

# MINNESOTA AS SEEN BY TRAVELERS

## A DANISH VISITOR OF THE SEVENTIES. II

Two chapters of Robert Watt's narrative of travel in America entitled *Fra det fjerne vesten*, in which he describes certain portions of eastern Minnesota, appeared in the June issue of MINNESOTA HISTORY (see *ante*, p. 157-173). Another chapter, in which the Danish traveler tells of a journey from St. Paul to the western boundary of the state at the Red River over the newly completed St. Paul and Pacific Railroad, is herewith presented. A short sketch of Watt's career and a statement about the editorial policy followed in translating and editing this account are to be found *ante*, p. 155-157.

JACOB HODNEFIELD

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ST. PAUL

[Robert Watt, *Fra det fjerne vesten. Skildringer fra Amerika*, 233-259 (Copenhagen, 1872) — *Translation*]

### XIX ON THE WESTERN PRAIRIES

Atwater, *St. Paul & Pacific* Railroad.

When I arrived in St. Paul it was not my intention to go farther west in this part of the country; but circumstances, which always play such a large part on a journey, determined that I should travel half a hundred Danish miles farther on to the boundary of Dakota. This territory, which is inhabited by large groups of the aborigines, is yet little known and visited by the whites. Here for a long time life will be peculiarly interesting to the traveler, for conditions are such that in all probability many years will pass before these prairies are incorporated into the number of the united states, thereby adding another star to those which already sparkle in the striped banner.

The first division of the so-called *St. Paul and Pacific Rail Road* has been completed — that is the railroad between St. Paul and

Breckenridge, a point on the western boundary of Minnesota — and the Mississippi is thereby joined by the *Red River (of the North)*, which flows through the Hudson Bay territory. The new chapter in Minnesota's history that the construction of this railroad initiates will prove to be of greatest importance.

“The Red River,” which formerly seemed so distant and which could be reached only by long and tedious journeys through thick woods and across endless prairies, has been brought near, and a considerable part of the traffic which formerly went by other routes will now go to St. Paul and from there goods will be shipped either down the Mississippi River or else by rail. The caravans of ox carts, which formerly, after a journey of several hundred miles, finally halted at Minnesota's capital to enable the fur-traders to dispose of their wares, will no longer be seen. Buffalo, otter, beaver, and muskrat hides will be loaded on cars at the *Red River* or at ends of the branches of this railroad, and thus in a short time towns that will grow with great rapidity will spring up in these places.

Hand in hand with the building of railroads goes the settlement and cultivation of the land; and the value of land increases because the settlers will have convenient markets where they may dispose of their products. As stated before, the government encourages such enterprises by every means. You may even hear the benediction pronounced from the pulpit upon the means by which civilization is enabled to advance so rapidly. Each railroad company is given a certain number of acres of land by the state in proportion to the number of miles of road that are built; and, as a result, each company must establish a so-called land office, which is engaged in selling the ceded tracts and which lays out towns, surveys roads, and builds houses for immigrants along the lines. Besides the tracts thus placed on the market, the government offers land to immigrants through its own officers. Under the *Homestead* law the government gives gratis to each settler surveyed land to the value of two hundred dollars — either 160 acres valued at a dollar and a quarter an acre or 80 acres valued at two and a half dollars — in return for which the homesteader is obliged, when he has selected a piece, to pay certain fees to the

local government office and thereafter live on the land for five years. When he has met these conditions and proves it at the aforesaid office, he receives a patent to the land and can do with it what he pleases. Or, under the so-called *Præemption* law, he can select a piece of land and immediately pay the government the very low price asked.

