bison were bathing their horned pates in the fresh mist spraying up from the gorge of the Horseshoe Falls, shimmering with the colors of a million diamonds.

For centuries, the taciturn Indian had contemplated the shining natural appearance of the Earth in vague astonishment and listened to the thundering of the stream without betraying the picturesque secret of his wilderness to the white men. It was circumstance that led the missionary from Canada to this secluded space and to the wigwams of his red-skinned penitents. If the first astonishment about what he had seen led him to get carried away with exaggeration, if in his account he estimated the waterfalls to be twice as high as they really are, it was comprehensible in his, the astonished discoverer's, case and one might rather marvel at the fact that the drawing of the cascades that was attached to his descriptions reflected them so exactly. Back then the great semicircular waterfall, whose shape resembles a horseshoe or a crescent moon, was divided into two parts by the mighty, protruding Table Rock. Instead of two great waterfalls, there were three of them – a fact confirmed 73 years later by the Swedish naturalist Kalm. The rock, which divided the main cascade, seems to have fallen into the abyss shortly before the Swede's visit.

Kalm was the second visitor at the Niagara Falls. A whole lifetime had passed without any one traveler getting the idea of following the tracks of Father Hennepin and making sure that his assertions were entirely truthful: "That in the wide world no natural spectacle can be seen that is comparable in sublimity and majesty to this waterfall."

Today, a beautiful summer day rarely passes without the trains from Buffalo and Rochester and the steamboats of Lake Ontario dropping off 400 to 500, sometimes even more than 1000 travelers at the Niagara. For a few dollars every peripatetic tailor or nature-craving seamstress from Boston and New York can satisfy their curiosity and describe their poetic sentiments at the Niagara Falls to their fellow countrymen in the homeland of Germany. Admittedly, the distance between New York and here via Buffalo comes to no less than 480 English miles. But how short of a way that is today,

for horses with six wheel-legs that need no sleep and no rest, merely continuous feeding with black rocks! The wild rumbling reverberates dully in the echo of the woods when the long wagon trains zoom along through the dark forest behind their huffing and puffing lead locomotives. In mute astonishment, the thousand-year-old oak trees watch and listen to the strange new phenomenon, to which they might have become accustomed at this point, while stags and bears have run far away to the West. With the swish of the iron horses and their shrill whistle that penetrates the quiet wilderness for many miles, the poor animals might have thought that the ghostly "wild hunter" was approaching with his entourage of rifle assistants, drovers and yelping dogs. They seem to not have afforded rest for themselves during their escape until they reached the shores of the Great Lakes in the West, and from there they are also being shooed further each year as the same eerie rumbling already rings out near the banks of the upper Mississippi.

The force of omnipotent time has brought about a considerable number of curious changes in Old Europe as well. But history has been evolving at a ponderous pace there, while the culture of the New World has been pressing forward with the urgency of storms and steam. From the journey of Swedish Dr. Kalm to our last visit of the Niagara – what a tremendous metamorphosis in such a comparatively short time span! Back then, no tree had ever been felled on Goat Island. No white man had himself stepped onto the famous island that separates the Horseshoe Falls from the American cascade. And today Mr. Porter, the owner of this island, draws a yearly pension of 20,000 dollars just from the small bridge tax he has imposed on the visitors*¹)! Human scalps and buffalo horns adorned the wigwams of the belligerent Chippewa in those days. The remnants of this formerly so mighty tribe have been pushed far to the West, and one sees only poor Indian women on Goat Island, who sell their wickerwork and embroideries to white idlers in order to feed their hungry men and children from the proceeds. Instead of Indian war cries and the bellowing of buffalo, it is the lunch bells of a huge number of hotels which, along with the rushing from the falls and the whistling locomotives, can be heard most loudly and most often.

It is not our intention to give a long-winded description of the famous waterfalls or to tell the reader what he has already heard a hundred times before. Who has not read Chateaubriand's "Atala" and its brilliantly picturesque depiction of the great waterfalls? And before him as well as after him there has been many a Niagara pilgrim who had nothing more urgent to do than getting his perceptions printed. Chateaubriand's account is one of his most accomplished nature

¹ *) Mr. Porter studied in Heidelberg and developed a love for the German language and German education. He is one of the few cordial Yankees that we have found in America. In his hospitable house every educated visitor is welcome. As the owner of the most land in the vicinity of the Falls and the Rapids, he has at his command a notable part of the immense water powers that are at the disposal of the industry here.

descriptions, although nevertheless not free of excessive ornateness and rhetorical pompousness. Here, such things are certainly more venial than at the Dead Sea of Palestine or in the magnolia forests of the lower Mississippi.

