

MINNESOTA PIONEER LIFE AS REFLECTED IN THE PRESS

An excellent picture of the frontier of the fifties is provided by the Minnesota territorial editors, who, between 1849 and 1858, observed and recorded the moving life of the upper Mississippi Valley. In the faded numbers of their papers appears news that was as momentous in the precarious days when Minnesota was a territory as it is interesting today. These papers are rich in accounts of travel, adventure, expansion, and festivity. From such sources, therefore, can be drawn a picture of a period, less than a decade in length, during which Minnesota marched steadily toward statehood and higher social levels.

Territorial Minnesota was no dull outpost of civilization. Its pioneer life was full of adventure and uncertainty. Would the food supply last till spring? Would the mail come through safely? Could boats cross the sandbar? Who would the new immigrants be? Were the war-painted Sioux about to attack the Chippewa? These and many other significant questions were answered in the brief, editorial style that characterized the columns of local news in territorial papers. In editorials and news articles editors reflected the pioneer life about them — its struggles, successes, and pleasures.

James M. Goodhue, the first Minnesota editor, who founded the *Minnesota Pioneer* in 1849, understood St. Paul, so like other new settlements. He wrote:

In one particular, our town excels any other of its size we ever knew; and that is, in excitement. . . . This is the charm, that attaches so many to our town. It is exactly that thing of which all your little old towns of the east and south are destitute. No person can live for a year, in the excitement of our town, and afterward be content with the quiet method, dulness, stillness and stupidity of another place. Our blood is red.¹

¹ *Minnesota Pioneer* (St. Paul), June 10, 1852.

If events did not happen, they were made. National holidays and civic festivals were great occasions. One of the first celebrations in the territory was arranged in St. Paul for July 4, 1849, when settlers from St. Anthony, Stillwater, and Mendota joined with those in the capital city. Bells were rung at sunrise. Cannon boomed at Fort Snelling. The Fort Snelling band played the popular "Washington March" and "Farewell Waltz." A parade formed in front of the St. Paul House and moved on to a near-by grove, where Governor Alexander Ramsey, Henry H. Sibley, Henry M. Rice, and Judge Bradley B. Meeker spoke on the significance of the occasion and the future of Minnesota. Later in the day, when two hundred guests sat at dinner in the American House, toasts were drunk to Minnesota in swaddling clothes, destined like Borealis to be the light of the confederacy; to the great West, the granary of the world; to St. Paul, St. Anthony, and Stillwater, the glorious three; and to the plow, the axe, the hammer, and the press.²

One of the biggest news events of the nine-year territorial period occurred in June, 1854, when the Rock Island Railroad excursion visited Minnesota. This was the editor's great chance for favorable publicity and promotion, and he made the most of it. In the group of eastern men and women, numbering a thousand, who accompanied the excursion, were ex-President Fillmore; college presidents; historians; authors; thirty-five newspaper men, including Charles A. Dana, then on the *New York Tribune* staff, and Samuel Bowles of the *Springfield Republican*; George Bancroft, the historian; railroad men; engineers; geologists; mineralogists; artists; divines; poets; merchants; and persons of fashion. Where but a few years earlier the Chippewa and Sioux had scalped one another and uttered war whoops before the dwellings of the settlers, the "fair daughters and gallant sons of Minnesota" now welcomed their distinguished guests, served them with delicious foods, entertained them at a reception and ball, and escorted them

² *Minnesota Register* (St. Paul), July 14, 1849.

overland to the Falls of St. Anthony. The band played the lovely "Prima Donna Waltz"; the halls of the Capitol were decorated and the windows brilliantly lighted for the occasion. While felicitations were exchanged, Fillmore suggested St. Paul as a "summer place of fashionable resort" and complimented the ladies present. Bancroft described the Mississippi country as "incomparable in scenery and promise." When finally the excursion boat started on its return trip down the Mississippi, it was with regret, yet pride, that Minnesotans watched it disappear around the bend.³

