



*THOSE WHO LIVED* at the head of navigation on the Mississippi in the 1850s doubtless welcomed melting snows, returning robins, and budding trees as heralds of spring. But the most meaningful symbol for these pioneers came from the river itself—the whistle of the season's first steamboat. Often long delayed by ice in Lake Pepin, this boat meant that contact with the outside world had been re-established—that supplies of food, clothing, building materials, and various other necessities and luxuries would once more be within easy reach.

The feeling of release from the confinement of a northern winter that accompanied the arrival of the season's first boat at the St. Paul levee has seldom been better conveyed than in the present narrative. Its author followed her husband, Joseph Ullmann, northward from St. Louis in May of 1855, bringing with her an infant son and

a younger sister. Both Amelia and her husband had emigrated in 1852, she from a Rhineland town and he from Alsace. Before they were married in St. Louis, Amelia told Joseph, "I shall go with you to the end of the world." She admitted, however, that she "did not think that the time to go to 'the end of the world'" would come so soon, for that is where she felt she surely was going when she boarded a steamboat northward bound for St. Paul. But Joseph, who had gone on ahead, believed that the "new and thriving town" offered "decided advantages as a place of business" and Amelia was ready to enter into his frontier adventure.

There is evidence aplenty to indicate that Joseph's business venture met with unusual success. He went into the wholesale trade, selling coffee, tea, sugar, liquor, and other items to merchants. In lieu of cash, he often

# the Frontier

## Reminiscences of MRS. JOSEPH ULLMANN

was asked to accept in payment for his wares packages of furs — mink, sable, skunk, etc. Upon disposing of some pelts to a New York firm, he found that he could realize a large profit, and gradually he began to deal in furs exclusively. By 1860, five years after settling in St. Paul, his real-estate holdings were valued at ten thousand dollars and his personal property at twenty-five thousand dollars — no mean sums for the period. In time the fur business he founded in St. Paul reached out far beyond the limits of the growing city, the state, and even the nation. Shortly after the turn of the century, it had branches not only in St. Paul, Chicago, and New York, but in Paris, London, Leipzig, Edmonton, and Shanghai.<sup>1</sup>

When the headquarters of the Ullmann firm were removed to Chicago in 1866, the family went there to live. As years went by, they spent much time abroad. Thus it was that Mrs. Ullmann's personal reminiscences of "Saint Paul Forty Years Ago," recorded in 1896, were written at Fribourg. Today the manuscript is owned by her grandson, Mr. Joseph Ullmann of New York, the head of a firm of fur brokers.<sup>2</sup> With his permission, the present extract from Mrs. Ullmann's narrative, and others to follow in future issues, are published.

<sup>1</sup> The property valuations are given in the population schedule of the census of Ramsey County for 1860, in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society. For an illustrated account of the expansion of the Ullmann firm, see its *Denkschrift zum 50jährigen Geschäfts-Jubiläum* (Leipzig, 1904).

<sup>2</sup> A photostatic copy of the narrative is in the American Jewish Archives at Cincinnati. Through the courtesy of its director, Dr. Jacob R. Marcus, a copy was obtained by the Minnesota Historical Society.

THE LAST DAY of October [1855] had come. The lengthening nights were growing cold and the air crisp and frosty. The sun set behind pinkish clouds and its last rays made luminous the dark masses that had been banking up in the northwestern sky. When morning came the clouds had lowered upon the town and the air was so dense with the flying flakes of snow that one could see scarcely across the street. Stern necessity alone drew people out of their homes that day. The snow continued on through the next night and when the clouds floated away to the south the new town lay buried beneath two feet of snow.

Winter had begun in earnest. Of its severity I had been told with all the harrowing incidents that the old settler could bring to embellish his descriptions. Besides, the preparations that had been going on impressed me with the apprehensions with which the inhabitants viewed the approach of winter. Earth had been banked up around the foundations and even half way to the lower row of windows in many of the frame houses. In a little slaughter house on St. Anthony Hill, Mr. Coulter had been busy for several weeks killing cattle and packing away the beef in salt and sawdust for consumption during the winter.<sup>3</sup> "Fresh meat is not to be had here for either love or money before the first of May," remarked one of my neighbors. For the past month steamboats that came up the river were laden with provisions for the winter months; flour in barrels from the mills at Prairie du Chien, crackers from St. Louis, bags of potatoes from the South, and butter in earthen ware jars from Ohio.

