

## SOME SOURCES FOR ST. CROIX VALLEY HISTORY<sup>1</sup>

Any discussion of historical sources for a region in this country must give an important place to newspapers. As long ago as 1849 Governor Ramsey, urging Minnesota to preserve its newspapers, called them "daybooks" of history. An American scholar, Professor E. E. Robinson, recently referred to newspapers as "the revealing diary of a great people." Speaking of the California papers of the fifties, he said that their news stories, editorials, advertisements, general comment, and local items furnish a picture that "glitters with a realism that even the lapse of eighty years does not dim."<sup>2</sup> That is true also of the early papers of the St. Croix Valley, perhaps especially if one thinks of such things as the social and economic life, customs, cultural activities, and the hopes and rivalries of communities. As in the case of the California newspapers, the record is the more valuable because it is largely informal and unconscious, not an avowed effort to draw a picture of the times.

The newspaper editor was a pioneer of culture, and the dates of the founding of papers are clues to the emergence of genuine communities from the straggling clusters of earlier settlement. Thus the *St. Croix Inquirer* began publication at Hudson in 1850 and the *St. Croix Union* at Stillwater in 1854; the *Prescott Journal* made its bow in 1857; Taylor's Falls and St. Croix Falls got newspapers of their own in 1860; and Osceola Mills had one in 1861. If the

<sup>1</sup> A paper read on June 27, 1936, at the Stillwater session of the fourteenth state historical convention held under the auspices of the Minnesota Historical Society. The writer is indebted to Mr. Lewis Beeson and Mrs. Robert Beveridge for aid in assembling illustrative material.

<sup>2</sup> Professor Robinson's address, "In Praise of Newspapers," was delivered at a session of the American Historical Association in Chattanooga in 1935.

dates tell a story, so also do the names, as is evidenced, for example, in the newspapers of Stillwater. The first paper, the *Union*, took the position that the Democrats were the party of union, that they only had succeeded in "harmonizing with the wishes of the people." The name of the next paper, the *Messenger*, emphasizes news itself, but that of the *Stillwater Democrat* of 1859 again reminds one that Stillwater was a Democratic stronghold in pioneer times. The *Democrat* expired, however, in the year that marked the opening of the Civil War; and when a new name appeared, after the Civil War, it was the *Stillwater Republican*. This in turn was followed by the *Stillwater Gazette*, which was launched in 1870 and has continued to the present day. Five years later the *Stillwater Lumberman* testified to the importance of the great industry of the valley. The *Prison Mirror*, beginning in 1887, records the presence of the great penal institution of the state. And in 1891 the influx of German-speaking settlers was reflected in the journal known as *Hermanns Sohn im Westen*. So the names of Stillwater newspapers suggest in some measure the panorama of Stillwater history.

But dates and names will not open the mines of historical ore represented by the papers. The only way to do that is to dig into the files. In doing so, one quickly discovers that the pioneer newspaper editors were boosters, optimists, eager to attract immigrants, to convince the East of the advantages and possibilities of Minnesota, and to build up their communities, and they referred to their rivals with no friendly voice. Even before announcing its politics, the *Stillwater Union* extolled Stillwater, its location, advantages, and enterprise. In an early issue it predicted that the valley would become a center of attraction for all classes and professions from all parts of the country; its back country was fertile and easy of access and the iron horse was coming. As to climate, it told of a Baltimore gentleman with a pulmonary complaint that threatened his life who was com-

pletely cured by the bracing winter atmosphere of the St. Croix Valley. Well for him, said the *Union*, that he chose Minnesota instead of the enervating climate of Florida. It sounded a more critical note, however, when it looked at rival cities. St. Paul's growth, it thought, was too rapid to be honest. It charged that St. Paul deliberately delayed all mail destined for Stillwater, and on certain other matters it cast aspersions in the direction of the capital city. The *Union* declared that St. Paul was almost entirely dependent upon Stillwater for lumber, however. "So it seems something good can come out of Nazareth," wrote the *Union*. "But the St. Paul papers won't acknowledge it. They would infinitely prefer to have their eye teeth pulled." A slightly less genial note was sounded in a paper of Osceola Mills, Wisconsin, when it paid its respects to the neighboring village of Sunrise, Minnesota. It urged that the name be changed to Sunset and added the following comment: "The village is about ten years old, is not of rapid growth, nor fortunate in its settlers. When one neighbor gets mad with another, the custom has been to set his house on fire, kill his hogs and chickens, poison his dogs and cats or pull down his fence and let another neighbor's cattle destroy his crops; but we are happy to note the advent of better things." In a more charitable, if somewhat condescending, mood, a Stillwater citizen conceded that he had "on the whole formed a very favorable opinion" of Hudson. "It appears to contain," he went on, "a very intelligent, industrious, and enterprising population, whose principal aim appears to be, to make Hudson, *the* town of the St. Croix valley; and with the exception of Stillwater, they will doubtless succeed."

