



MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY BUILDING, ST. PAUL

MIDDLE WESTERN PIONEER DEMOCRACY¹

In time of war, when all that this nation has stood for, all the things in which it passionately believes, are at stake, we have met to dedicate this beautiful home for history.

There is a fitness in the occasion. It is for historic ideals that we are fighting. If this nation is one for which we should pour out our savings, postpone our differences, go hungry, and even give up life itself, it is not because it is a rich, extensive, well-fed, and populous nation; it is because from its early days America has pressed onward toward a goal of its own; because it has followed an ideal, the ideal of a democracy developing under conditions unlike those of any other age or country.

We are fighting not for an Old World ideal, not for an abstraction, not for a philosophical revolution. Broad and generous as are our sympathies, widely scattered in origin as are our people, keenly as we feel the call of kinship, the thrill of sympathy with the stricken nations across the Atlantic, we are fighting for the historic ideals of the United States, for the continued existence of the type of society in which we believe because we have proved it good, for the things which drew European exiles to our shores and which inspired the hopes of the pioneers.

We are at war that the history of the United States, rich with the record of high human purposes and of faith in the destiny of the common man under freedom, filled with the promises of a better world, may not become the lost and tragic story of a futile dream. Yes, it is an American ideal and an American example for which we fight; but in that ideal and example lies medicine for the healing of the nations. It is the best we have to give to Europe, and it is a matter of vital

¹ Address delivered at the dedication of the Minnesota Historical Society building, St. Paul, May 11, 1918.

import that we shall safeguard and preserve our power to serve the world, and not be overwhelmed in the flood of imperialistic force that wills the death of democracy and would send the freeman under the yoke. Essential as are our contributions of wealth, the work of our scientists, the toil of our farmers and our workmen in factory and shipyard, priceless as is the stream of young American manhood which we pour forth to stop the flood which flows like molten lava across the green fields and peaceful hamlets of Europe toward the sea and turns to ashes and death all that it covers, these contributions have their deeper meaning in the American spirit; they are born of the love of democracy.

Long ago in prophetic words Walt Whitman voiced the meaning of our present sacrifices:

Sail, sail thy best, ship of Democracy,
Of value is thy freight, 'tis not the Present only,
The Past is also stored in thee,
Thou holdest not the venture of thyself alone, not of the Western
continent alone,
Earth's *résumé* entire floats on thy keel, O ship, is steadied by
thy spars,
With thee Time voyages in trust, the antecedent nations sink or
swim with thee,
With all their ancient struggles, martyrs, heroes, epics, wars,
thou bear'st the other continents,
Theirs, theirs as much as thine, the destination-port triumphant.

Shortly before the Civil War, a great German, exiled from his native land for his love of freedom, came from his new home among the pioneers of the Middle West to set forth in Faneuil Hall, the "cradle of liberty," in Boston, his vision of the young America that was forming in the West, "the last depository of the hopes of all true friends of humanity." Speaking of the contrast between the migrations to the Mississippi Valley and those of the Old World in other centuries, he said:

It is now not a barbarous multitude pouncing upon old and decrepit empires; not a violent concussion of tribes accompanied by all the horrors of general destruction; but we see the vigorous elements of all nations . . . peaceably congregating and mingling together on virgin soil . . . led together by the irresistible attraction of free and broad principles; undertaking to commence a new era in the history of the world, without first destroying the results of the progress of past periods; undertaking to found a new cosmopolitan nation without marching over the dead bodies of slain millions.

If Carl Schurz had lived to see the outcome of that Germany from which he was sent as an exile, in the days when Prussian bayonets dispersed the legislatures and stamped out the beginnings of democratic rule in his former country, could he have better pictured the contrasts between the Prussian and the American spirit? He went on to say:

Thus was founded the *great colony of free humanity*, which has not old England alone, but the *world*, for its mother-country. . . . And in the colony of free humanity, whose mother-country is the world, they establish the *Republic of equal rights, where the title of manhood is the title to citizenship*. My friends, if I had a thousand tongues, and a voice strong as the thunder of heaven, they would not be sufficient to impress upon your minds forcibly enough the greatness of this idea, the overshadowing glory of this result. This was the dream of the truest friends of man from the beginning; for this the noblest blood of martyrs has been shed; for this has mankind waded through seas of blood and tears. There it is now; there it stands, the noble fabric in all the splendor of reality.

