

The ST. CROIX VALLEY WELCOMES THE IRON HORSE

JAMES TAYLOR DUNN

GREAT EVENTS or important motifs in history are often illuminated through seemingly trivial local happenings which become symbols of the larger movements to which they belong. The nineteenth century witnessed the epic struggle to cover the United States with a network of railroads—the arteries through which commercial life could flow to all parts of the nation. The long and often discouraging fight by Minnesotans to secure railroads and their great rejoicing at each success is pointed up by a celebration which took place at Stillwater on March 19, 1857, when its citizens, mistakenly as it turned out, believed that their village was about to become the eastern terminus of a transcontinental railroad.

The infant territory of Minnesota began almost immediately after its birth in 1849 to fight for iron links with the outside world. By the end of that year the Galena and Chicago Union Railroad had built tracks as far west as Elgin, Illinois, forty miles beyond Chicago. In 1850 the federal government gave the state of Illinois a munifi-

cent grant of public land which the state could use to finance construction of a railroad. When the legislature chartered the Illinois Central Railroad, it provided that the company was to receive six sections of public land for each mile of railroad completed. The state sold the rest to guarantee a loan to the railroad firm. This first federal land grant established a pattern that was followed in financing many of America's railroads.¹

The iron horse was beginning its headlong race to the banks of the Mississippi. "Our neighbors below us, in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin, appear to be getting up the railroad excitement in good earnest," reported the *Minnesota Chronicle and Register* of St. Paul on February 2, 1850. These steps toward the "annihilation of space and time," predicted the same newspaper on April 20, would revolutionize the course of trade in the Northwest.

Railroads were needed not only to stimulate steadily increasing immigration and to join the inadequate transportation systems afforded by Minnesota's rivers, but also to

MR. DUNN, whose special field of interest is the St. Croix Valley, is librarian of the Minnesota Historical Society.

¹ On the Illinois land grant, see Carlton J. Corliss, *Main Line of Mid-America*, 7-29 (New York, 1950).

bring the icebound settlements of the sparsely populated territory into more direct contact with the rest of the country during the long winter months. In a speech before the St. Anthony Library Association on March 21, 1850, hardware merchant William R. Marshall, who was later to become governor of the state, approved the railroad excitement in the territory as "worthy of the spirit of the age."²

BY JANUARY, 1853, the unbounded faith of Minnesotans in the future of rail transportation was reflected in Alexander Ramsey's last message as territorial governor. Succumbing to the railroad mania, Ramsey recommended connections between Lake Superior, the Mississippi, and the Red River of the North. His message was the go-ahead signal for railroad promoters, and from 1853 to 1857 twenty-seven companies were chartered by the Minnesota legislature. Few of them got beyond the planning stage, for there was not sufficient capital within the territory to make any real progress in railroad building without federal assistance.³

Profiting from the example of Illinois' successful land grant, Henry H. Sibley, Minnesota's territorial delegate in Congress, tried unsuccessfully in 1851 and again in 1853 to secure a liberal federal donation and appropriation to aid the construction of railroads.⁴ Although some Minnesotans considered these efforts visionary and even wildly fanciful, the *Minnesota Pioneer* of

March 10, 1853, refused to "recognize *anything* as chimerical in the settlement of the great valley of the Mississippi."

Minnesota's attempts to obtain federal aid at last succeeded in June, 1854, when Congress approved the territory's request for a land grant of approximately a million acres. The act stipulated, however, that the land should not go to any company already "constituted or organized." The Minnesota and Northwestern Railroad Company, incorporated by the legislature in March, 1854, managed by devious means to have the proviso changed to read "constituted and organized." This illegal alteration made the firm eligible for the grant, since it had been created by the legislature but was not as yet definitely organized.⁵

The incorporators immediately met in New York City and organized the firm by electing a board of directors that included Edmund Rice, Lyman Dayton, and Alexander Ramsey of Minnesota. Suspicions were aroused when the company, which would have been excluded by the original wording of the bill, continued with its plans. An investigation was held, and, as a result, the land grant bill was repealed by Congress early in August, 1854.