The boats had made their last trips. The river was frozen over; the gateway to the

<sup>3</sup> Both Charles and George Colter are listed as cattle dealers in the *St. Paul Directory* for 1856–57. The high plateau extending west and north of the present Cathedral of St. Paul was known as St. Anthony Hill, since it was crossed by the road leading northwest to the village of St. Anthony and the falls of the same name. See Warren Upham, *Minnesota Geographic Names*, 440 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 17).

outer world was closed and we were left alone with the stores that we had laid up to withstand the siege of Winter. Paths were cleared before the doors of the houses, and the roads were broken as well as possible with the primitive means that we possessed. Wheels were retired and sledge runners came into fashion; sleigh bells began to jingle and to their not untuneful melodies we were to listen without cessation until Spring. The snow had come to stay; it was not to be spasmodic efforts to whiten the earth, the alternating snowfalls and meltings, such as I had been accustomed to. At first one felt depressed to be thus cut off from the remainder of the world; but the air was so bouyant [,] so full of life as to be not conducive to long continued lowness of spirit.

We dwellers in St. Paul, from being thrown so much upon our own resources for entertainment, became as one big family living under different roofs. Among us there was a geniality and a cordiality that was most agreeable. Whatever viciousness there may have been seemed to have been so gently modified that it did not become obtrusive enough to be burdensome upon the community. That every one had his or her intimates, that there were circles and cliques, was natural; but these special friendships were not permitted to become so selfish as to exclude an interest in the

general society of the town. The inhabitants were as a whole an earnest, enterprising people; there were not many young children nor aged persons, and the women were a small percentage of the entire population. The majority were young or middle aged men who were able and fitted to build well and firmly the foundation of a new city.

The means of amusements were few. There were no theatres; and, except the entertainments given at some of the churches, there were no attempts at amateur performances of plays or operas. People came often together at church meetings or the circles that were formed among the members. Men appeared to find some pleasure in conversing in the barrooms of the hotels or in attendance upon the sessions of the lodges[,] for already there were branches in St. Paul. Both the Freemasons and Odd Fellows were, I think, established here at this time. The Sons of Malta, which was then so popular throughout the East, had a number of adherents among the business men; the meeting place was in the third story of the Coulter building.<sup>4</sup>

Several balls were given at either the Market house hall or the Portgesa hall.<sup>5</sup> They were attended by members of the best families and were enjoyable social affairs. In St. Paul there were not a few pretty girls and good looking women who dressed with good taste; the young men, too, were not



INTERIOR  
of Masonic Hall,  
St. Paul, 1869



THE vicinity of Fifth and Wabasha Streets, St. Paul, 1857

niggardly in the matter of expenditures, and, while their money might not have purchased clothes that showed the skill or fashion of eastern tailors, hatters or haberdashers, yet they were the best that could be got in St. Paul. Sometimes, too, there was a certain degree of brilliancy added by the presence of officers from the garrison at Fort Snelling. Dancing would continue until 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning with an intermission of an hour or more for supper at midnight. A few private parties were given at homes of some of the residents.

In this dearth of public entertainment the family life developed. There were many

house[s] in which the evenings were spent as at our own modest home on Jackson street.<sup>6</sup> To two young men whom unsuccessful business ventures had landed penniless upon the street, we gave shelter and food. They, as were also we, were fond of reading and thus developed among ourselves a reading circle that eagerly devoured all the books that could be obtained in St. Paul. Seated before a bright wood fire and around an oil lamp we took turns reading from a favorite book; and lived in the warmth of the sunshine or in the bustle of a great city while the wind howled and the snow drifted in blinding clouds over our buried settlement in the far Northwest.

Letters and newspapers, that were brought twice a week by the mail sledge over the prairie from Dubuque, were eagerly read and discussed. One evening, I remember, we read with the keenest interest of the bur[n]ing of a ferry boat on the Delaware river between Camden, N. J., and Philadelphia. We were moved with sympathy by the description of the agony and suffering of the hundreds of passengers afloat upon the burning hulk in the icy current. It was days after the catastrophe happened that we read of it and it was still many days later that I received a letter from my husband, then in the East, telling me that he had been aboard the burning boat and had narrowly escaped with his life.