A great many Scandinavians have taken advantage of these facilities for the acquisition of land in Minnesota either from the government or from the railway offices, so that there are now so many of our northern countrymen in the state that they constitute about one-fifth of the population. Their numbers give them an importance in political and other affairs that it is not easy for them to attain elsewhere. I had reason, therefore, to expect to meet many of these Scandinavian pioneers on my journey to the *Red River*. I undertook the trip upon the invitation of General Geo. L. Becker, the president of the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad. I had brought a letter of recommendation for him from home; and when he realized that I wished, as far as possible, to see the most interesting parts of the United States, he proposed that I use an opportunity to see the opening of the *Red River* railroad, which was to be celebrated some days later by all the pioneers who had been in Minnesota before 1850, that is before there was a single mile of railroad constructed in the state or the near-by region.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In September, 1871, Becker made plans to open the first division of the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad with an "excursion party made up of the members of the Old Settlers' Association only, with their good wives." Only those pioneers who had settled in Minnesota before January 1, 1850, were eligible to membership in this association, which was incorporated in 1857. The Red River excursion took place on October 25 and 26, 1871. See *A Sketch of the Organization, Objects, and Membership of the Old Settlers' Association of Minnesota; together with an Account of Its Excursion to the Red River of the North*, 3, 17 (St. Paul, 1872). This pamphlet was printed by the association, and members who had participated in the excursion were later assessed one dollar each to cover the expense of publishing and mailing this account, according to a circular letter dated August 15, 1872, among the papers of the association in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

By immediately entering upon the journey I could inspect the land between the terminals of the railroad, and then later I could make connections with the first train carrying the old adventurers who had fought the Indians and tramped about the country before there was a single house in many places where there are now large cities. Mr. John Svensson, an experienced and genial man from Skaane, became my traveling companion.<sup>2</sup> He had spent a score of years in America and had secured a position in the mixed lot of Danish, Dutch, Hanoverian, and American officials who were employed by the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad.

The fall of the year is considered the most delightful of the seasons in Minnesota, and our trip toward the distant Dakota Territory began on a crisp and clear autumn morning. According to arrangement we were to go by the help of steam for some distance away from St. Paulean civilization. The first division of the railroad had been in use several months, and, when the train started, the coaches were full of settlers and their wives, long-bearded *Lumbermen*, immigrants, children, and hunters carrying guns. As a matter of fact Minnesota is famous for the quantity of its game, and a person does not have to be a particularly good shot in order to bring home ample returns from a hunting expedition. The state is overrun with *Sportsmen* from other parts of America during the entire season. Every other young man who lives in Minnesota has a gun. As an example of how remunerative it is to wander out to one of the many lakes, a settler, who did not at all pretend to be a hunter, told me that during one forenoon alone he had shot forty-two blue-winged teal. In season whole cars full of game are shipped to other states; and the families that live here find it much cheaper to have pheasant,

<sup>2</sup> Watt's companion seems to have been John Swainson, a Swedish immigrant who, according to O. N. Nelson, *History of the Scandinavians and Successful Scandinavians in the United States*, 1:607 (Minneapolis, 1893), "was employed as general land agent for the Great Northern R. R." from 1871 to 1876. During this period the St. Paul and Pacific was absorbed by the Great Northern. In the St. Paul *Directory* for 1874 and 1875 Swainson is listed as agent for the land department of the first division of the St. Paul and Pacific. According to the same source during this period he was publishing a Swedish newspaper, *Svenska Nybyggaren*, at St. Paul.

prairie chicken, wild duck, or venison on the table than to buy meat at the butcher shop.

But if Minnesota is famous for its game, it is not less so for its lakes. The entire area is literally sown with these beautiful sky-blue bodies of water; and for that reason the whites gave to the entire state the name that the Dakota Indians had given to the sky-colored river that flows through the country. It is estimated that there are approximately ten thousand lakes in Minnesota. They are of all sizes, from five hundred yards to two or three miles in length. The water in all of them has a wonderful clearness; they all teem with fish; and about most of them are small compact groves of oak, elm, ash, and maple.

At the station of Wayzata we came to one of the most beautiful of the lakes. The Indian name Minnetonka,\* which means "Great Water," is retained. This lake is somewhat larger than others near by, of which we already had passed several on our way out and which were to be seen among the trees or in smiling meadows where the hay had been cut and set up in large stacks. Minnetonka, which is three [*Danish*] miles long and of a corresponding width, has many bays; and the shores are picturesque, as occasionally they rise proudly to rocky hills overgrown with ancient trees or merge gently into meadows. The lake is full of fish, and the neighboring woods shelter droves of game. It is therefore no wonder that Minnetonka is visited yearly by hundreds of travelers who camp about its shores or lodge at the hotels that have been erected. Numerous sailboats and a couple of steamboats rode on the water near the railroad when we stopped. Then we proceeded on our way through the Big Woods—a belt of timber that extends for a considerable distance north-westward and must be traversed before one comes in sight of the prairies. From this woody region the entire western country is supplied with timber, and the trees grow so close together that the cutting that has been done does not seem to have made any impression. In olden days, that is a few years ago, it took three

\* In the language of the Dakota or Sioux Indians, *Minne* means water; from that comes, as has been said, Minnesota or sky-tinted water, *Minne-ha-ha* or laughing water, and *Minne-inne-opa* or singing water. [*Author's note.*]

days to traverse these great woods, but now one rushes through in a couple of hours. The wealth of the pioneers on the other side has suddenly doubled, as they now save both time and labor when they wish to bring their products to market.