The *Minnesota Democrat* of August 16 called the revocation a "stunning blow upon the interests of our territory," but the *St. Anthony Express* of August 19 took a different view. "It is possible that the time may be somewhat deferred . . . for building a railroad in Minnesota," the paper said, "but we would infinitely rather be without a road for twenty years, than to have the Territory fall a prey to a gang of land sharks, pirates and consummate scoundrels."

Although Minnesota was again without financial help from the government for building railroads, the Minnesota and Northwestern, aided by expert legal advisers and spurred on by speculators, made every attempt to have the land grant declared irrevocable. During the next two years the railroad's efforts became a public

² *Minnesota Pioneer*, April 10, 1850.

³ Ramsey's speech appears in Minnesota, *Council Journal*, 1853, p. 30. See also James H. Baker, "History of Transportation in Minnesota," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 9:25 (1901); and Rasmus S. Saby, "Railroad Legislation in Minnesota, 1849 to 1875," in *Collections*, 15:1-29 (1915).

⁴ See *Congressional Globe*, 32 Congress, 1 session, 21; 2 session, 98; Minnesota Territory, *Laws*, 1851, p. 44.

⁵ See United States, *Statutes at Large*, 10:302; Minnesota, *Laws*, 1854, p. 159. For the full story of the Minnesota and Northwestern discussed here and below, see William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1:327-350 (St. Paul, 1956).

issue and caused a great deal of comment and ill will throughout the state.

THE PEOPLE of the St. Croix River Valley were especially interested in the activities of the company, since its line was to "pass to a point not exceeding one and one fourth of a mile from that portion of Lake St. Croix adjoining the eastern limits of the city of Stillwater."⁶ Thus Washington County and the lumbering town of Stillwater were frequently involved in the railroad fight. The well-publicized actions of some of the area's representatives in the territorial legislature caused considerable general animosity.

In January, 1855, Washington County's representative, William Willim, a prominent Stillwater contractor, joined Sibley, who was then a territorial legislator, in submitting to the House the majority report of the judiciary committee which requested that the legislature memorialize the national Congress to annul the Minnesota and Northwestern charter and restore the land grant. When the report came up for consideration five days later, Willim cast his vote on the railroad's side, doubtless under instruction from his constituents, and the memorial failed to pass.⁷

The *Daily Minnesota Pioneer* of January 30, unable to account for this "antagonistic action," accused the representative not only of having been bribed but of being a fool. Without accounting for his action, Willim hotly denied the former, but blandly admitted: "All the sense that I possess is only enough to know that I am a fool." In the meantime, Congress had taken up the matter and had refused to annul the company's charter, much to the satisfaction of its friends in the St. Croix Valley.⁸

In 1856, Washington County was again embroiled in the fight over the Minnesota and Northwestern's attempt to obtain from the territorial legislature an extension of time to complete the length of track required by its charter. The county's representatives in the legislature, Major

Abraham Van Vorhes and lumberman Henry A. Jackman, in spite of last-minute instructions from valley residents, voted against the extension. Both territorial prison warden Francis R. Delano and the local newspaper blasted Van Vorhes and Jackman for thrusting "a red hot poker into the belly of Stillwater."⁹

Again the company won out; the legislature extended the charter and gave the firm four years in which to complete fifty miles of track.¹⁰ On February 22, 1856, the *St. Paul Pioneer and Democrat*, editorializing about public sentiment toward the Minnesota and Northwestern, stated that Governor Willis A. Gorman alone remained "the uncompromising enemy of the company." The competition of numerous other chartered railroads and renewed hopes for government assistance, however, soon made the people forget the once-favored Minnesota and Northwestern, which by the end of 1856 has ceased to be of interest to anyone except lawyers and stockholders. At that time Minnesota was still without a single mile of railroad track!