It is in a solemn and inspiring time, therefore, that we meet to dedicate this building, and the occasion is fitting to the time. We may now see, as never before, the deeper significance, the larger meaning of these pioneers, whose plain lives and homely annals are glorified as a part of the story of the building of a better system of social justice under freedom, a broader, and as we fervently hope, a more enduring foundation for the welfare and progress under liberty of the com-

mon man, an example of federation, of peaceful adjustments by compromise and concession under the system of self-government, in which sections replace nations over a union as large as Europe, party discussions take the place of warring countries, and the *Pax Americana* furnishes an example for a better world.

As our forefathers, the pioneers, gathered in their neighborhood to raise the log cabin, and sanctified it by the name of home, the dwelling place of pioneer ideals, so we meet to celebrate the raising of this home, this shrine of Minnesota's historic life. It symbolizes the conviction that the past and the future of this people are tied together; that this historical society is the keeper of the records of a noteworthy movement in the progress of mankind; that these records are not unmeaning and antiquarian, but even in their details are worthy of preservation for their revelation of the beginnings of society in the midst of a nation caught by the vision of a better future for the world.

Harriet Martineau, the English traveller, who portrayed the America of the thirties exclaimed:

I regard the American people as a great embryo poet, now moody, now wild, but bringing out results of absolute good sense; restless and wayward in action, but with deep peace at his heart; exulting that he has caught the true aspect of things past and the depth of futurity which lies before him, wherein to create something so magnificent as the world has scarcely begun to dream of. There is the strongest hope of a nation that is capable of being possessed with an idea.

And she appealed to the American people to "cherish their high democratic hope, their faith in man. The older they grow the more they must reverence the dreams of their youth."

The dreams of their youth! Here they shall be preserved, together with the achievements as well as the aspirations of the men who made the state, the men who built on their foun-

dations, the men with large vision and power of action, the lesser men in the mass, the leaders who served the state and nation with devotion to the cause, the men who failed to see the larger vision and worked impatiently with narrow or selfish or class ends as well as those who worked with patience and sympathy and mutual concession, with readiness to make adjustments and to subordinate their immediate interests to the larger good and the immediate safety of the nation.

In the archives of such an old institution as that of the Massachusetts Historical Society, whose treasures run to the beginnings of Puritan colonization, the student cannot fail to find the evidence that a state historical society is a Book of Judgment wherein is made up the record of a people and its leaders; and so as time unfolds shall be the collections of this society, the depository of the material that shall preserve the memory of this people. Each section of this widely extended and varied nation has its own peculiar past, its special form of society, its traits and its leaders. It were a pity if any section left its annals solely to the collectors of a remote region, and it were a pity if its collections were not transformed into printed documents and monographic studies which can go to the libraries of all parts of the union and thus enable the student to see the nation as a whole in its past as well as in its present.

This society finds its special field of activity in a great state of the Middle West, so new, as history reckons time, that its annals are still predominantly those of the pioneers, but so rapidly growing that already the era of the pioneers is one that is a part of the history of the past, capable of being handled objectively, seen in a perspective that is not possible to the observer of present conditions.

Because of these facts I have taken as the special theme of this address "Middle Western Pioneer Democracy," which I would sketch in some of its outstanding aspects in the large, and chiefly in the generation before the Civil War, for it was from the pioneers of that period that the later colonizers to

the newer parts of the Mississippi Valley derived many of their traits and drew a large proportion of their ranks.