Several of these pioneers were on their way to their homes in the neighborhood of the many small towns that have sprung up along the railroad during the last two years. I entered into conversation with one of them and soon discovered that he was a Dane. He was a young farmer boy from Lolland who had selected eighty acres of land and built a log cabin on the prairies. He could not yet afford to keep horses, but he had a pair of good oxen and with these he could do temporarily the necessary work. He plowed his ground in the fall and then let it lie covered with snow during the winter until he could put in the seed. During the winter he hauled lumber from the Big Woods with his oxen (those faithful companions of the first pioneers) until he gradually had his land fenced with it. He was especially pleased with life in *The far west* and stated that his father, sixty years old, was soon coming to join him. Of course it had been somewhat lonesome at first, but soon neighbors had come into the region, and now there were in the vicinity where he had settled a Swedish, a Norwegian, and a Danish colony. Together they supported a pastor, a Norwegian named Dahl, who preached to them and instructed the children.

"You ought to get married," I suggested. "Then you would find it less lonesome during the long winter season and you would get along better generally."

"I am going to do just that," said Henrik and smiled shyly. "The girl is in the other coach. Come in and take a look at her."

I accepted his invitation, but was uncertain at first as to who his Else might be until he sat down beside an attractive Norwegian girl, a real sturdy northern beauty with blue eyes and yellow hair.

"Where did you get her?" I inquired.

"I captured her on the prairies," he laughed.

"She was not running loose out there?"

"No, I have been traveling about for two months in order to

find a wife," he explained, "and I think I have been lucky. I took work on various farms; and it would be strange if a man should return unsuccessful if he purposefully set out upon such an errand."

"Now, have you a good house for her?" I inquired.

"Not exactly. I am going to build another next winter, but she can stay with some friends of mine in the neighborhood. Moreover, we are not married as yet, but that may happen at any time," he replied. Thereupon he told me about his pioneer life and that of others, and continued the conversation until we had emerged from the woods and were gliding across the prairies.

The young couple alighted with us at Litchfield, — a little town of eighty houses, including churches, schools, and stores, occupying ground from which wheat was harvested in 1869 — Henrik to inquire if there were any of his neighbors in town with wagons, and we to engage a conveyance that could give us a flying trip across the prairies until we again crossed the railway farther west. We had passed many villages and stopping places before we had come thus far, and everywhere it was possible to discern the increasing life that the railroad had made possible. Oxcarts hauled the grain to the warehouses, where it was loaded on cars; houses were erected here and there; and the plow furrowed the grateful earth in whichever direction one turned to look. We were successful in getting a light wagon, which my well-oriented companion hired for a period of two days. While the horses were being hitched we wandered about among the houses and spoke to several of the inhabitants, who, of course, were all of the opinion that Litchfield some day would become a glorious city. Among others we met a company of young Norwegians and Swedes who, with guns on shoulders and accompanied by a leash of hounds, were on the point of starting for the timber belt that stretches across country and here approaches a settlement.

A little four-wheeled vehicle with springs, drawn by two horses, drove forth at three o'clock in the afternoon. The driver, who was enthroned on the front seat, had donned a buffalo fur coat as a protection against the approaching cold of the evening; after we had taken our places behind him, he swung in on a road leading

in a southerly direction and we said good-by to Litchfield. The land we passed appeared to be especially well fitted for cultivation. Most of it is prairie land consisting of a black, rich mould. Here and there are small groups of trees, and the entire region is well watered by a great number of streams and small lakes. On the latter the wild ducks swarmed, and prairie chickens were continually flying up about us, so that a hunter's fingers surely must have itched had he been in the buggy with us. We passed many pioneer cabins — small frame buildings with a door and a couple of windows, the stable at the side dug half way into the ground and covered with hay. If the oxen were not hitched to the plow they would be grazing close to the little house, where also a couple of pigs and chickens would be disporting themselves. We spoke to several of the settlers and were so certain of finding people from the northern countries that we confidently opened the conversation in "Scandinavian," and we were not disappointed. One of the veterans among the pioneers in Minnesota, the Norwegian Ole Næss, lives in these parts.<sup>3</sup> He is well known to Americans as well as to Scandinavians and is considered one of the most well-to-do of the farmers in the state. Everywhere there were cultivated fields, occasionally about a hundred acres of plowed land in one piece.