Alongside such commentaries are jubilant reports about the products of the soil. "The past season, enough wheat was raised in Minnesota to bread the population, but not having mills to grind it, our farmers have been obliged to send their grain to foreign markets," wrote the *Union* in

1854. Game was plentiful, and in 1855 in Stillwater venison sold at eight and ten cents a pound, prairie chickens, ducks, and pheasants, from fifteen to twenty-five cents apiece, and occasionally bear meat was on the market. If you didn't want to buy your game at the market, you might respond to the advertisement of Peter F. Bouchea of Willow River, who in 1850 in the *St. Croix Inquirer* advertised his services as a guide:

Come on then, ye sportsmen, with high boots, rifle and blanket, and I will shortly conduct you to the forests where my forefathers, as they chased the swift elk and the huge black bear, would proudly exclaim,

No pent-up willow huts contain our powers,  
But the unbounded wilderness is ours.

It has already been noted that Stillwater achieved its first newspaper in 1854. That year also witnessed the establishment of a lyceum and an academy and so it must have marked a new stage of advance in the cultural history of the community. Both the lyceum and the academy are well reported in the local newspapers. Thus we learn that four debaters opened the career of the lyceum with a discussion of the question "Resolved that the ultimate success of the Know Nothing party will endanger the moral, social, and political institutions of the United States." Soon thereafter a speaker from St. Croix Falls discoursed on "Young America" and his address was printed in full in the *Union*. Every town in the valley desired an academy of learning, and the first issue of the *Union* in 1854 announced the opening of Washington Seminary at Stillwater, with the Reverend J. S. Webber as principal, and with a course of studies including English, languages, geography, algebra, intellectual philosophy, and music. At the dedication in November an address was delivered on the subject of "The Pedagogue versus the Demagogue." Commenting on the dedication the *Union* remarked, "It is seldom we meet with so intelligent and refined an audience even in our eastern cities

as met on this occasion." Fourteen years later, when the cornerstone of the St. Croix Valley Academy was laid at Afton, the Masonic lodges of Stillwater, Lakeland, Cottage Grove, Hudson, and Osceola had charge of the ceremony, excursion boats brought several hundred persons to Afton, the Comet Band of Stillwater played, there was a parade, and an elaborate program followed. The pioneer academies were a phase of town promotion, but they also represented a genuine desire for education in the era before the public high school. Their beginnings, aims, and progress are reflected in the pioneer newspapers, and it is rather difficult to find much information about them elsewhere.

Many other illustrations can be drawn from the early St. Croix Valley newspapers to show their value to the historians of this region. The advertisements afford a gauge of the professions, trades, and business of the towns; they enable one to enter the stores and price such items as shawls, cambrics, bonnets, red and blue flannel shirts, and the like; they tell of competing business houses in other towns, including such distant places as Prairie du Chien, Galena, and St. Louis; they emphasize in many ways the importance of the river in the life of the valley; and they reveal the progress of land sales and of building. The French department of the *St. Croix Inquirer*, with news in French from Three Rivers, Montreal, and other places, reminds one that the valley had a considerable French-Canadian element. The papers as a whole, with their poetry, love stories, essays, and articles clipped from eastern newspapers, are repositories of pioneer reading—frontier magazines as well as newspapers. Casual items tell of pioneer amusements from horse racing to ventriloquy, and from gambling to music. The president of the Turf Fisher Course of Stillwater, announcing a match in 1854 between the "celebrated Birmingham" and the "well known Cannon Ball," characterized the racing rendezvous as the "Long Island of Minnesota." The sedate pages of the papers are often spiced with frontier wit and infor-

mality. The local tax collector in Stillwater did not stand on ceremony when he wrote in 1854: "Fellow citizens! New Year's is coming and so are the County Commissioners. Please pay your taxes and oblige your humble servant." The next year he employed verse in his appeal to the people:

Taxes, taxes, taxes  
 Oh my delinquent friends, do pay your taxes.  
 Now eighteen fifty four is o'er,  
 The county fathers growl,  
 While they for Taxes, Taxes roar,  
 Poor I for taxes howl.