THE TERRITORY'S initial application early in 1857 for admission to the Union made timely another appeal for a land grant to aid railroad construction. Since Minnesota was not held responsible by the federal government for the questionable actions of the unscrupulous individuals who had altered the 1854 bill, the new request met with only token resistance. On March 3, 1857, Congress passed a new land grant bill, and at a special session of the Minnesota legislature four railroad companies were authorized to build six lines.¹¹

Stillwater rejoiced that it would be the starting point of what the entire St. Croix

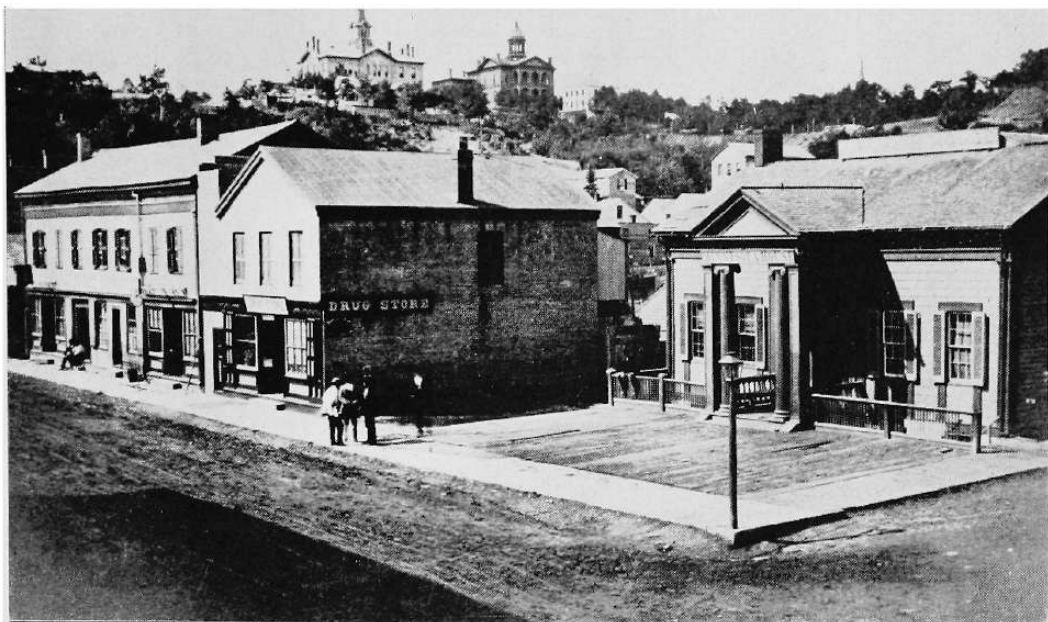
⁶ *Minnesota, Laws*, 1855, p. 150.

⁷ *Minnesota, House Journal*, 1855, p. 69-74, 97-99, 107-112, 127, 176-184, 241.

⁸ *Pioneer*, February 2, 1855; Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1:344.

⁹ *House Journal*, 1856, p. 263, 287, 308; *St. Croix Union* (Stillwater), March 21, 1856.

¹⁰ *Laws*, 1856, p. 76.



STILLWATER'S main street, 1870. Buildings at right and left date from 1848.

Valley believed was one of the most important railroads ever projected in America — the newly chartered Minnesota and Pacific.¹² "Among all the points in the Territory," stated the *Pioneer and Democrat* on March 21, 1857, "none will be more highly benefited than our neighbor on the St. Croix. . . success could not fall upon the shoulders of a more vigorous . . . community."

Little wonder, then, that early in March, 1857, hope ran high throughout the valley that within three years, at the most, the iron horse would reach Stillwater. Milton H. Abbott, the editor of the *St. Croix Union*, reasoned that with Stillwater as the starting point, iron rails would soon lead directly to the Pacific and there connect with ocean vessels bound for China. Thus Minnesota's major lumber mart was to become one of the first cities in the Northwest. "What is to hinder?" asked the editor of the *Union* on March 13, for it was his


foregone conclusion that "the commerce of Asia will come to Stillwater! This is not gas — it isn't humbug."

