



Who Was George Bonqa?

IN THE 1800s IN THE TERRITORY KNOWN AS MINNESOTA, THIS TALENTED **fur trader** HAD A REPUTATION TO RIVAL THE LEGEND OF LOGGER PAUL BUNYAN. BUT **George Bonqa** WAS REAL, AND TODAY FEW MINNESOTANS KNOW HIS STORY.

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His Story

George Bonga was born near Duluth in 1802 to an African-American father and an Ojibwe mother. He grew up to be a fur trader and a wilderness guide. Due to his strength of character and talents, he was well known in the Lake Superior region.

Bonga was well educated, as

he attended school in Montreal and spoke English, French, and Ojibwe. He claimed to be both the “first black man born in this part of the country” and one of the “first two white men that ever came into this country.”

In the language of the time, Bonga was correct. He was one

of only 14 African-Americans counted in the Minnesota Territory in the 1850 census. But sometimes, such as at treaty signings, Bonga was considered “white,” because it was common for people to be classified only as Indian or non-Indian (white). Many African-Amer-



had been an indentured servant to a British Army officer

icans in the United States were slaves in the early 1800s, but Bonga was a free man. His grandfather Jean Bonga

in Michigan. After the officer died, Jean Bonga was released from his contract and gained his freedom. George Bonga's grandfather and grandmother became fur traders.

Bonga's father, Pierre, was a fur trader and a guide for the famous explorer Alexander Henry Jr. George learned wilderness skills from his father and

mother and followed in the family tradition of fur trading. He worked for the American Fur Company in the 1820s. In the 1830s, he traded at posts throughout northern Minnesota. The following story, "Meet the Guide," imagines a journey that George Bonga may have taken from Fond du Lac to Leech Lake in August 1836.

Meet the Guide

The wood floor creaked as Louie stepped into the log storehouse. The dim light made it difficult to see. "Hello," Louie called. "Is anybody ..."

Before he could finish his question, a huge voiced boomed, "Hello, yourself!" A man stood at the other end of the room. He held a pile of wool trading blankets in his arms.

Louie jumped, startled by the loud voice. The man dropped the blankets and walked toward him. He was the biggest and blackest man that Louie had ever seen. His head nearly touched the log beam that ran down the middle of the cabin. He was wearing a broadcloth shirt, pants, and leather boots. "I'm George Bonga," he grinned. "By the look on your face, I can tell that you've never seen a white man."

"A white man?" Louie looked to see if there was anyone else in the room. "But you're so ..."

"Black?" Bonga laughed a huge laugh.

Louie didn't know what to say. He was only 14 years old, and this was his first summer as a *voyageur*.

"Welcome to Fond du Lac." Bonga reached out and shook Louie's hand, lifting him onto his tiptoes.

"Nice to meet you," Louie said, feeling like his teeth were rattling. "I'm Louie Pomeroy."

Bonga suddenly frowned. "Where are the others?"

"They had trouble getting a crew together at *Fort Misery*."

"How many fellows came with you?"

"Just me."

"We asked for three men," Bonga said.

"The fellows at the fort are tired of hauling barrels of fish. Half of them have deserted. They said they signed on as fur traders not fishmongers."

Bonga laughed again. "Can't say as I blame them. We're packing our share of fish here these days. Are you a good paddler?"

"I made it all the way from Montreal."

Bonga looked Louie up and down.

"I'm short, but I'm strong," Louie said. At 5 feet 4 inches tall, Louie was average height for a *voyageur*, but he felt like a child next to Bonga, who was more than a foot taller.

"You'd better be strong. I promised to deliver four canoes of trade goods to Leech Lake before freeze up, and we've only got 14 men."

"Which leaves you two men short," Louie said.

"I can see you know your math, professor," Bonga laughed. "The only other fellow I have handy is my assistant, Cadotte. And he's got a wooden leg. Both yours are real aren't they?" Bonga grabbed a long canoe paddle that was leaning against the wall and tapped Louie's shins.

"Ouch," Louie said, as Bonga grinned.

"The two of us will have to handle one *north canoe* ourselves."

Louie's eyes widened. "Don't they hold 3,000 pounds?"

"I hope you can paddle as well as you count, professor."





Day Two

“Time to voyage!” Bonga poked Louie’s ribs with his paddle.

“What’s that?” Louie sat up with a start. The sky was still half dark, but the other voyageurs had already broken camp.

“Roll up your blanket, professor,” Bonga said. Wearing a deerskin shirt and moccasins this morning, Bonga looked more like an Ojibwe trapper than a fur trader.