The North Central states as a whole occupy a region comparable to all of Central Europe. Of these states, a large part of the Old Northwest, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin, and their sisters beyond the Mississippi, Missouri, Iowa, and Minnesota were still, in the middle of the nineteenth century, the home of an essentially pioneer society. Within the lifetime of many living men, Wisconsin was called the "Far West," and Minnesota was a land of the Indian and the fur-trader, a wilderness of forest and prairie beyond the "edge of cultivation." That portion of this great region which was still in the pioneering period of settlement by 1850 was alone about as extensive as the old thirteen states, or Germany and Austria-Hungary combined. The region was a huge geographic mould for a new society, modeled by nature on the scale of the Great Lakes, the Ohio Valley, the upper Mississippi and the Missouri. Simple and majestic in its vast outlines it was graven into a variety that in its details also had a largeness of design. From the Great Lakes extended the massive glacial sheet which covered that mighty basin and laid down treasures of soil. Vast forests of pine shrouded its upper zone, breaking into hardwood and oak openings as they neared the ocean-like expanses of the prairies. Forests again along the Ohio Valley, and beyond lay the levels of the Great Plains. Within the earth were unexploited treasures of coal and lead and iron in such form and quantity as were to revolutionize the industrial processes of the world. But nature's revelations are progressive, and it was rather the marvelous adaptation of the soil to the raising of corn and wheat that drew the first pioneers to this land of promise and made a new era of colonization. In the unity with variety of this pioneer empire and in its broad levels we have a promise of its society.

First had come the children of the interior of the South, and with ax and rifle in hand had cut their clearings in the forest, raised their log cabins, fought the Indians, and by 1830 had pushed their way to the very edge of the prairies along the Ohio and Missouri valleys, leaving unoccupied most of the basin of the Great Lakes.

These slashers of the forest, these self-sufficing pioneers, raising the corn and livestock for their own need, living scattered and apart, had at first small interest in town life or in markets. They were individualists, to whom government was a necessary evil, to be held to its narrowest bounds in order that the pioneer might do his work with the minimum of restraint. They were passionately devoted to the ideal of equality, but it was an ideal which assumed that under free conditions in the midst of unlimited resources, the homogeneous society of the pioneers must result in equality. What they objected to was arbitrary obstacles, artificial limitations upon the freedom of each member of this frontier folk to work out his own career without fear or favor. What they instinctively opposed was the crystallization of differences, the monopolization of opportunity and the fixing of that monopoly by government or by social customs. The road must be open. The game must be played according to the rules. There must be no artificial stifling of equality of opportunity, no closed doors to the able, no stopping the game before it was played to the end. More than that, there was an unformulated, perhaps, but very real feeling, that mere success in the game, by which the abler men were able to achieve preëminence, gave to the successful ones no right to look down upon their neighbors, no vested title to assert superiority as a matter of pride and to the diminution of the equal right and dignity of the less successful.

If this democracy of southern pioneers, this Jacksonian democracy, was, as its socialist critics have called it, in reality a democracy of "expectant capitalists," it was not one which expected or acknowledged on the part of the successful ones

the right to harden their triumphs into the rule of a privileged class. In short, if it is indeed true that the backwoods democracy was based upon equality of opportunity it is also true that it resented the conception that opportunity under competition should result in hopeless inequality or rule of class. Ever a new clearing must be possible. And because the wilderness seemed so unending, the menace to the enjoyment of this ideal seemed rather to be feared from government, within or without, than from the operations of internal evolution.

From the first, it became evident that these men had means of supplementing their individual activity by informal combinations. One of the things that impressed all early travelers in the United States was the capacity for extralegal, voluntary association. This was natural enough. In all America we can study the process by which in a new land social customs form and crystallize into law. We can even see how the personal leader becomes the governmental official. This power of the pioneers to join together for a common end without the intervention of governmental institutions was one of their marked characteristics. The logrolling, the house raising, the husking bee, the apple paring, the camp meeting, and the association of squatters whereby they protected themselves against the speculators in securing title to their clearings on the public domain, are a few of the indications of this attitude. It is well to emphasize this American trait, because in a modified way it has come to be one of the most characteristic and important features of the United States of today. America does through informal association and understandings on the part of the people many of the things which in the Old World are and can be done only by governmental intervention and compulsion.