For those settlers who were not satisfied with the adventures that entered into the normal course of pioneer life, there was additional opportunity for excitement. It was offered in part by such steamboats as the "Galena," "Nominee," "War Eagle," "Greek Slave," "Minnesota Belle," and "Golden Era," which plied up and down the Mississippi between ambitious little river towns and raced with competitors. Exploring parties, headed by dragoons and assisted by French-Canadians and half-breeds, rode westward, examined unknown country, hunted, and dined around camp fires on roast skunk, ducks, prairie hens, and wild geese. The less adventurous in order to find excitement had only to go to the levee, where perhaps the thirty immigrants who had slept on the cabin floor of a steamboat the night before had landed. Without roofs over their heads, they boiled potatoes, bathed the babies, and rejoiced that they would soon be among old friends in the territory.⁴

The desire for adventure often was smothered by ambition. New settlements radiated a spirit of industry. Each village had its sawmill. Larger settlements had their breweries, general stores, oyster saloons, hostelries, livery stables, daguerreotypists, professional men, and skilled workmen. When the firm of Rollins, Eastman, and Upton built a flour mill at St. Anthony in 1854, a local editor interpreted the event as the

³ *Pioneer*, June 9, 10, 1854.

⁴ *Pioneer*, June 10, 1852.

“commencement of the development of our immense water power.”⁵ Other editors condemned unscrupulous lumbermen who built dams that flooded bottom lands and destroyed Indian rice fields and other property. “On the Mississippi and along its banks, within the next ten years,” a St. Paul editor prophesied in 1854, “is to be fought the great closing contest between steam on water, and steam on land.”⁶ Perhaps he had read the May 20, 1854, issue of the *St. Anthony Express*, which announced the first railroad to be built in Minnesota, an engine and car that were to run up and down an eight-hundred-foot track built on Nicollet Island.

Progress could be measured and felt. The editor of the *St. Paul Daily Times* knew this when he wrote in 1854:

Enclose St. Paul, indeed! Fence in a prairie fire! Dam up Niagara! Bail out Lake Superior! Tame a wolf! Civilize Indians! Attempt any other practical thing; but not to set metes and bounds to the progress of St. Paul!⁷

Stagecoaches carried travelers between principal towns. Rivalry between the Patterson and Benson line of yellow coaches and the Willoughby and Powers line of red coaches resulted in fifty cent rates and trips to and from St. Paul and St. Anthony by each company both in the morning and in the afternoon. At least one St. Paul editor took time to praise the horses used on the St. Paul-St. Anthony route. He declared them to be “none of your lank, spavined, ring-boned, foundered, half-hipped, wheezing, hoof-bound, knock-kneed, gambrel-legged, sore-headed, shadowy animals, that look as if they had just come limping out of the Apocalypse — the progeny of the Pale horse described in Revelations, which ‘Death and Hell followed after.’”⁸ Twice a year or so, the squeak and

⁵ *St. Anthony Express*, October 21, 1854.

⁶ *Pioneer*, July 26, 1854.

⁷ *St. Paul Daily Times*, May 22, 1854.

⁸ *Pioneer*, March 25, 1852. The subject of the competition of stagecoach companies is touched upon by Arthur J. Larsen in an article on “Roads and Trails in the Minnesota Triangle,” *ante*, 11: 405-407.

rumble of carts loaded with buffalo robes and other valuable furs from the Red River settlements beyond the Canadian boundary and from Pembina meant good business to St. Paul and St. Anthony merchants.

Streams of immigrants poured into Minnesota Territory in the fifties. In July, 1855, a report from La Crosse told that forty immigrant trains passed through the town every day, and one from Galena estimated that a thousand people headed toward Minnesota had traveled through that town each day. Editors boasted that the amount of preëmpted land in Minnesota exceeded that of all other states and territories. Yet the land business flourished. "What the 'crack mare' is to the Vermonter," a St. Paul editor wrote, "the Town lot or quarter Section is to us, as to all settlers in a new country. Land is our whole stock in trade."⁹ Whatever the business, competition was strong. Vendors of ice, bread, meat, and milk exemplified it when they made faces at one another on the streets of St. Anthony and St. Paul.