Louie followed Bonga down to the

bank of the St. Louis River. Three canoes were already loaded. And the dock was piled with the ton and a half of freight that would fill Bonga’s canoe: five 90-pound bales of *trade goods* plus a case of *North West guns*, bags of lead balls and bird shot for the guns, kegs of gunpowder, sacks of flour, kegs of wine and *side pork*, *iron works* for Ojibwe trappers, sacks of tobacco, and kettles. They would deliver the trade goods to trade posts, where traders would give them to Ojibwe families in return for beaver furs to be trapped and delivered throughout the winter.

Ten minutes later Louie was seated in the bow of the loaded canoe with Bonga in the stern.

“Which side should I paddle on?” Louie’s head was spinning.

“Take your pick,” Bonga said.

Louie reached out to paddle, but Bonga’s first stroke shot the canoe forward so fast that Louie tipped over backward. The voyageurs in the other canoes all laughed.

“Don’t be lying down on the job, professor,” Bonga chuckled, taking another powerful stroke. “You keep a steady pace, and I’ll handle the steering.”

“OK,” Louie nodded. Trying to relax, he began pulling at his normal pace.

Louie was amazed as they skimmed upriver like a ship under sail. He had never traveled so fast in a canoe.

Bonga struck up a familiar song, *A la Claire Fontaine*: “At the clear running fountain/Sauntering by one day . . .” The men in the trailing canoes joined in at the chorus: “Your love long since overcame me/ Ever in my heart you’ll stay!”

When the current began to speed up, Bonga said, “Hear that, professor?”

Louie stopped paddling and heard the roar of a rapids.

“That’s the *Dalles*,” Bonga said. “We’ll land below that bald rock.”

His Story



BONGA, CA. 1870

On fur-trading voyages, Bonga’s strength and endurance became legendary among his fellow travelers. And his excellent singing voice helped voyageurs keep time all day long as they paddled birch-bark canoes loaded with trade goods. He also was a gifted storyteller. According to folks who knew him, Bonga “loved to relate his adventures to newcomers,” and he would frequently “paralyze his listeners with laughter.”



Portage Test

When they neared the shore, Louie stepped into the shallows and turned the canoe sideways to unload. Bonga grabbed a parcel of trade goods in each hand and carried them up the bank.

As soon as the canoe was empty, Bonga picked it up by the center thwart.

“Let me help,” Louie said, knowing that two men always portage a north canoe.

“Birch bark is light,” Bonga chuckled

as he walked up the bank holding the canoe against his hip.

After all four canoes were unloaded, Bonga said, “Time for a little stroll.” He swung a parcel of trade goods onto his back and slipped a *tumpline* around his forehead. Then he told Louie, “Help me boost that next bundle up.”

Louie stacked on another parcel. Bonga said, “I’ll take one more.” Louie had seen a

man carry three packs, but never on a portage this steep and rocky. Bonga was so tall that Louie had to stand on a rock to hoist the third parcel high enough to settle between Bonga’s shoulders.

“Now two parcels in front,” Bonga said.

“But,” Louie stammered, “that would be 450 pounds.”

“Fine multiplying, professor,” Bonga laughed.

“I know the routine.” A *bowman* named Jacques stepped up and helped strap two parcels on Bonga’s chest. Louie stared in disbelief.

As Bonga leaned forward and started up the trail, the crewmen chanted, “Bonga, Bonga, Bonga ...”

“He’ll never make it,” a short man spoke to Jacques.

“We’ll see,” Jacques replied. Then turning to Louie, he said, “Bonga likes to start his trips with a little test. You’d better hurry if you want to see the finish.”

Shouldering a single parcel, Louie ran after Bonga. The rest of the crew followed.

At first Louie trotted to keep up, and Bonga hummed a tune. When the trail steepened, Bonga stopped humming and took deep breaths. His calf muscles bulged, and his moccasins slipped on loose rocks.

“You can make it,” Louie said.

“Thanks, professor,” Bonga spoke through gritted teeth.

Once Bonga crested the ridge, his stride lengthened again. From there, it was a short march to the river’s edge.

The men all cheered when he reached the calm pool above the rapids. Jacques pulled out a coin purse and said, “The time of reckoning has come.”

The handful of men who had wagered against Bonga dropped a coin into Jacques’ palm.

Then Jacques jingled his purse and asked Bonga, “Do you want your share now or later?”

“Hold it for me,” he grinned. “We’ve got canoes to carry.”