The actions of these associations had an authority akin to that of law. They were usually not so much evidences of a disrespect for law and order as the only means by which real law and order were possible in a region where settlement and

society had gone in advance of the institutions and instrumentalities of organized society.

Because of these elements of individualistic competition and the power of spontaneous association, the backwoodsmen were responsive to leadership. They knew that under the free opportunities of his life the abler man would reveal himself and show them the way. By free choice and not by compulsion, by spontaneous impulse, and not by the domination of a caste, they rallied around a cause, they supported an issue. They yielded to the principle of government by agreement, and they hated the doctrine of autocracy even before it gained a name. They looked forward to the extension of their American principles to the Old World and their keenest apprehensions came from the possibility of the extension of the Old World's system of arbitrary rule, its class wars and rivalries and interventions to the destruction of the free states and democratic institutions which they were building in the forests of America. They were of a stock which sought new trails and were ready to follow where the trail led, innovators in society as well as finders of new lands.

If we add to these aspects of early backwoods democracy, its spiritual qualities, we shall more easily understand them. These men were emotional. As they wrested their clearings from the woods and from the savages who surrounded them, as they expanded these clearings and saw the beginnings of commonwealths where only little communities had been, and as they saw these commonwealths touch hands with each other along the great course of the Mississippi River, they became enthusiastically optimistic and confident of the continued expansion of this democracy. They had faith in themselves and their destiny. And that optimistic faith was responsible both for their confidence in their own ability to rule and for the passion for expansion. They looked to the future. "Others appeal to history: an American appeals to prophecy; and with Malthus in one hand and a map of the back country in the other, he boldly defies us to a comparison with America as she

is to be," said a London periodical in 1821. Just because, perhaps, of the usual isolation of their lives, when they came together in associations whether of the camp meeting or of the political gathering, they felt the influence of a common emotion and enthusiasm. Mr. Bryce has aptly said that the Southern upland folk have a "high religious voltage." Whether Scotch-Irish Presbyterian, Baptist, or Methodist, these people saturated their religion and their politics with feeling. Both the stump and the pulpit were centers of energy, electric cells capable of starting widespreading fires. They felt both their religion and their democracy, and were ready to fight for them.

This democracy was one that involved a real feeling of social comradeship among its widespread members. Justice Catron who came from Arkansas to the Supreme Court in the presidency of Jackson said: "The people of New Orleans and St. Louis are next neighbors—if we desire to know a man in any quarter of the union we inquire of our next neighbor who but the other day lived by him." Exaggerated as this is, it nevertheless had a surprising measure of truth for the Middle West as well. For the Mississippi River was the great highway down which groups of pioneers like Abraham Lincoln, on their rafts and flat boats, brought the little neighborhood surplus. After the steamboat came to the western waters the voyages up and down, by merchants and by farmers shifting their homes, brought people into contact with each other over wide areas. This enlarged neighborhood democracy was not determined by a reluctant admission that under the law one man was as good as another; it was based upon "good fellowship," sympathy, and understanding.

By 1830 the southern inundation ebbed and a different tide flowed in from the Northeast by way of the Erie Canal and steam navigation on the Great Lakes to occupy the zone unreached by southern settlement. This new tide spread along the margins of the Great Lakes, found the oak openings and small prairie islands of southern Michigan and Wisconsin,

followed the fertile forested ribbons along the river courses far into the prairie lands, and by the end of the forties began to venture into the margin of the open prairie.

In 1830 the Middle West contained a little over one and a half million people; in 1840, over three and a third million; in 1850, nearly five and a half million. Although in 1830 the North Atlantic states numbered between three and four times as many people as the Middle West, yet in those two decades the Middle West made an actual gain of several hundred thousand more than did the old section. Counties in the newer states rose from a few hundred to ten or fifteen thousand people in the space of less than five years. Suddenly, with astonishing rapidity and volume, a new people was forming with varied elements, ideals, and institutions drawn from all over this nation and from Europe. They were confronted with the problem of adjusting different stocks, varied social customs and habits, to their new home.