Money was scarce, often worthless, especially so in the late fifties. Farmers were fortunate to collect twenty-five cents a bushel for potatoes, forty cents for corn and oats, and fifty cents for wheat. Business men suffered with the others. In the midst of such hard times editors did much to protect settlers from "wild cat" money and to strengthen their faith in the future of Minnesota by reiterating the conviction that "To an industrious careful contented man, a crash never comes."¹⁰

Of the evils of pioneer days, drinking seems to have been considered the worst. Temperance societies fought it. Lecturers competed with the corner saloon for patronage. Religious and other organizations passed resolutions against it. Young ladies' institutes took action. For example, members of one group in Illinois adopted the following resolution, which was printed in a St. Anthony paper:

⁹ *Saint Paul Financial & Real Estate Advertiser*, February 16, 1855.

¹⁰ *Chatfield Democrat*, October 21, 1857.

Resolved, that, we young ladies . . . pledge ourselves not to keep company, or join in the sacred bonds of matrimony with any young gentleman who is not in favor of the Maine liquor law, or some other prohibitory law.¹¹

That Gideon H. Pond, editor of the *Dakota Friend* and counselor of the Indians, knew their weakness for drink is shown by the following quotation from his paper :

Twelve years ago they bade fair to die, all together, in one drunken jumble. They must be drunk — they could hardly live if they were not drunk — Many of them seemed as uneasy when sober, as a fish does when on land. At some of the villages they were drunk months together. There was no end to it. They *would* have whiskey. They would give guns, blankets, pork, lard, flour, corn, coffee, sugar, horses, furs, traps, any thing for whiskey. It was made to drink — it was good — it was wakan. They drank it, — they bit off each other's noses, — broke each other's ribs and heads, they knifed each other. They killed one another with guns, knives, hatchets, clubs, fire-brands; they fell into the fire and water and were burned to death, or drowned; they froze to death, and committed suicide so frequently, that for a time, the death of an Indian in some of the ways mentioned was but little thought of by themselves or others.¹²

Goodhue doubted the possibility of enforcing a liquor law. He wrote :

If we could see the law against gambling enforced in our town, for one month, we should have more faith in the liquor law. Gambling is openly and notoriously carried on, in various public places in St. Paul — and our friends, who are urging the passage of a law, quite as difficult to enforce, *know it, they see it every day*; but not a man of them all, moves to the work of prosecuting gamblers.¹³

In addition to curbing drinking and gambling, the new communities were compelled to provide for starving Indians, to prevent fights between Chippewa and Sioux, to guard against the spread of cholera, to stop brawls and rowdiness, to protect

¹¹ *Express*, June 9, 1855.

¹² *Dakota Tawaxitku Kin or the Dakota Friend* (St. Paul), September, 1851.

¹³ *Pioneer*, February 19, 1852.

settlers against prairie and forest fires — in short, to be ready for any emergency.

With the growth in settlements, church spires increased, and the newspapers soon included notes on religious activities. St. Paul editors told of the church that was built for the Reverend Edward D. Neill in August, 1849, of the Methodist Episcopal church built of brick in December of the same year, of the first Unitarian church meetings in the hall of the Sons of Temperance, and of the beginnings of the Baptist and Protestant Episcopal churches; and they also recounted early Minnesota church history, telling of the work of the Presbyterian church at Fort Snelling in 1834, its board of elders, — Colonel Gustavus Loomis, Captain Edmund A. Ogden, and the Honorable Henry H. Sibley, — and its pastor, the Reverend Thomas S. Williamson, who served the Lord's Supper for the first time in one of the company rooms at the fort.¹⁴ There were interesting episodes in the growth of the Roman Catholic church, which had organized a congregation and built a chapel in St. Paul when it was the resort of the French *voyageur*.