Naturally the valley newspapers reflect the dominant industry of the region. The *St. Croix Union* believed the pineries inexhaustible, but even as early as 1855 it urged lumbermen to permit a vigorous second growth through sparing the young trees. Now and then one gets swiftly etched pictures of the lumber business from the Stillwater point of view. Here is an item from the *Union* for November 3, 1854:

A large number of our lumbermen, who reside in our city during the summer, have gone up the river to the woods. Active preparations have been made during the fall to fit out this vast army of workers. Work cattle have been in demand for some time. Wagons have been shipped to this point in great numbers. Provisions have come to us by boat loads, and [have been] reshipped to . . . the pineries. Long trains are on the way, and are still going, and have continued so for over a month, and will continue until winter sets in.

Scholars must use newspaper sources with due caution, alert for inaccuracies, bias, and inadequacy, but the fact remains that for the story of manners and customs in the broad sense, for the history of a community, for the reconstruction of the manifest activities of a society, they are invaluable. The illustrations here given are little more than hints of what the early press has to tell of the people and towns and industries that flourished in the St. Croix Valley during the foundation period of the state.

Newspapers are not enough, however. The truth is that

the materials for history are about as varied as are human interests themselves. So we are obliged to cast a wide net in collecting historical documents—we must put a broad interpretation upon that phrase “historical documents.” Laws and political platforms, the proceedings of conventions, the archives of government, the addresses of leaders are of course important; but a letter telling of a pioneer’s experience is as genuine a document of history as a state paper. The diary of a farmer or of a businessman or of a minister or of a housewife is as genuine a document of history as a treaty. So the job of our state and local historical societies is to find, to forward the care of, and to use not only newspapers and public records, but also letters, diaries, reminiscences, notes of interviews, account books, business papers, the archives of churches<sup>3</sup> and of special organizations, even pictures, pamphlets, and handbills, not to mention museum objects—in a word, all kinds of records and remains that can help us to portray the life of the people. Here is a big job! The state historical society has done much to advance it these many years, but I am glad that today there are nearly a half hundred local societies that are joining hands with us in the task.

It is possible only to allude to some of the rich treasures of manuscript sources for St. Croix Valley history that are preserved, either as originals or as transcripts, in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society. The diary of Jedediah Stevens, the first Protestant missionary among the Chippewa of eastern Minnesota, has its setting in the St. Croix Valley in 1829 and 1830, when the missionary visited at the trading post of Daniel Dingley. In this diary is what is probably the first account of any literary merit of the Dalles of the St. Croix. Another unpublished diary of in-

<sup>3</sup> It may be noted that the First Presbyterian Church of Stillwater has records that go back to 1849 and that St. Mary’s Catholic Church of the same city has records that run from 1865 to the present. This information is derived from a recent WPA inventory of church records in Stillwater.

terest is that of Dr. Douglas Houghton, the physician who accompanied the Schoolcraft expedition of 1832. Its regional interest arises from the fact that Dr. Houghton made his way out of the Northwest by way of the St. Croix. It records the journey, with vivid detail about the canoe expedition, the natural life of the region, Indian villages, and the fur trade. On the Snake River he found a camp of Chippewa Indians and stopped long enough to vaccinate sixty-three of them. In the Levi Stratton Papers is an interesting letter in which Stratton, a New Englander who took a claim at the site of Marine, tells of his journey up the St. Croix in 1838. He was one of a company of thirty-five men who went up to the St. Croix to build a sawmill. The "Palmyra the Boat that I went on," he wrote, "was the first Boat that entered the river we surprized the natives as we passed them on the river with their birch Canoes."

Unusual are the St. Croix records left by the artist Henry Lewis, who visited this valley twice in the late forties. A delightful chapter on this region was included in his book *Das illustrirte Mississippithal*, published at Düsseldorf in the fifties. There he describes the beauties of the valley, telling of its fertility, and incidentally commenting on the excellent fishing in some of the lakes of the region. Lewis himself felt moved to scold his guide one day, when the latter caught 185 pike, trout, and other fish in two hours and then threw away all but the best and the largest. A fine painting by Lewis of Cheever's Mill on the St. Croix is owned by the Minnesota Historical Society, but his paintings of Stillwater and Point Douglass seem to have been lost. Only a short time ago a manuscript journal kept by Lewis in 1848 was found in Canada.<sup>4</sup>

Tucked away among the Sibley Papers are two Stillwater documents of basic political significance for Minnesota: the