In comparison with the Ohio Valley, the peculiarity of the occupation of the northern zone of the Middle West lay in the fact that the native element was predominantly from the older settlements of the Middle West itself and from New York and New England. But it was from the central and western counties of New York and from the western and northern parts of New England, the rural regions of declining agricultural prosperity, that the bulk of this element came. That is, it was a migration of Yankees, in different degrees removed from the original Puritan stock, according as the original stock had been modified by settlement in (1) New England's back country, (2) New York, or (3) the older Middle West itself. Each of these modified Puritan areas contributed its own characteristics.

Thus the influence of the Middle West stretched into the Northeast and attracted a farming population already suffering from western competition. The advantages of abundant, fertile, and cheap land, the richer agricultural returns, and

especially the opportunities for youth to rise in all the trades and professions gave strength to this competition.

This Yankee stock carried with it a habit of the community life, in contrast with the individualistic democracy of the southern element. The colonizing land companies, the town, the school, the church, the feeling of local unity, furnished the evidences of this instinct for communities. This instinct was accompanied by the feeling for industrial development. It was accompanied by the creation of cities, the production of a surplus for market, the reaching out to connections with the trading centers of the East, the evolution of a more complex and at the same time a more integrated industrial society than that of the southern pioneer.

But the Yankees did not carry with them the unmodified New England institutions and traits. They came from the people who were less satisfied with the old order than were their neighbors in the East. They were the young men with initiative, with discontent; and the New York element especially was affected by the radicalism of Locofoco Democracy, which was in itself a protest against the established order.

The winds of the prairies swept away almost at once a mass of old habits and prepossessions. Said one of these pioneers in a letter to friends in the East:

If you value ease more than money or prosperity, don't come. . . . Hands are too few for the work, houses for the inhabitants, and days for the day's work to be done. . . . Next, if you can't stand seeing your old New England ideas, ways of doing, and living and in fact, all of the good old Yankee fashions knocked out of shape and altered, or thrown by as unsuited to the climate, don't be caught out here. But if you can bear grief with a smile, can put up with a scale of accommodations ranging from the soft side of a plank before the fire (and perhaps three in a bed at that) down through the middling and inferior grades; if you are never at a loss for ways to do the most unpracticable things without tools; if you can do all this and some more come on. . . . It is a universal rule here to help one another, each one keeping an eye single to his own interest.

These pioneers knew that they were leaving many dear associations of the old home, giving up many of the comforts of life, sacrificing things which those who remained thought too vital to civilization to be left. But they were not mere materialists ready to surrender all that life is worth for immediate gain. They were idealists themselves, sacrificing the ease of the immediate future for the welfare of their children, and convinced of the possibility of helping to bring about a better social order and a freer life. They were social idealists. But they based their ideals on trust in the common man and their readiness to make adjustments, not on the rule of a benevolent despot or a controlling class.

The attraction of this new home reached also into the Old World and gave new hopes and new impulses to the people of Germany, of England, of Ireland, and of Scandinavia. Both economic influences and revolutionary discontent promoted German migration at this time; economic causes brought the larger volume, but the quest for liberty brought the leaders, many of whom were German political exiles. While the latter urged, with varying degrees of emphasis, that their own contribution should be preserved in their new surroundings, and a few visionaries even talked of a German state in the federal system, what was noteworthy was the adjustment of the immigrants of the thirties and forties to middle western conditions, the response to the opportunity to create a new type of society in which all gave and all received and no element remained isolated. Society was plastic. In the midst of more or less antagonism between "bowie knife Southerners," "cow-milking Yankee Puritans," "beer-drinking Germans," and "wild Irishmen," a process of mutual education, a giving and taking, was at work. In the outcome, in spite of slowness of assimilation where different groups were compact and isolated from the others, and a certain persistence of inherited morale, there was the creation of a new type, which was neither the sum of all its elements nor a complete fusion in a melting pot.

The people of the Middle West were American pioneers, not outlying fragments of New England or Germany or Norway.

