

MN History: Unflappable fur trader was at heart of state's first murder case

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George Bonga was born near Duluth in 1802 to a black father and Ojibwe mother. He was educated in Montreal and had many stories of the frontier.

George Bonga was unflappable — even when folks Up North threatened to burn his trading post and wreck his canoes.

A 19th-century North Woods fur trader, translator, canoe guide, storyteller and Leech Lake lodge owner, Bonga found himself in the middle of Minnesota's first murder case in 1837.

Alfred Aitkin, 21, who ran a trading post on what is now Cass Lake, had been fatally shot by an Ojibwe man involved in a love triangle that Aitkin tried to squelch.

Aitkin's father, William, was a big-shot trader and namesake of the county and town in central Minnesota. Alfred's mother was Ojibwe. The elder Aitkin asked Bonga to track down the suspect in his son's death, Che-ga-wa-skung, after he escaped and the initial search party failed to find him.

Son of a black father and Ojibwe mother, Bonga spoke French, English and Ojibwe. He stood 6-foot-6 and was a third-generation backwoodsman famous for singing voyageur songs while carrying hundreds of pounds of pelts and goods through northern Minnesota's swampy, mosquito-thick portage trails.

After a posse failed to track down Che-ga-wa-skung, Bonga headed out in the subzero chill of January 1837. Six days later, he returned with the suspect, tied to a dog sled, and transported him 250 miles to Fort Snelling.

Bonga warned William Aitkin that Ojibwe in the area were angry about the arrest, threatening arson and vandalism if Che-ga-wa-skung was hanged.

"For my part," Bonga wrote Aitkin, "I don't think they are really in earnest in these words."

Che-ga-wa-skung was eventually acquitted at a territorial trial in Prairie du Chien, Wis. Although he clearly killed young Aitkin, the victim's mother was Ojibwe. So jurors ruled that the murder didn't count because the deceased wasn't a full-blooded white citizen.

And it was in that jumbled racial context that Bonga grew to become the rare, well-respected person of color in early Minnesota.

Jack of all trades

Thumbnail sketch: Bonga spoke English, French and Ojibwe and served as a guide and fur trader for the American Fur Co. in the 1820s and '30s. When beaver trapping diminished, he ran a lodge on Leech Lake — singing and storytelling among his guests.

Rarity: Bonga was among only 14 blacks counted in the 1850 Minnesota Territory census.

Career highlights: At 18, Bonga helped guide a failed trek to find the source of the Mississippi River in 1820. At 65, he served as a witness at the signing of the treaty that created the White Earth Indian Reservation.

“No word could be better trusted than that of George Bonga,” said the Rev. Henry Whipple, Minnesota's first Episcopal bishop.

Here's the back story behind Bonga winding up one of 14 black Minnesotans counted in the 1850 territorial census: Back in the late-1700s, British military Capt. Daniel Robertson lived at a fort on Mackinac Island in Lake Michigan. He owned slaves named Jean and Marie-Jeannette Bonga — whose lineage traced from Africa to Jamaica and then the French-speaking West Indies.

When Robertson died in 1787, he freed the Bongas. They went into fur trading, as did their son, Pierre — George's father — who traversed northern Minnesota and established a trading post near Pembina, N.D., on the Canadian border across from Winnipeg.

George was born near Duluth in 1802, one of five kids of Pierre and his Ojibwe wife, Ogibwayquay.

Pierre was successful enough to send his children to school in Montreal, where George mastered French and learned writing skills he would use later in life to craft letters detailing the wrongs perpetrated by white traders in early Minnesota.

“George was an extremely intelligent man whose letters to government leaders revealed all kinds of corruption among the white Indian agents,” said Barry Babcock, a Bemidji-area historian who has been working on a book about the Bongas for a decade.

Bonga's career in the North Woods was bookended by two pivotal events. He helped lead Michigan Territory Gov. Lewis Cass' 1820 exploration that tried, and failed, to find the source of the Mississippi River. Bonga was 18 at the time. When he was 65, he helped negotiate the treaty establishing the White Earth Indian Reservation.

“He was instrumental in those talks and lobbied for a far larger reservation that would have spanned west to the Red River,” Babcock said.

Bonga worked for years for the American Fur Co., opening posts on Otter Tail Lake and other sites. When the beaver pelt trade, which had been fueled by French hat fashions, died out amid over-trapping, the company went belly-up.

That same year, 1842, George married Baybahmausheak Ashwewin, an Ojibwe woman often referred to as Ashwinn. They had four children and ran one of the first lodges on Leech Lake.

Guests would recount his yarn spinning and after-dinner singing until he died near Leech Lake in 1880 at 78. Bungo Township in Cass County is named after his family and reflects the varied spellings of the era.

Curt Brown's tale on Minnesota's history appears each Sunday. Readers can send him ideas and suggestions at mnhistory@startribune.com