Pioneer ministers were often compelled to preach without pay. In June, 1852, the "only organ in town" was one that a "German girl carries about strapped on her back, like a papoose."¹⁵ Lectures were popular. The Reverend T. K. Cressey announced that he would give three or four lectures at the Presbyterian church in St. Paul on the "Divine institution of the Sabbath — tracing it from Eden, through the Patriarchal and Mosaic to the Christian dispensation," and giving reasons for changing from the seventh to the first day. On another occasion in 1852 "The largest public assembly ever convened in Minnesota within a building" was made up of hundreds of westerners squeezed into the aisles, pews, and gallery of Neill's church in St. Paul to hear Gregory M. Wortabet of Beirut, Syria. At St. Anthony a Young Men's Association was or-

¹⁴ *Minnesota Democrat* (St. Paul), December 10, 1850.

¹⁵ *Pioneer*, June 3, July 15, 1852.

ganized which had for its objects the "development of the mind" and the "mutual enjoyment" of its members.¹⁶

Details of church socials were described in the columns of pioneer papers. They were a popular means of raising money for a new bell, the pastor's salary, or for payment on the church debt. One such social was held with great success in 1852 on the decks of a steamboat, the "Greek Slave," anchored in St. Paul. The ladies of the local Baptist church filled a seventy-foot table in the men's cabin with "meats and confections." A pyramid cake in the center of the table was worth twenty dollars. The ladies' cabin was filled with "fancy articles." And woe to the bachelor who ventured into that room! The proceeds from the sale amounted to between three and four hundred dollars. Joseph R. Brown, editor of the *Pioneer*, was there, and the following week he wrote:

Many little scenes of gallantry and repartee, occurred at the sales, but which like lightning-bugs, lose too much of their charm when caught; therefore, we shall let them fly.¹⁷

Because education was a less urgent need than others, the building of schools was often delayed. Larger settlements, however, soon had their private academies and public schools. Excelsior boasted a college. No liquor or gambling was allowed about the premises and students had an opportunity to study special courses in language, physiology, and music. The schools advertised their high moral tone, discipline, and new standards of education. St. Paul had its Episcopal day school. St. Anthony had a young ladies' high school, and the public was invited to attend its rhetorical exercises and examinations. St. Peter provided for its first school by assessing a tax of one hundred dollars upon the property of the school district, and by appropriating fifteen dollars for books.¹⁸ The regents of

¹⁶ *Pioneer*, September 9, October 7, 1852; *Falls Evening News* (St. Anthony and Minneapolis), October 16, 1857.

¹⁷ *Pioneer*, December 30, 1852.

¹⁸ *Falls Evening News*, October 2, 20, 1857; *Pioneer*, May 6, 1852; *St. Peter Courier*, November 20, 1855.

the University of Minnesota met in the St. Charles Hotel, a two-story frame building in St. Anthony, on May 31, 1851, to arrange for a site and to start a preparatory department for that school. Hamline University at Red Wing had more than seventy-five students of both sexes, who paid \$4.00 a term for the primary course, \$5.33 for the junior, \$6.00 for the middle, and \$6.66 for the senior. Students could obtain board and room for \$2.50 a week, and the student who wished to be economical could board himself for \$1.25 a week. All the wood used by students was furnished at cost.¹⁹

The educational problems of the period often caused intense feeling in a community. In St. Paul, a correspondent of the *Pioneer* was outspoken in his convictions:

We are told that the way to elevate schools, is to pay high wages to teachers. Now it occurs to me, that paying a blockhead \$50 or \$60 a month, say \$600 per annum, the salary of the principal of a high classical Academy in other parts of the country, to teach a common district school in Minnesota, may elevate *teachers* and not *schools*.²⁰

In July, 1852, a month before Goodhue died, he called attention of St. Paul parents to a village problem of a similar type:

. . . There is a free school, at the lower landing in St. Paul, where your children can be taught all the peccadilloes and vices, from lying and profane swearing, up to the higher calendar of crimes. . . . They will soon be beautiful graduates, every one of them with a diploma from the Devil.