The Germans were most strongly represented in the Missouri Valley, in St. Louis, in Illinois opposite that city, and in the lake shore counties of eastern Wisconsin north from Milwaukee. In Cincinnati and Cleveland there were many Germans, while in nearly half the counties of Ohio the German immigrants and the Pennsylvania Germans held nearly or quite a balance of political power. The Irish came primarily as workers on turnpikes, canals, and railroads, and tended to remain along such lines, or to gather in the growing cities. The Scandinavians, of whom the largest proportion were Norwegians, founded their colonies in northern Illinois and in southern Wisconsin about the Fox and the headwaters of the Rock River, whence in later years they spread into Iowa, Minnesota, and North Dakota.

By 1850 about one-sixth of the people of the Middle West were of North-Atlantic birth, about one-eighth of southern birth, and a like fraction of foreign birth, of whom the Germans were twice as numerous as the Irish, and the Scandinavians only slightly more numerous than the Welsh and fewer than the Scotch. There were only a dozen Scandinavians in Minnesota. The natives of the British Isles, together with the natives of British North America in the Middle West, numbered nearly as many as the natives of German lands. But in 1850 almost three-fifths of the population were natives of the Middle West itself, and over a third of the population lived in Ohio. The cities were especially a mixture of peoples. In the five larger cities of the section natives and foreigners were nearly balanced. In Chicago the Irish, Germans, and natives of the North Atlantic states about equalled each other. But in all the other cities, the Germans exceeded the Irish in varying proportions. There were nearly three to one in Milwaukee.

It is not merely that the section was growing rapidly and was made up of various stocks with many different cultures,

sectional and European; what is more significant is that these elements did not remain as separate strata underneath an established ruling order, as was the case particularly in New England. All were accepted as intermingling components of a forming society, plastic and absorptive. This characteristic of the section as a "good mixer" became fixed before the large immigrations of the eighties. The foundations of the section were laid firmly in a period when the foreign elements were particularly free and eager to contribute to a new society and to receive an impress from the country which offered them a liberty denied abroad. Significant as is this fact, and influential in the solution of America's present problems, it is no more important than the fact that in the decade before the Civil War the southern element in the Middle West had also had nearly two generations of direct association with the northern, and had finally been engulfed in a tide of north-eastern and Old World settlers.

In this society of pioneers men learned to drop their old national animosities. One of the immigrant guides of the fifties urged the newcomers to abandon their racial animosities. "The American laughs at these steerage quarrels," said the author.

Thus the Middle West was teaching the lesson of national cross-fertilization instead of national enmities, the possibility of a newer and richer civilization attained, not by preserving unmodified or isolated the old component elements, but by breaking down the line fences, by merging the individual life in the common product—a new product, which held the promise of world brotherhood. If the pioneers divided their allegiance between various parties, Whig, Democrat, Free Soil, or Republican, it does not follow that the western Whig was like the eastern Whig. There was an infiltration of a western quality into all of these. The western Whig supported Harrison even more because he was a pioneer than because he was a Whig. He saw in him a legitimate successor of Andrew Jackson. The campaign of 1840 was a middle

western camp meeting on a huge scale. The log cabins, the cider, and the coonskins were the symbols of the triumph of middle western ideas, and were carried with misgivings by the merchants, the bankers, and the manufacturers of the East. In like fashion, the middle western wing of the Democratic party was as different from the southern wing, wherein lay its strength, as Douglas was from Calhoun. It had little in common with the slaveholding classes of the South, even though it felt the kinship of the pioneer with the people of the southern upland stock from which so many westerners were descended.

In the later forties and early fifties most of the middle western states made constitutions. The debates in their conventions and the results embodied in the constitutions themselves tell the story of their political ideals. Of course, they based the franchise on the principle of manhood suffrage. But they also provided for an elective judiciary, for restrictions on the borrowing power of the state lest it fall under the control of what they feared as the money power, and several of them either provided for the extinguishment of banks of issue or rigidly restrained them. Some of them exempted the homestead from forced sale for debt; married women's legal rights were prominent topics in the debates of the conventions; and Wisconsin led off by permitting the alien to vote after a year's residence. The newcomer was welcomed to the freedom and to the obligations of American citizenship.