<sup>4</sup> Lodges of Freemasons and Odd Fellows were organized in St. Paul in 1849 and 1850, respectively, according to J. Fletcher Williams, *History of the City of Saint Paul*, 235, 263 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 4). M'dewakanton Lodge No. 1 of the Independent Order of the Sons of Malta was organized in St. Paul in 1858. A copy of its *Laws and Rules of Order* is in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society. The lodge probably held its meetings over Charles Colter's store, located at Fifth and Jackson streets.

<sup>5</sup> Earlier in her narrative, Mrs. Ullmann locates the Market House on Minnesota Street. The second hall mentioned doubtless was in the Minnesota House at Fifth and Wabasha, which was managed by Nicholas Pottgieser, a native of Germany who settled in St. Paul in 1853. See the *St. Paul Directory* for 1856-57.

<sup>6</sup> The Ullmanns lived at the corner of Fifth and Jackson streets, probably back of Joseph's place of business, according to the *St. Paul Directory* of 1856-57.



The cold increased in the months of January and February. It was that dry, piercing cold that nipped an exposed ear or finger before one was aware. Buffalo hides were plentiful and not costly; and men and women wrapped themselves up in the garments made from them whenever they went out of their houses. Every day we were told of persons maimed for life or even killed by the vigor of the climate. The driver of the St. Anthony coach in spite of heavy furs was sometimes taken off his box unconscious from the cold and had to be resus[c]itate[d] by stimulants. Not unfrequently was an adventur[e]some teamster mistaken in a blizzard on the prairie and his team dragged home his body frozen stiff in the wagon. The melting snows of Spring often solved the mystery of a sudden disappearance in the dead of winter by disclosing a team and driver caught in the cold embraces of a snow drift and left there to perish.

AS THE DAYS lengthened, the heat of the sun began to have more and more effect; the snow upon the south hillsides melted; and, then, with a feeling of great relief we saw the Mississippi, which had lain like a line of cold steel all Winter, rushing on towards the south carrying away the ice that for so many months had held its current imprisoned. Navigation, however, was not yet resumed; between us and the open river below was still the frozen [Lake] Pepin. But there were many business men and merchants, who anxious to make the purchase of their stock of summer goods, were impatient of this delay. Those who had not already braved the hardships of a sledge ride to Dubuque, could now go as far as Red Wing, at the head of the lake, by means of a little steamboat that Captain [William F.] Davidson had fitted up. This boat also brought back travelers who coming by boat to Bay [Lake] City had gone around the lake to Red Wing.<sup>7</sup> Captain Davidson had this monopoly for about two weeks and then came the information that the ice on

the lake had broken and that the boats were approaching St. Paul.

No news could have been received with more general rejoicing. The day was a gala day given up to congratulations and good cheer and was celebrated with more spontaneity than any other holiday of the year. Every person who was able went down to the landing or watched from the bluffs for the black smoke stacks that were to tell us we were once more of the great world below. The *War Eagle*, one of the mail packets from Galena, the fastest of all the boats that came so far north, was the first arrival. This was on April 18; sometimes the first boat did not come until the twenty-fifth of the month and in seven years not even so late as May 1.<sup>8</sup>

The store of winter supplies was almost exhausted. There was enough flour to have lasted for some time; but only a small portion of the meat which Mr. Coulter had packed away in the Autumn remained; and that could not find a buyer even among the meat hungry population of the new town. A Board of Health, had there been one, would have condemned it long before this time. The boats brought up not only what was considered necessities; but also luxuries a taste for which had now begun to manifest itself among the people. It was curious and interesting to see how the stocks of goods in the shops, depleted by the long drought made upon the winter, were replenished after the arrival of the first boats. The scene at the landing became most animated through the anxiety of each merchant to be the first to have his goods ready for sale; for people bought with avidity and upon the first opportunity what they had been deprived of for months past.

The boat brought up, too, many settlers

---

<sup>7</sup> Davidson's boat was the "Frank Steele."

<sup>8</sup> It was the "Lady Franklin," not the "War Eagle," that reached St. Paul as the first boat of the season on April 18, 1856. The latter, however, held the record for 1855. Captain Russell Blakely, "The Mississippi River and the Advent of Commerce in Minnesota," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 8:413.