In the same issue he spoke of the lack of proper facilities for education:²¹

There is not a building in all St. Paul, fit to be called a District school house. The only building known as such, is hardly fit for a horse stable. — There was another miserable substitute for a school house . . . sold the other day, to satisfy a mortgage of less than \$200.00. All this in an opulent town, swarming with chil-

¹⁹ *Express*, May 31, 1851; *Red Wing Sentinel*, February 9, 1856.

²⁰ *Pioneer*, April 1, 1852.

²¹ *Pioneer*, July 29, 1852.

dren, little untaught brats, swarming about the streets and along the levee in utter idleness, like wharf rats. All this in a town too, that boasts of half a dozen steepled churches.

A Winona editor, writing in 1857, heaped shame on his city for its lack of schools and regretted that with a population of four thousand inhabitants and a large number of children Winona was destitute of schools.²²

The new settlements had their young men's associations, debating clubs, dramatic societies, and lyceums, which provided both recreation and education. During the winter months, these societies could choose their speakers from a long list of capable men in the territory. In this list were the Reverend Edward D. Neill, Henry H. Sibley, James W. Taylor, Alexander Ramsey, Joseph A. Wheelock, Samuel Beaman, the Reverend Charles G. Ames, the Reverend A. D. Williams, the Reverend David B. Knickerbacker, Judge Bradley B. Meeker, Isaac Atwater, and the Reverend Charles Secombe.

Despite the institutions working for good and elevating listeners, whispers and gossip were an insidious evil in the settlements. Sometimes editors used sentimental editorials as a weapon in their fight against such talk:

. . . The foul tongue of slander, the idle boast of the silly braggart, or the vain jest of the thoughtless inebriate, will cast a blur upon her name which will plunge her in endless grief and sorrow: perhaps, breaking her heart, lead her to an early and untimely grave, about which no kindly hand shall plant a flower.²³

Editors with an eye for the sensational clipped items that carried conversational possibilities from eastern newspapers. Jenny Lind and her philanthropies were rarely overlooked. P. T. Barnum was reported to have said that he would give more for a drunkard who had succeeded in business as a public curiosity than for anything he had ever owned, not excepting the woolly horse, the mermaid, or Tom Thumb. An international telegraph was planned. New inventions were startling.

²² *Winona Argus*, April 30, 1857.

²³ *Minnesota Democrat*, January 14, 1851.

New York boasted a six-story building that housed a hundred and forty-four families. Milwaukee had reached a population of twenty thousand; Detroit, twenty-one thousand; Cleveland, seventeen thousand; Chicago, twenty-eight thousand. St. Paul was destined to be the metropolis of the West; Pittsburgh would never be anything but a small town.

When spring arrived, settlers turned to the out-of-doors for pleasure. Boys flew kites and played marbles. Men fished. Women knew that summer time was picnic time. While belles rustled laces and satins in admirable profusion at Saratoga, Newport, Sharon, and Cape May, fancy-free daughters of pioneers with their pretty faces hidden in mammoth sunbonnets spread damask napkins and took picnic lunches from wicker baskets on the banks of the Mississippi, on the shores of Minnesota lakes, and at the Falls of St. Anthony. Minnesota weather contributed to the success of such outings. A St. Paul editor must have experienced a beautiful day when he wrote:

This is an Indian-Summer day, of a perfect cast. A gossamer haze hangs like a fringe over the river, and soft Sunbeams mingle with the stream, like the parting kiss of lovers.²⁴

Winter was the season of balls and gaiety. These were often described by the pioneer editor:

One of the most delightful assemblies of the season, took place at the house of G. R. TUCKER, ESQ., on Friday evening last. More lovely women, or fairer maidens, we may challenge the Territory to produce.