When we had driven some distance from Litchfield we passed Henrik and his prospective bride. He had not found a conveyance in Litchfield going in his direction, and now the two were walking arm in arm across the prairie. Before night they would arrive at a house where they would find shelter. They were smiling and looked happy as we wished them good luck. Late in the afternoon we reached *Swede Grove*, as the Americans call the place;\* and so Swedish was the life in the collection of houses that were located about the prospective town that, even here in the midst of the great western prairies, we were treated to Swedish punch.

<sup>3</sup> This was Ole Halverson Ness, a Meeker County pioneer who settled near Litchfield in 1856. Nelson, *Scandinavians*, 1: 515.

<sup>4</sup> A post office known as Swede Grove was established in 1864 within the limits of the present township of the same name in Meeker County. Warren Upham, *Minnesota Geographic Names*, 340 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 17).



Moreover, the place has acquired renown because the Indian carnage of 1862 began at the place of some farmers a short distance away [*at Acton*]. Our northern brethren in large numbers were among the first over whom the wild enemies swung their scalping knives.

Darkness began to fall and shadows lay across the endless billowy lines of land that we saw about us. The trees were now entirely gone, but here and there the silhouette of a pioneer cabin was traced on the evening sky. The houses stood like lonesome sentinels awaiting the great army of immigrants that was soon to follow. Everything was hushed and still. Neither birds nor animals emitted any sound nor made themselves visible. All nature had gone to slumber. And the only thing that moved on the immense expanse, like an ocean suddenly hardened and spread out under the starry sky, was our little vehicle, which rode the long, dun waves of the earth and advanced toward some points of light in the distance. When we reached these we were in the town of Atwater, a station on the *Red River* railroad, which here passes through one of the most fertile and picturesque parts of the state.

We put up for the night at a real prairie hotel; and, after we had partaken of a repast of pork in company with the citizen who had driven our wagon, we made a mutual promise to be up early the next morning and fell into sound sleep undisturbed by the din that greets a traveler in a city.

After staying for the night at the aforesaid settlement we took up our journey again and set our course in a southerly direction toward a chain of lakes known collectively as the Kandiyohi lakes, which means "buffalo fish lakes" in Sioux. The region is known throughout Minnesota for its beautiful lakes as well as for the productive land that surrounds them. My companion had been on their shores sixteen years before when on a tour of exploration with a score of other pioneers, and he had not seen them since. He was untiring in his description of these beautiful mirrors of water as he had seen them then, partly surrounded by oak and maple trees. During the season of the year when he had made his visit the rolling prairies had appeared in all their splendor, with yard-high, light green grass in which millions of varie-

gated flowers — among which the wild rose was conspicuous — were woven into the pattern, as it were, of a magnificent thick carpet. The place had appealed to the travelers so much that they had determined to build a town there. Others had taken up the idea, and twice a plan to remove the capital of Minnesota to Kandiyohi had been laid before the governor for his signature.<sup>5</sup> No consideration was taken of the fact that there was not a house there. Something similar had happened in Wisconsin, and for that reason the capital of that state is located in such an exceptionally beautiful place.

It was too late in the season for me to see this smiling aspect of the prairies. Here and there a fire had burned off the grass, so that for miles one saw nothing but the black waves. In other places the withered grass remained. But the impression of luxuriousness that a prairie gives in summer, I did not get. I had to be content with admiring in general the grandiose in nature. And this billowy expanse appeared immensely large to me. Not a tree, not a house, not a living creature could be seen for hours sometimes; and thus the prairies extend to the very boundaries of Minnesota and farther through the large territories of Dakota, Montana, and Idaho, until (to preserve the figure) the waves break on the great Rocky Mountains in the Far West.

