

JUDGE CHARLES B. LASSELLE'S NOTES ON ALICE OF
OLD VINCENNES.

[The following paper was written by Judge Lasselle several years ago and published, at least in part, in the Logansport and other papers. Extracts from it, and comments upon it, are given in Hubbard M. Smith's "Historical Sketches of Old Vincennes," pp. 34, 286 ff. But as there seem to have been inaccuracies in its production, and as it raises interesting questions, it is here printed practically in full with only a few verbal changes and some unimportant omissions. Judge Lasselle, now living at an advanced age at Logansport, has long been regarded, and rightly so, as authority upon the lore of the Wabash Valley. A contribution from him on the early traders of the State was published in the issue of March, 1906.]

THE story of "Alice of Old Vincennes," by the late Maurice Thompson, is so realistic that a number of the writer's friends have requested him to point out such characters and events as would justify its claim of being an "historical romance." This is no easy task, owing to the employment by the author of anachronism as to the age of Alice and the dates of the events in which she figures, and the great number of the scenes and events, partly historical and partly fictitious, which occur. As to Alice herself, she was a real person, well known to the early inhabitants of Vincennes, as the sequel of this will show. Her real name was Mary Shannon. She was the daughter of Captain William Shannon, one of Colonel George Rogers Clark's most patriotic and gallant officers. We first hear of Captain Shannon through Clark himself. In his "Memoirs," to be found in English's "Conquest of the Northwest," vol. I, p. 531, he states that Captain Shannon was taken prisoner by a party of the enemy while the army was nearing Vincennes. He was taken to the British fort, but released upon the surrender of the fort a day or two afterward. Shortly after the surrender of the fort, Colonel Clark distributed his troops to different points, one part going to Fort Clark, at Kaskaskia; another to Louisville, Ky., under his immediate command there, and another part remained at the fort at Vincennes. Captain Shannon removed with that part

going to Kaskaskia. Here he remained as captain and conductor of the military stores. How long he remained there is not known. A letter from him to Captain Francis Bosseron, conductor of the stores at Vincennes, in possession of the writer, dated June 15, 1779, shows that he was still there at that date. A few years after this, about 1784, he obtained from the Court of Vincennes a tract of land near the village, on the west side of the Wabash river. Many other grants of the same character were also made by the court. This gave offense to the Indians, and especially the Piankeshaw Indians. These Piankeshaws had been great friends of the French. After the defeat of the French and killing of Vincennes by the Chickesaws, of Tennessee, in 1736, the inhabitants of Vincennes entertained great fears of a hostile visit from this numerous and powerful tribe of Indians. The Piankeshaws, who, for time immemorial, had occupied a village called by the French traders "Terrehaute" (highland), at or near the site of the present city of Terre Haute, moved down, in 1742, to Vincennes to protect and defend the inhabitants in case of invasion. At the same time, as claimed by the French and afterward by the Americans, they made a grant of land to the French, extending from a point twenty-five miles above Vincennes to a point twenty-five miles below, and twenty-five miles on each side of the Wabash river—making the tract fifty miles square. But the Piankeshaws, while admitting that they made such grant as to that portion of the land lying east of the Wabash river, denied that they ever made a grant for that portion lying west of the river. Hence, the Piankeshaws and other Indians commenced hostilities.

Mr. Dillon, in his "History of Indiana," p. 184, states that, "notwithstanding the hostile temper of the Indians during the years 1785 and 1786, the court of Post Vincennes continued to grant tracts of land to various French and American adventurers. * * * Of the Americans who attempted to make improvements on such grants, some were killed by the Indians, others became alarmed and retired to Kentucky, and a few remained at Post Vincennes, where they were protected by the French inhabitants."

It was unfortunate that Captain Shannon did not do as the

other settlers. It was but a short distance, probably less than a mile, from the town. The Indians attacked his home and proceeded to massacre him and his family. Mary attempted to escape, but some of the Indians pursued and brought her back. In her great distress she called upon her Maker for help, exclaiming, "Oh, mon Dieu, oh, mon Dieu." The Indians, recognizing these words as French, supposed her to be a French girl and gave her her liberty. She then hurried toward Vincennes and hailing persons on the opposite bank of the river for help, they took her over in a boat to the village. Here she was soon provided for.

The story of "Alice" tells us that Gaspard Roussillon became her foster father. Was he a real personage? There can be no doubt that Captain Francis Bosseron was the Gaspard Roussillon of the story. In the first place, the story throughout refers to him as mayor and captain. At the time the French inhabitants organized, took possession of the fort and raised the flag, there was no captain of any kind of troops in Vincennes. Upon the return of Father Gibault and his report of the proceedings of the inhabitants of Vincennes, Colonel Clark sent over a captain's commission (now in possession of the writer) to Francis Bosseron. It was written in French, for Clark scarcely knew a word of French, nor Bosseron of English. Translated, it reads as follows:

"No. 1.