SPRING on the  
St. Paul levee



and speculators. Settlers, who having made entries upon land, were going at the opening of the Spring to live upon their properties in accordance with the requirements of the law. Speculators, who had the year before made purchases of real estate in the town or vicinity, came up to look at their investments and to see what could be done in the way of "booming." The transfers of real estate became frequent and values rapidly increased. It was, however, a steady, healthy increase warranted by surroundings and situations. The town was not yet in the throes of a real estate boom such as came later on in its history. We gained, too, as citizens men who did much to build and improve the town. St. Paul grew. Newer and better buildings were put up on almost every street; and the town took on an appearance of enterprise and substantiality.

One day in the Spring, I walked up to the level track that lay on St. Anthony's Hill and was struck by the peculiar sight that I saw. Several hundred men of dark com-

plexions, with long black hair and black eyes; a collection of carts made entirely from wood, and scraggy Indian ponies or long-horned oxen had possession of the hill. They were "Half Breeds," as we called them, who had come from the "Red river country" and beyond to St. Paul to sell their furs.<sup>9</sup> The men with their tall straight figures clothed in furs or rough cloth, were lounging around their rude two-wheeled carts, in the construction of which no iron not even a nail had been used, and displaying the furs that they had brought. They had started as soon as the melting snow and ice would permit and with their crude carts and heavy burdens had consumed three or four months on the way. After they made the purchase of such necessities as they wished to take back with them, they silently disappeared. For several years they continued to make these business pilgrimages and encamped upon St. Anthony Hill; but later, when the country was opened up to settlement and the fur dealers sent their agents there to buy furs, this peculiar feature of St. Paul life became only a reminiscence.

These people, although considered by us as very primitive and almost uncivilized, were very different from the neighboring

<sup>9</sup> The Red River cart trains, consisting of five to six hundred carts, usually arrived in St. Paul sometime in June. For a more detailed description of the traffic between the Canadian settlements on the lower Red River and St. Paul, see Williams, *Saint Paul*, 304-306.

Indian tribes, representations of which we saw every day upon the streets. The men were tall and erect; few had adopted the clothes of the white man but wrapped themselves in government blankets. The squaws were in striking contrast; they were small and almost childlike. . . . Their papooses they carried crosswise on their backs, the little one's stolid face peeping over the mother's left shoulder. . . .

THE LONG dreary Winter of 1857 we were somewhat better prepared to meet than that of the preceding year. The same precautions against cold and starvation were taken but on a more extensive scale. Mr. Coulter in addition to beef this year packed away a quantity of buffalo meat. There were more people, more money to spend and more life and entertainment to break the monotony of the dreary siege of winter.

The most characteristic of the social gatherings of the season were surprise parties. One or two had been given the preceding Winter and the enjoyment that we had had from them was carried over as such a pleasant reminiscence that they were begun soon after we were cut off from the outside world. With great secrecy all of the arrangements would be made. Then, with our own little company of musicians, with a load of provisions and a barrel of beer we would descend upon the home of our victim. We came unheralded and uninvited and our pleasure would be complete if we had succeeded in taking the inmates of the house entirely unaware. The house itself

became our conquest and we made free use of it in carrying out our plans. The dinner which we had brought would be served; and with music, dancing and conversation the evenings became short enough.

Sleighs were many and sleighing parties frequent. The most popular ride was to St. Anthony and return in the bright moonlight; twelve persons in a big sledge filled with straw and buffalo robes and drawn by four horses ringed round with strings of bells. The only house on the road was the country inn half the distance to which the name "The Half Way House" was given.<sup>10</sup> A stop would generally be made here for refreshments. Sometimes there were more than one of these big sledges and besides several smaller one[s]. Increase in size made the party livelier and jollier. Songs and friendly cheerful banter, shouts and calls from one party to another, the jingling of the bells in the crisp air and the moonlight bright and clear on the vast expanse of white prairie, are memories of life and honest enjoyment which it is a pleasure to recall.

<sup>10</sup> Halfway House was erected in 1843 on the stage road between St. Paul and St. Anthony by Stephen Desnoyer, who operated it as an inn and trading post until his death in 1859. It was famed for dinners of venison and other game. Joseph A. Corrigan, *History of St. Marks and the Midway District*, 27 (St. Paul, 1939); Minnesota Historical Society Scrapbooks, 1:52.

THE PHOTOGRAPHS reproduced with this article are, with one exception, from the Edward A. Bromley collection owned by the Minnesota Historical Society. The view on page 197 is one of several taken from the roof of the courthouse.



RED River traders  
encamped on  
St. Anthony Hill  
in 1858



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](#).