A heavy fog came on when we had been out several hours and, in order that our experiences might be as all inclusive as possible on this tour across the prairies, we lost our way several times and headed in wrong directions. When this happened we had to hunt for a house, and when we found one we could be certain of finding a Northman either in the immediate vicinity or engaged in plowing his field, while his wife was busy about the house. The information we received was not always of the most intelligent kind. Most of the farmers seemed to know the road only to the nearest station, where they had taken their grain. We criss-crossed on wet meadows, through swampy holes, or crawled about the high

<sup>5</sup> In 1861 a bill for the removal of the capital to Kandiyohi County was passed by the House but was defeated in the Senate; a similar bill was passed by both houses in 1869 but was vetoed by the governor. William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 3:9 (St. Paul, 1926).

places for several hours before we knew our whereabouts. In one place we followed a road and came near to driving directly into a lake. It was apparent that a farmer had hauled water from the place; consequently he should be in the neighborhood. We hunted and found his house, surrounded by trees and lying in paradisaical peace on a little elevation between two beautiful lakes. He knew that one of the lakes was Lake Elizabeth and that the other was called Lake Ella, but that was about all we got out of the old Swede, who had come from the northern part of the country of his birth and settled in this wonderfully beautiful place. In the meantime the fog had lifted and we drove through a little belt of timber surrounding the first of the above-mentioned lakes. On its mirrored surface the wild ducks were swimming by the thousands. Two large imperial eagles (or, perhaps more properly, Republican eagles, considering the country we were in) flew over our heads, and the driver pointed to them with pride as he exclaimed: "Behold the American eagle!" Round about the lake could be seen the well-built hemispherical habitations of the muskrats, and only a short distance away a flock of wild geese with their glistening black heads rose and flew out across the water. We were among the original inhabitants of the place, and it required but a pair of Indians among the bushes and wild rice to make the picture complete.

The two above-named lakes belonged to the Kandiyohi group, and a little farther on we came to *Lake Katoga* and *Lake Minnetaga*, and then to Little Kandiyohi. My companions now recognized the country, and after having, for the sake of safety, made inquiries from a couple of farmers whom we met concerning directions, we came upon a sort of road across the seared prairies and proceeded on our way toward the northwest and the station of Willmar. This station is situated on the railroad and is surrounded by a considerable number of newly erected frame houses arranged for hotels and stores. The pioneer cabins became more numerous as we turned away from the Kandiyohi lakes. A person would have had difficulty in finding land more luxurious for cultivation or farmsteads more delightfully situated than these, located as they were in open places and among clusters of trees rimming

bowl-like lakes. If the capital of Minnesota actually should be located among the Kandiyohi lakes in future years, it would undoubtedly, as far as situation is concerned, be able to compare favorably with any in the world. In spite of the fact that the season was well advanced and that consequently the green foliage of the trees, the luxurious grass, and the bloom of flowers were lacking, the region presented an aspect of striking beauty.

We did not reach Willmar until evening, although we had seen it for a long time, but it is as hard to calculate distance on the prairies as it is on the ocean. This town, which is situated on *Foot Lake*, a smiling little body of water, is exactly halfway between St. Paul and the *Red River*. Everything considered, it doubtless will be of much consequence some time, as it has a large back country in the region of the upper Minnesota River, where the settlements of *Yellow Medicine* and *Redwood Falls*, noted as the sites of Indian battles, are located. We now bade farewell to our driver and his nigh-exhausted horses. The steam horse, hitched to the old settlers' train, snorted in the distance, and soon we were seated in a coach among the guests who had been invited to the approaching opening celebration of the railroad. The train went on to a station farther west [*Morris*] the same evening. There we halted, and we had to sleep where we sat as best we could until the next morning, when the journey was resumed.

Two days previously a train had gone up to the *Red River* with the last rails; and only because our course lay across entirely level prairies was it possible to complete the road in time. An immense plain extended on both sides of us, and for a score of miles not the least change was evident. Everywhere the soil is suitable for cultivation, and neither stones nor stumps would hinder the pioneer from immediately starting to plow, after providing lumber for a house from the distant river courses. We passed several trains of ox carts covered with oilcloth and filled with the earthly possessions of immigrant families. The people walked at the sides of the vehicles, which labored slowly forward. We were met also by caravans from the northern districts of the *Red River*. These consisted of hunters who were bringing their supplies of furs down to St. Paul; for their great benefactor, the railroad, had