"By George Rogers Clark, Esqr., Colonel Commanding East Illinois and its dependencies, etc., etc., etc.

"By virtue of the power and authority vested in me by his Excellency, Patrick Henry, Governor and First Magistrate of Virginia, etc., I name, appoint and constitute you by these presents, captain of a militia company at Poste Vincennes. In consequence of which you will carefully discharge all the duties pertaining to the same.

"Given under my hand and seal at Fort Clark, this 10th day of August, 1778. G. R. CLARK."

The No. 1 at the left hand corner of the commission shows that it was the first commission issued by him after he and his troops left the falls of the Ohio (now Louisville) on their expedition.

Shannon, Alice's father, was conductor of the military stores at Kaskaskia and Bosseron held the same position at Vincennes. They necessarily were in close correspondence. In the letter of Shannon to Bosseron, dated at Kaskaskia, June 15, 1779, referred to above, he concludes with the words, "My compliments to Madame Bosseron," which he would not likely do unless their families were in close social relations. Bosseron being rich and liberal, it is natural that he should step in and protect the orphaned child of his friend. In this connection it may be remarked that no reference to Bosseron or, indeed, to any other person as captain of the company of French inhabitants who took possession of British Fort Sackville, is made by any of the Indiana historians. Law, Dillon, English and even Mr. Dunn in his thorough history of early times of Indiana, all seem to have implicitly followed Colonel Clark in his "Memoir." This was written by him several years after the events occurred, and with a great number of events to relate from memory, he might well be excused in making some omissions. It is due to the memory of Mr. Thompson to say that, after a very thorough investigation of the subjects of which he wrote, he was the first historian, under the garb of fiction, to give the name of the French captain above referred to.

The incidents of the flag, in the main, are clearly historical, but there are some fictions surrounding it. In Captain Bosseron's book of accounts against Captain Leonard Helm, as the representative or agent of the State of Virginia, he makes, among others, these entries:

1778:			
Nov. 4.	For having raised the company.....	*500	" — "
Nov. 12.	Paid to St. Marie for 5 ells of red serge for the flag, at 9.....	45	" — "
	Paid to Mr. Dajenet for 3¾ ells of green serge at 10.....	37	" 10 "
	Paid Madame Goderre for making the flag	25	" — "

*See footnote p. 85.

From these entries we can obtain almost a full and precise description of the flag. It consisted of two stripes—one of red and the other of green. The extra length of the red stripe of $1\frac{3}{4}$ ells—the French ell being 40 inches in length—being taken off to form the shield in its proper place, left the flag about 11 feet in length. Whether or not a coat of arms was blazoned on the shield is not known. Nor is it known exactly what the cost price was. From the figures of Captain Bosseron, whether in French currency or in Virginia currency of $\$3.33\frac{1}{2}$ to the pound, as was usual afterward, it would be a very costly flag.* But it was a famous flag for the reason that it was the first American flag in all that vast extent of country. * * * The quartermaster's office in the War Department at Washington City and Lossing's Field Book of the Revolution contain an abundance of flag lore, but they contain no instance of a display of an American flag west of the Atlantic States.

As to the other characters and events mentioned in "Alice," they were either known to the general reader of Vincennes history or are fictitious. The writer knew "Alice" well in her old age. It so happened that her youngest son, named William Shannon, after her father, and the writer were playmates together, and their families being near neighbors, he often visited her house. In her personal appearance and character she was well described by the author. But he states several times that she was not to be regarded as beautiful. The writer would have thought otherwise, and that in her girlhood days she must have been a beautiful girl. The most prominent features of her character were her independence and kindness. She was, in fact, such a woman that the men would have called her "grand old lady" and the ladies "a sweet old lady."

*Both Judge Lasselle and Mr. Smith, in commenting upon this, seem to be confused as to the currency. There can be no question, however, that in the account book, where the denominations are represented by ditto marks, the large denomination is "livre" (one-fifth of a "piastre," or Spanish dollar, and about $18\frac{1}{4}$ or $19\frac{1}{4}$ cents of our money), and the smaller is "sol" (modern "sou," being about one-twentieth of the livre and therefore about the same as our cent), both French. For "having raised the company" the charge was therefore $\$95-\100 , and the total cost of the "flag" was a little more, $\$100-\105 .—*Editor*.