<sup>4</sup> Publication of this journal, edited by Bertha L. Heilbron, was begun in MINNESOTA HISTORY for June, 1936, and is completed in the present issue.



proceedings of the famous Stillwater convention of 1848, which set in motion the political forces that led to the creation of Minnesota Territory, and the memorial that the delegates addressed to President Polk. With the latter are the original sixty-one signatures, including eighteen Stillwater names, among them Morton Wilkinson, H. L. Moss, C. Carli, and Socrates Nelson. One of the most interesting historical documents for this region is the original of the federal census of 1850 for Minnesota, which lists the 1,056 residents of Washington County, giving their origins, occupations, and other information. This is matched by a similar record for 1860, when the county had advanced to a population of 6,043. In these two records we have a kind of Domesday survey of Minnesota.

As we move into the fifties the manuscript sources become more numerous. There are, for example, the letters of Richard Hall, pastor of a congregation at Point Douglass and a missionary preacher in the St. Croix area, written to the American Home Missionary Society. Just after he reached Point Douglass in 1850, Hall called attention to the fact that "On the Wis. side the people are from N. Y. Ohio and northern Ill. On the Minn. side the people are mostly from Maine." In another letter, written in 1852, he tells of plans for a town hall in Cottage Grove. "The design [is] to have it for public meetings of all kinds & not under the executive control of any religious society."<sup>5</sup>

By a coincidence the Minnesota Historical Society has the account book of one of the first blacksmiths of Taylor's Falls, A. C. Sevey, and also a group of letters written by a man who worked for him, both records going back to 1851. Beginning with 1853, a remarkable diary kept at Lakeland by Mitchell Young Jackson, a Hoosier, gives a detailed and valuable picture of the building of a farm in frontier

<sup>5</sup> Film slides have been made for the Minnesota Historical Society of Hall's original letters, which are preserved in the library of the Chicago Theological Seminary.

days.<sup>6</sup> Ignatius Donnelly's diary starts with 1857, the year of his first visit to Minnesota, and describes the towns of Hastings, Prescott, Point Douglass, and Stillwater. The latter, he wrote, "is a closely built small place—white houses neatly built & painted . . . it has but little level ground"; and he speaks of "the lumber men—day after pay day—red shirts like sailors—all drunk—fine looking set of men." The manuscript records of the Taylor's Falls Lyceum for 1859 and 1860 supplement very neatly the newspaper accounts of such organizations. This lyceum met weekly. We find it dealing with community problems, hopefully resolving that the "present crisis" in the financial world would prove a benefit to Minnesota, urging the United States to purchase Cuba and Nicaragua, and debating the wisdom of making voting obligatory upon citizens. The correspondence in the early sixties of George S. Biscoe, a young Congregational minister, gives a vivid picture of the Cottage Grove settlement, one of the most interesting farming communities in the state. Sometimes the minister complained of stagnation. Biscoe wrote that, although he understood the United States was at war, "We have heard no cannon, seen no soldiers, and the rain pours down as steadily as if it were a time of universal peace." When he became chaplain of the House of Representatives in St. Paul in 1862, he went to the capital city, but was unhappy there. Its prevalent vices, he found, were smoking, drinking, and cards. "This is a godless city," he wrote. "There are many churches but few active Christians." The next year he led a valiant effort to secure the location at Cottage Grove of a proposed Congregational college, but his village ran second to Northfield. A few additional thousands of dollars in pledges, he believed, would have resulted in the

<sup>6</sup> Dr. Solon J. Buck has published portions of this material under the title of "Making a Farm on the Frontier: Extracts from the Diaries of Mitchell Young Jackson," in *Agricultural History*, 3: 92-120 (July, 1930).

placing of Carleton College at Cottage Grove, rather than at Northfield.<sup>7</sup>

Today there is a widespread interest in state and community history. The Minnesota Historical Society and the many county and municipal historical societies are cultivating the field, trying to stir interest and to promote historical appreciation and understanding. I believe that they deserve encouragement, support, and co-operation. As a practical step I call upon Minnesotans to join hands in making a state-wide attic inventory and in helping these organizations to enrich their collections of records.

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ST. PAUL

<sup>7</sup> The Biscoe correspondence was used by Phyllis Sweeley in writing an excellent paper entitled "A Glimpse of Minnesota's Past: Life in the Eighteen-Sixties Seen through the Eyes of a Pastor," which appears in the *Hamline Piper*, 15:17-23 (May, 1935).



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