The first view of the great waterfalls leaves an egregious impression on all lovers of nature and receptive souls, and passion will always dictate the most illustrious words onto the pages of those who do not stay here long enough to experience the moment of reaction and tedium that comes as a result of daily contemplating a spectacle that is, despite all its grandeur and splendor, nevertheless a bit monotonous. Since even a famous German professor, relocated from the scholarly Spree River to the thundering Niagara, felt so elevated and invigorated that not only did “his spirit’s flapping wings rise to the skies like sounds from an Aeolian harp in harmony with the sounds of this miracle of nature”, but he even thought to have regained, from this “fountain of youth”, new youthful forces and vital energy for years to come. The Englishman Lyell viewed and described the Niagara in a more sober tone than did the erudite historian from Berlin, but certainly with a bit more visual acuity and knowledge about nature. He also did not find the splendor of the scene, especially when viewed from the Canadian shore, below his reputation. Monsieur Cabet, the Icarian, was the first and only man who confessed to the writer of these letters that he found the Niagara Falls below, way below his expectations – a confession that could be counted as proof that Icarian imagination far exceeds that of a French Christian romantic and even of a German professor.

Whoever has seen the famous cataracts of Terni in central Italy, the Rhine falls near Schaffhausen, the Aar falls on the Grimsel and the falls of Ponale near Lake Garda, the beauty of which surpasses all other European waterfalls in our opinion, and whoever compares these various much-visited cataracts to the Niagara will be a great deal more surprised here than if his exploring step had led him first to Canada. All of the most renowned cascades of Italy, Tyrol, and Switzerland take second place to the Montmorency Falls near Quebec and the Sainte-Anne Falls, but especially to the Saint-Maurice River Falls near Shewanegan – most grandiose in their wildly beautiful loneliness as the terrifically roaring waters, surrounded by rich forest scenery, press over high granite rocks into a deep basin. They are as much second to all these Canadian waterfalls as the latter are surpassed by the Niagara. It seems as if the great Creator of Nature has made special efforts to conceive the most beautiful and fitting shapes for a true masterpiece of scenery *en miniature* in this place. The banks, bluffs and insular falls crowned with a high forest, are by no means “gigantic rocks” as Chateaubriand says hyperbolically. They only rise insignificantly above the upper edge of the waterfall, and they themselves do not leave a very colossal impression when seen from the depths of the lower basin.

But it is exactly this circumstance that bestows the right harmony upon the tableau and heightens rather than diminishes its picturesque effect. Everything has been done here to gracefully adorn the sight of the waterfall with an ingenious grouping and dispersion of the rocks and trees, rather than to press down on it by means of accumulating hefty masses of rocks or even exhibiting an alpine proscenium. With the exception of the Rhine falls, the exact contrary can be noticed about the waterfalls in Switzerland. The tumbling column of water is never proportionate to the grandeur of its alpine surroundings. The eye of the visitor seldom rests on the Staubbach in Lauterbrunn, which does not deserve its reputation even though it falls down 700 feet from a vertical rock, for very long as it is detracted from the meager rivulet, dissolving into mist, by the view of the gigantic white Jungfrau in the background. The Niagara only falls down 158 English feet in a completely vertical manner, like the Staubbach. But how infinitely more impressive of an effect is created by the enormous mass of water *2) and the complete harmony of its surroundings! There is not one rock or tree too many or too few. In addition to the mass of the liquid element that presses towards the edge of the overhanging layers of limestone, and to the picturesque adornment of the banks, it is the wonderful crescent-moon shape of the main waterfall on the Canadian side and especially the color nuances of the water that surprised us the most. This indescribably beautiful color play distinguishes the Niagara from all streams and waterfalls on earth. In the sunshine, the Rhine falls also glimmer with all the well-known colors of the rainbow.

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² *) According to Dr. Dwight's calculations of the depth and width of the upper river basin and of the speed of the stream, 170,156 tons of water tumble down the Niagara every minute, or 102,093,750 tons every hour. 7/8 of that comes down from the Horseshoe Falls. Of course this ratio changes according to the water level.