not yet come into full operation in these parts. Only one ox was hitched to each cart with a harness like that of a horse, and the vehicles were peculiar in the absence of metal. Even the wheels were held together by straps cut from buffalo hides. These hardy and contented people may take weeks and even months for their journey, but they take their guns along and increase their stock in trade en route. In the case of larger caravans there is generally a priest in the company, as most of these people — French-Canadians or half-breeds — are Catholics. A number of them are of half Indian and half Scotch descent and come from Selkirk's colony in the Hudson Bay territory. Their language is a sort of corrupt French. It was an extraordinary spectacle that these long lines of clumsy carts presented, and we were all agreed that the bearded fur-hunters who followed them constituted the most unique thing we had seen in these parts. But presently we discovered something white moving on the horizon, and the cry "Sioux Indians!" reverberated through the coaches.

They were in reality Sioux Indians. They came with waving blankets and furs at full speed across the prairie. We slowed down, and when we came to a stand they came very close. Their small hairy ponies did not appear able to endure many hardships, but they gallop about day in and day out with burdens that are far from light, and all the food they get is a whisk of prairie grass. The red warriors were not painted and the eagle feathers denoting their bloody deeds did not project from their coal black hair; hence they were not on the warpath. Guns hung indeed over their shoulders and scalping knives were visible, but the fact that *Squaws* accompanied them indicated that they were out on some hunting expedition. Some were of the opinion that they had come from the Missouri River, from the Indian "Reservation" at that place; others that they were from Dakota on the other side of the *Red River* and that possibly they had come to see the train — the herald of the fact that trouble had reached their borders. If this were the cause of their gathering on the prairie there was no indication of the fact; there was nothing in their appearance to suggest that they had any part in what was going on. They sat as motionless as bronze statues on their

unsaddled horses until the fire wagon was set in motion. It is Indian custom, of course, never to betray any sign of surprise or pain. Not even the greatest bodily pain is supposed to change the expression of an Indian's face. When the day is over and they gather about the fire, what they have seen doubtless will become the subject of discussion and then they will in all probability, like Minnesota's first pioneers in the coaches, recall the bloody wars in which they at one time took part.

As stated, the sight of these Indians gave rise to reminiscences of the Indian wars among my traveling companions; and that was no wonder, as among them were General Sibley, ex-Governor Marshall, Senator Ramsey, and a hundred others who themselves had taken part in the shocking conflict between the whites and the reds. Immediately following this encounter I learned many interesting details of this sad part of Minnesota's history. A young man who happened to be among these veterans and who had served in a corps of volunteers in 1862-63 even invited me, when I should return to St. Paul, to come and see an Indian scalp which he himself had cut off.

"I do not keep it in my house, however," he said. "My wife could not stand the thought of it. I could not treat a dead Indian that way now either. But at that time, when we had in mind the revolting deeds perpetrated by this race and when we ourselves daily were in danger of being killed by their bullets and knives, we looked upon the fight against them as a hunt for a certain scarce game, and we had no conscience in regard to them. I killed this Indian after he and two others in cold blood had shot their arrows through a little ten-year-old Norwegian boy and were making ready to cut off his head. I arrived betimes with some companions and we pursued them. Two of the bloody dogs escaped by jumping into the river and swimming under some water lilies, but I hit my man, and, with the body of the little boy before me, I pulled my knife and scalped him. When you see the scalp you will notice that one of the ears is lacking. It was on, but a friend of mine cut it off for a souvenir. He lost it finally, however, at New Ulm after we had surprised an Indian camp and captured several of the worst ones, including

'Cut Nose.' Our prisoners, linked together, were squatting before a nearly extinguished fire. 'Will you have a piece of tobacco?' he asked the aforesaid chief. 'Ho! Ho!' was the affirmative reply. My friend handed him the severed ear. Quick as lightning 'Cut Nose' rose and struck the man down with his chain, whereupon he threw what had been handed him on the coals."

I expressed the opinion that it would not have surprised me if the Indians had killed his friend. As usual, I received the answer that it was impossible for an outsider to understand conditions as they then existed. "But," continued the narrator, who was a cultured French immigrant artist, "I admit that I would hesitate again to participate in such a struggle with all the barbaric scenes it entails."