We were forced to quit the merry scene at an early hour, but we left the joyous group chasseeing to the inspiring strains of LEONARD'S excellent band.²⁵

A New Year's ball was announced in Winona in 1855:

NEW YEAR'S BALL AT THE ST. CHARLES HOTEL. — J. & J. H. EASTON will give a grand Ball on New Year's night at their new hotel at St. Charles. There will be a splendid chance for you,

²⁴ *Pioneer*, October 7, 1852.

²⁵ *Winona Republican*, December 18, 1855.

gay gallants of Winona, to give your sweethearts a delightful sleighride, and a merry dance.²⁶

In St. Paul, Mazourka Hall was a popular place for parties. Churches often gave entertainments. Hard-time balls were held at the St. Charles Hotel in St. Anthony. Pilgrim dinners were special events. Occasionally, the élite of St. Peter, Traverse des Sioux, and Nicollet County gave joint cotillions. Anniversaries and national holidays were not overlooked as appropriate times for such celebrations :

NEW YEAR'S CALLS. — Several beautiful young ladies — God bless 'em — of our town, have requested us to say that the good old Eastern fashion, of receiving the calls of gentlemen on New Year's day, will be observed by them, and we appreciate their resolution, satisfied that the gentlemen " will be too happy," &c.²⁷

Although editors recorded such happenings, their society items were usually brief. A news story written about a meeting of the New England Society of Minneapolis by a local editor in December, 1857, is one of this type :

The first Anniversary of the " New England Society of the Northwest " was celebrated with a Festival, on Tuesday Evening the 22nd inst., at the Cataract Hotel, Minneapolis. Extensive arrangements had been made for the occasion, and so much interest was manifested, that, at an early hour, the streets of our city were noisy with the din of carriages, and when we arrived, at 7 o'clock, a brilliant throng of 200 or 300 had already congregated in the spacious halls and parlors of the Cataract.²⁸

Homes and hotels were often the scenes of entertainment. Some of these places were elegant. The home of Dr. Alfred E. Ames, built in Grecian style in 1857 and situated on sloping ground overlooking " Minneapolis, upper and lower St. Anthony, the Falls, etc." was among the finest. It had " beauty and symmetry " both " within and without " and " none of the awkward and ponderous massiveness that hangs around the old castles of the Rhine." The house, which consisted of a

²⁶ *Winona Republican*, December 25, 1855.

²⁷ *Winona Republican*, December 25, 1855.

²⁸ *Falls Evening News*, December 24, 1857.

main body and wings to the north, west, and south, contained thirty rooms, among which were a hall ten by eighteen feet, a library fifteen by eighteen, a parlor eighteen by twenty-one, a family room and a dining room each twelve by eighteen, and a kitchen thirteen by twenty. It had "costly mantles of marbled iron," ornamented ceilings, complete piping for the introduction of gas, a "beautiful slab of clouded granite" in front of the doors, and a "spacious veranda supported by fluted columns."²⁹ In 1856 St. Paul boasted an excellent hotel in the Fuller House, with its "magnificent saloon," steam heat, home-manufactured gas, and office overlooking the entrances, parlors, reception room, washroom, porter's room, and dining room. The Winslow House, built in St. Anthony a year later, was a "magnificent" hotel, containing the "most capacious and beautiful" ball room in the West outside of Chicago. Its dining room, eighty-six by thirty-eight feet, seated five hundred people at thirty-two tables. Its ball room, with twenty-foot ceiling, platform, and ninety by forty-foot dimensions, contained chandeliers that cost \$670. The ladies' parlor contained four mirrors costing \$150 apiece. The furnishings alone were reported to have cost \$45,000.³⁰

Despite such examples of extravagance, any picture of Minnesota in the fifties must portray a society that was young and simple in its pleasures. Western frontier standards governed. It was the day of the steamboat, the immigrant, the bonnet and the shawl, and the plow, axe, hammer, and gun. It was a time when the crash of tall pines resounded in settlements and rough buildings grew into towns.

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²⁹ *Falls Evening News*, October 2, 1857.

³⁰ *Weekly Pioneer and Democrat*, July 17, 1856; *Falls Evening News*, October 3, 1857.



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