WHEN THE NEWS reached Stillwater on March 11, 1857, that the second land grant bill had become a law eight days earlier and that the St. Croix Valley would probably get its railroad, celebrations were spontaneous in every corner of the town. No other locality in the entire territory raised such an immediate shout of joy. The *Union* of March 13 reported that throughout the village there was "a good-natured uproar; and the burning of powder and bonfires soon became general." The gaiety continued at a high pitch the following day, and as twilight shadowed the Wisconsin and Minnesota bluffs, church bells began ringing, bonfires were kindled on both sides of the river, and rockets illuminated the sky. Stillwater's band was pressed into service and many homeowners added to the colorful festivities by placing lighted candles in their windows. "Old and young, rich and poor, the high and the low — seemed im-

¹¹ United States, *Statutes at Large*, 11:195-197; Minnesota, *Laws*, 1857, extra session, 4.

¹² *Union*, February 27, 1857.

CLEAR THE TRACK! LOOK OUT!



**A Grand Rail Road Ball, Supper, and General
JOLLIFICATION!**

IN HONOR OF THE PASSAGE OF THE

Minnesota Land Grant,

Will be given in the City of Stillwater, Thursday Even'g, March 19, 1857.

The company of Yourself and Ladies is respectfully invited.

The Odd Fellow's and Lake House Halls will be in running order, and individuals may dance
in either.

Steam will be let on and the machine started at 8 o'clock.

PART of a handbill
announcing the
celebration

COURTESY WASHINGTON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

mensely pleased," happily concluded the *Union*. "Our good Stillwater neighbors," summed up St. Paul's *Daily Minnesotian* of March 16, "started off in high glee the night they heard of the passage of the Land Grant; have been in high glee ever since, and don't intend to settle down to their wonted quiet for five or six days to come."

But the people of Stillwater wanted more than just a small local celebration. They felt that the long-awaited land grant deserved a gala public demonstration, and they wanted to share with friends and neighbors the "Good time that has come." The rest of Minnesota would then see that the entire valley of the great St. Croix River stood behind the belief that "Rivers are the warp — Railroads the woof of the commercial web," and that its citizens were united to weave this web skillfully.¹³

No other community in all Minnesota celebrated so enthusiastically as did Stillwater. St. Paul wanted to mark the occasion, but political animosities played an important part in the abandonment of proposed festivities, as did the "near approach of the opening of navigation, and the gen-

eral scarcity of money." A talked-of celebration at Shakopee never materialized.¹⁴

"GO IT!! Minnesota Land Grant Jollification," urged the *Union* on March 13 in describing plans for the celebration. Thursday, March 19, 1857, was the date set, and Warden Delano was placed in charge of the festivities. He called for a general illumination of every building in the city—one candle to be "placed behind every pane of glass in each house that can be seen from any street." For those who could not afford such an expense, Delano and his committee offered to furnish the lights. Most of the population of Stillwater was engaged in making preparations.

"A great day for Stillwater," the Reverend Henry M. Nichols of that city's First Presbyterian Church wrote in his diary on March 19. During the afternoon, residents of other parts of the valley started pouring into the city. There were numerous representatives from Taylor's Falls, Marine

¹³ *St. Paul Financial, Real Estate, and Railroad Advertiser*, March 21, 1857.

¹⁴ See *St. Paul Daily Times*, March 23, 1857; *Union*, April 3, 1857.