For some time the conversation concerned the Indian wars and Minnesota as it was a score of years ago. When I observed the weather-beaten and calloused old-timers who composed the greater part of the native pioneers and listened to their stories, it became clear to me how much the later immigrants owe them and with what full justification they have designed the seal of the North Star state—a man who plows the field with a gun at his side, while a mounted Indian is fleeing toward the setting sun. Consequently it was also a fitting thing to invite the old settlers to take part in the celebration of the opening of this important railway. And so many of them had gathered that with their wives they constituted a party of over three hundred. Several of the ladies also had been in the territory long before its elevation to statehood and not a few had taken part in the wars by loading the guns for the men when things were at their worst. Two of the women interested me especially, as they were half-breed Indians of the Chippewa tribe. They naturally were now dressed in civilized clothes. But although one of them was reported to be very wealthy, her mother, who lived with her in an elegant house, continued to dress as other women of the tribe, and like other *Squaws* she received, with a sort of pride, the woolen blanket from the government yearly unto her death. It must have been with very peculiar emotions that these people took part in this excursion.

At ten o'clock in the forenoon we approached the end of our journey, and we rode over rails resting on ties simply laid loose across the prairie. The track was not laid entirely down to the river, but as soon as the train stopped all streamed out of the coaches and hurried toward a group of trees a couple of hundred yards beyond the engine. There was the famous fork of the Red River. The two branches are called the *Ottertail* and *Bois des Sioux River*, and a rousing hurrah greeted the sight of the waters at their confluence. On the opposite side of the river lay Dakota's flat and outstretched prairies. Several of the party crossed on logs and sent the glad shouts farther into space while they waved handkerchiefs and coats. A lone pioneer had erected his cabin in Dakota Territory near the river; a little caravan of oxcarts was camping on the Minnesota side; but otherwise everything was dead and still as far as the eye could see. The town of Breckenridge, which in 1857 had consisted of a score of houses, had disappeared entirely. In 1862 the Indians had partly killed, partly driven out the inhabitants, and later they had burned all the buildings.<sup>6</sup> Indeed we found few traces of the once promising town that now is going to be revived. A log house only half ready, a tent, and some chests spread about on the prairie where the train stopped pointed to a beginning. But with the entire *Red River Valley* as back country it will not be long before a town again stands on the old site.

When we had inspected the region, the real ceremony of the opening took place. Colonel [John H.] Stevens of Minneapolis, president of *The old settlers' association*, came forward and addressed a few words to the gathering. The surroundings and the occasion for the gathering of this motley crowd at the fork of the Red River, gave added weight to the short speech of the white-haired, erect old man. He expressed himself about as follows:

"As president of the first settlers here in Minnesota I may be permitted to say a few words on this memorable occasion. After

<sup>6</sup> Breckenridge was platted in 1857 and a sawmill was built on the site in the same year, but it is doubtful if many other buildings were erected there at the time. The mill was burned during the Sioux War. Daniel S. B. Johnston, "A Red River Townsite Speculation in 1857," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 15: 421, 433, 434.



a journey from the capital of this state, where the waters glide gently towards the south through orange groves and cotton fields until they arrive at the Gulf of Mexico and perpetual summer, we now stand on the banks of the Red River, which flows in an exactly opposite direction into Hudson Bay and perpetual winter, in the midst of what will become one of the richest grain lands of the world; and we, the old settlers, express our thanks and pleasure that we are permitted to be here today. In the presence of the first governor and over three hundred old settlers, in the presence of him who cultivated the first acre of wheat in Minnesota, and in the presence of our wives, we are witnesses to an event as unusual as it is magnificent. Who among us suspected, when we first stood on this soil, that such a thing could happen in our lifetime — that a railway should connect the Mississippi and the *Red River*? The day has been one of significance for us, and we must make an effort to convince ourselves that we actually are on the banks of the Red River. God bless the new railway and all the old settlers!"

It was a foregone conclusion that President [George L.] Becker, to whose exceptional ability and perseverance it was due in the main that the *Red River* railway was built, would not be forgotten in the many speeches that followed. Joy was general and pronounced, and it would be hard to find a merrier group than the one that returned to St. Paul after this excursion.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Detailed accounts of the Red River excursion and the texts of the speeches delivered during the celebration are to be found in the *Sketch of the Old Settlers' Association*, 17-29, and in the *St. Paul Pioneer* for October 27, 1871.



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