Although this pioneer society was preponderantly an agricultural society it was rapidly learning that agriculture alone was not sufficient for its life. It was developing manufactures, trade, mining, the professions, and was becoming conscious that in a progressive modern state it was possible to pass from one industry to another and that all were bound by common ties. But it is significant that in the census of 1850, Ohio, out of a population of two millions, reported only a thousand servants, Iowa only ten in two hundred thousand, and Minnesota fifteen in its six thousand.

In the intellectual life of this new democracy there was already the promise of original contributions even in the midst of the engrossing toil and hard life of the pioneer.

The country editor was a leader of his people, not a patent-insides recorder of social functions but a vigorous and independent thinker and writer. The subscribers to the newspaper published in the section were higher in proportion to population than in the state of New York and not greatly inferior to those of New England, although such eastern papers as the *New York Tribune* had an extensive circulation throughout the Middle West. The agricultural press presupposed in its articles and contributions a level of general intelligence and interest above that of the later farmers of the section, at least before the present day.

Farmer boys walked behind the plow with book in hand and sometimes forgot to turn at the end of the furrow; boys like the young Howells, who "limped barefoot by his father's side with his eyes on the cow and his mind on Cervantes and Shakespeare."

Periodicals flourished and faded like the prairie flowers. Some of Emerson's best poems first appeared in one of these magazines, published in the Ohio Valley. But for the most part the literature of the region and the period was imitative or reflective of the common things in a not uncommon way. It was to its children that the Middle West had to look for an expression of its life and its ideals rather than to the busy pioneer who was breaking a prairie farm or building up a new community. Illiteracy was least among the Yankee pioneers and highest among the southern element.

The influence of New England men was strong in the Yankee regions of the Middle West. Home missionaries and representatives of societies for the promotion of education in the West, both in the common schools and the denominational colleges, scattered themselves throughout the region and left a deep impress in all these states. The conception was firmly fixed in the thirties and forties that the West was the coming

power in the Union, that the fate of civilization was in its hands, and, therefore, rival sects and rival sections strove to influence it to their own types. But the Middle West shaped all these educational contributions according to its own needs and ideals.

The state universities were for the most part the results of agitation and proposals of men of New England origin; but they became characteristic products of middle western society, with the community as a whole rather than wealthy benefactors supporting them and, in the end, determining their directions in accord with popular ideals. They reached down more deeply into the ranks of the common people than did the New England or middle state colleges; they laid more emphasis upon the obviously useful and became coeducational at an early date.

Challenging the vast spaces of the West, struck by the rapidity with which a new society was unfolding under their gaze, it is not strange that the pioneers dealt in the superlative and saw their destiny with optimistic eyes. The meadow lot of the small intervale had become the prairie stretching farther than their gaze could reach.

All was motion and change. A restlessness was universal. Men moved, in their single lives, from Vermont to New York, from New York to Ohio, from Ohio to Wisconsin, from Wisconsin to California, and then longed for the Hawaiian Islands. When the bark started from their fence rails, they felt the call to change. They were conscious of the mobility of their society and gloried in it. They broke with the past and thought to create something finer, more fitting for humanity, more beneficial for the average man than the world had ever seen.

"With the Past we have literally nothing to do," said B. Gratz Brown in a Missouri Fourth of July oration in 1850, "save to dream of it. Its lessons are lost and its tongue is silent. We are ourselves at the head and front of all political experience. Precedents have lost their virtue and all their

authority is gone. . . . Experience . . . can profit us only to guard from antiquated delusions."

"The yoke of opinion," wrote Channing to a western friend, speaking of New England, "is a heavy one, often crushing individuality of judgment and action," and he added that the habits, rules, and criticisms under which he had grown up had not left him the freedom and courage which are needed in the style of address best suited to the western people. Channing no doubt unduly stressed the freedom of the West in this respect. The frontier had its own conventions and prejudices, and New England was breaking its own cake of custom and proclaiming a new liberty at the very time he wrote. But there was truth in the eastern thought of the West as a land of intellectual toleration, one which questioned the old order of things and made innovation its very creed.