His Story



At 6-feet, 6-inches tall, Bonga stood a foot taller than the average French-Canadian voyageur. Along the trade route of lakes and rivers he paddled rushing rapids and hiked rough portages with ease. He carried heavier bundles than most men crossing overland from one waterway to another. The tale of his 700-pound carry around the dalles of the St. Louis River was most likely an exaggeration. But if Bonga portaged even half that amount, his feat would have been extraordinary because a voyageur ordinarily carried two 90-pound parcels.

His Story



When Bonga was 18 years old, he was hired by explorer Lewis Cass to guide a search for the Mississippi River headwaters (which was unsuccessful). Cass chose Bonga because he was a skilled canoeist, spoke the Ojibwe language (anishinaabemowin), and knew the headwaters country, home of his mother's Pillager band of the Leech Lake tribe.

The most difficult test for the Cass expedition came when they encountered the Savanna Portage. This mosquito-infested, six-mile trail ran through muck that could swallow a man up to his waist. Bonga's jokes and fine singing kept up the men's spirits.

Swampy Portage

The lower St. Louis River was a mix of rapids, black chutes of rock, and waterfalls. Hundred-foot-tall white pines grew along the rugged, rocky shoreline. But other than a few short *pipe breaks* that day, Bonga gave the crew no time to admire the scenery.

Four days later, they turned up the East Savanna River. The farther they paddled west, the more the channel meandered and narrowed. Thick reed beds slowed down their canoes. Trees formed a tangled green canopy that blocked the sun. Louie slapped at clouds of mosquitoes, but Bonga only said, "Those little critters don't eat much."

By the second day, swamp grass had closed in so tightly that Louie couldn't get his paddle into the water.

"Portage time," Bonga called.

Louie stepped out of the canoe and sank to his ankles in smelly, black muck. "Be careful you don't lose your moccasins, professor," Bonga laughed.

For four more grueling days, Bonga led the way across the Savanna Portage. The voyageurs cursed the knee-deep mud, the alder brush and thorns that cut their faces, and the swamp grass that grew taller than their heads. But Bonga sang silly folk songs to keep the spirits of the men up.

The ground gradually got higher as they crossed the *continental divide*. By the end of the portage, half of the men were limping, and all had bloody cuts and torn shirts and sashes.

Declaring the stream wide enough to float a canoe, Bonga called, "Leech Lake, here we come!"




Hero's Welcome

The afternoon the crew arrived at the Leech Lake trading post, 20 or 30 men and women—voyagers and Ojibwe—greeted Bonga with a hero's welcome.

When Bonga raised his paddle and waved, two men fired guns into the air, raining bird shot down on all four canoes.

"Now, that's what I call a fine reception, professor!" Bonga smiled. "The Indians in these parts are partial to me. My mother was one of them. And folks think it's real special that I was the first black man born in this part of the country."

Louie shook his head and grinned. Whether Bonga claimed to be black, white, Ojibwe, or something else, there was no doubt that he was 100-percent original. 

A NOTE TO TEACHERS

Find links to teachers guides at www.mndnr.gov/young_naturalists.

Historical consultation by Anton Treuer, professor of Ojibwe, Bemidji State University.



His Story

In 1837 Bonga's name became a household word when he captured an accused murderer. Ignoring the bitter January cold and snow, Bonga set off alone in search of the suspect. For six days and nights, he tracked him. Finally, he caught and delivered the man named Che-ge-waskung to Fort Snelling, resulting in the first criminal trial in Minnesota history.

Bonga's career as a fur trader faded in the 1840s as the fur trade ended. Both the supply and demand for furs had declined. Too much trapping and disease almost wiped out the beaver population. Demand for beaver pelts to make top hats dropped off as silk became the fashion in Europe. In 1842 the American Fur Company went bankrupt.

Being resourceful, Bonga found a new way to earn a living. In the 1850s, he and his wife, Ashwinn, and their four children operated lodges for tourists at



Leech and Otter Tail lakes.

In his later years, Bonga was an outspoken advocate for fair treatment of the Ojibwe people. He recommended that the government acquire good land for the Ojibwe so they could maintain their traditional fishing, hunting, and gathering of wild rice and maple sap. In 1867 Bonga served as the official witness to the treaty signing that established the White Earth Indian Reservation.

When Bonga died in 1884, notice of his death appeared in newspapers in Minneapolis, Chicago, and New York. The U.S. Congress honored his passing. Bonga left a legacy of voyaging, pioneering, and being a fair and honest man. The Rev. Henry Whipple, Minnesota's first Episcopal bishop, said: "No word could be better trusted than that of George Bonga."