The West laid emphasis upon the practical and demanded that ideals should be put to work for useful ends; ideals were tested by their direct contributions to the betterment of the average man, rather than by the production of the man of exceptional genius and distinction.

For, in fine, this was the goal of the Middle West: the welfare of the average man; not only the man of the South or of the East, the Yankee or the Irishman or the German, but all men in one common fellowship. This was the hope of their youth, of that youth when Abraham Lincoln rose from rail-splitter to country lawyer, from Illinois legislator to congressman, and from congressman to president.

His was no lonely mountain peak of mind,
 Thrusting to thin air o'er our cloudy bars,
 A sea mark now, now lost in vapor blind;
 Broad prairie rather, genial, level lined,
 Fruitful and friendly for all human kind,
 Yet also nigh to heaven and loved of loftiest stars
 Nothing of Europe here,
 Or, then, of Europe fronting mornward still,
 Ere any names of serf and peer

Could Nature's equal scheme deface
And thwart her genial will ;

.

New birth of our new soil, the first American.

It is not strange that in all this flux and freedom and novelty and vast spaces, the pioneers did not sufficiently consider the need of disciplined devotion to the government which they themselves created and operated. But the name of Lincoln and the response of the pioneers to the duties of the Civil War, to the sacrifices and the restraints on freedom which it entailed under his presidency, reminds us that they knew how to take part in a common cause, even while they knew that war's conditions were destructive of many of the things for which they worked.

There are two kinds of governmental discipline: that which proceeds from free choice in the conviction that restraint of individual or class interests is necessary for the common good, and that which is imposed by a dominant class upon a subjected and helpless people. The latter is Prussian discipline, the discipline of a harsh, machine-like, logical organization, based on the rule of a military autocracy. It assumes that if you do not crush your opponent first, he will crush you. It is the discipline of a nation ruled by its general staff, assuming war as the normal condition of peoples, and attempting with remorseless logic to extend its operations to the destruction of freedom everywhere. It can only be met by the discipline of a people who use their own government for worthy ends, who preserve individuality and mobility in society and respect the rights of others, who follow the dictates of humanity and fair play, the principles of give and take. The Prussian discipline is the discipline of Thor, the war god, against the discipline of the white Christ.

Pioneer democracy has had to learn lessons by experience: the lesson that government on principles of free democracy can accomplish many things which the men of the middle of the nineteenth century did not realize as even possible. They

have had to sacrifice something of their passion for individual unrestraint; they have had to learn that the specially trained man, the man fitted for his calling by education and experience, whether in the field of science or of industry, has a place in government; that the rule of the people is effective and enduring only as it incorporates the trained specialist into the organization of that government, whether as umpire between contending interests or as the efficient instrument in the hands of democracy. Organized democracy after the era of free land has learned not only that popular government to be successful must be legitimately the choice of the whole people, not only that the offices of that government must be open to all, but that in the fierce struggle of nations in the field of economic competition and in the field of war the salvation and perpetuity of the Republic depend upon recognition of the fact that the specialization of the organs of the government, the choice of the fit and the capable for office, is quite as important as the extension of popular control. When we lost our free lands and our isolation from the Old World, we lost our immunity from the results of mistakes, of waste, of inefficiency, and of inexperience in our government.

But in the present day we are also learning another lesson which was better known to the pioneers than to their immediate successors. We are learning that the distinction arising from devotion to the interests of the commonwealth is a higher distinction than mere success in economic competition. America is now awarding laurels to the men who sacrifice their triumphs in the rivalry of business in order to give their service to the cause of a liberty-loving nation, their wealth and their genius to the success of her ideals. That craving for distinction which once drew men to pile up wealth and exhibit power over the industrial processes of the nation, is now finding a new outlet in the craving for distinction that comes from service to the Union, in satisfaction in the use of great talent for the good of the Republic.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).