Mills, Lakeland, and Point Douglas. Several sleigh loads of visitors drove up on the ice from Hudson, Wisconsin, and others came from St. Anthony and Shakopee.¹⁵

At three o'clock in the afternoon the St. Paul contingent of nearly two hundred arrived after a three-and-a-half-hour trip from the capital. The group made an imposing sight as it entered Stillwater on that crisp, clear day with flags flying and led by its own brass band. The procession was loudly cheered when the sleighs drew up in front of Stillwater's leading hotel, the Minnesota House. According to the *Union* of March 20, former Governor Alexander Ramsey was there, together with Judges David Cooper and Aaron Goodrich, lawyers Morton S. Wilkinson, Lorenzo A. Babcock, and Samuel J. R. McMillan, once a Stillwater resident. James W. Taylor, soon to become secretary of the Minnesota and Pacific Railroad, banker Joseph M. Marshall, and Sibley were also noted in the crowd, as were the editors of three St. Paul newspapers. The *Daily Pioneer and Democrat* of March 21 reported that during the afternoon the "Joy of the people found vent in gunpowder, and cannon boomed and reverberated from bluff to bluff."

At dusk the church bells began ringing, a signal for the quieter entertainments of the evening and for setting torches to bonfires and tar barrels spaced at frequent intervals for two miles along the Minnesota and Wisconsin bluffs. The crowd, elbowing its way through the streets to the martial music of the St. Paul brass band, admired the numerous transparencies placed either in front of the buildings or elevated by ropes stretched across Main Street. Sufficient light shone through them so that the figures and letters could easily be seen. Celebrating Democrats especially liked one

which plugged their own choice, "Henry M. Rice, Present Delegate and Future Senator"; and the entire valley applauded a large transparency that read on one side "Stillwater, The Eastern Terminus" and on the other, "Minnesota Land Grant. Look Out For the Cars." On another streamer, in front of an old paint shop opposite the Minnesota House, were spelled out the words "California Railroad Depot"; beside it, a smaller banner stated, "Ladies Room—Gentlemen are not Admitted." The *Stillwater Messenger* office was well illuminated and in front of the building a transparency depicted an engine and tender with the words, "Stillwater Welcomes the Iron Horse."¹⁶

Sky rockets flashed brilliantly in the dusky night, outlining against the white of the frozen river numerous sleighs constantly moving to and from the top of the Wisconsin bluffs. The *Union* of March 20 reported that the committee had provided the sleighs so that all would have the chance to get a full view of the impressive scene from the high ground on the Wisconsin side of the river. The spectators were thus afforded what the *St. Paul Daily Times* of March 21 called one of the "grandest and most imposing scenes we have ever witnessed."

AT ABOUT ten o'clock, dance floors were crowded at the Lake House, a popular hotel, and in the large hall over banker Adam B. Gorgas' stone building. Crochety Thomas M. Newson, editor of the *Daily Times*, was greatly impressed by what he considered an innovation: "The introduction of singing," to the accompaniment of the Stillwater brass band, "to harmonize with the tune played for the dancers." His glowing account of the celebration in the *Times* of March 21 was doubtless intended to atone for the comment he made a few days before on March 17: "Stillwater never amounted to much except in its own estimation." The galaxy continued until nearly morning, and although the Reverend Nich-

¹⁵ Nichols' diary is owned by the Minnesota Historical Society. See also *Union*, March 20, 1857.

¹⁶ The transparencies are described in the *Union* of March 20 and the *St. Paul Daily Times* of March 21.

ols, who retired early in the evening, feared that "undoubtedly there was much drunkenness," his pessimistic view was refuted by the general opinion that neither boisterous conduct nor drunkenness were in evidence that night among Stillwater's young men.¹⁷

In the meantime, so many meals had to be served at the hotels that it was necessary to postpone the more formal "collation" and speechmaking until one o'clock in the morning. Only then did the honored guests and valley notables finally sit down to supper at the Lake House. During the course of the meal, numerous toasts were drunk. By the end of the night a total of sixteen had been offered, and each one was responded to at length in "a very happy manner."¹⁸

Taylor's speech, in reply to the toast, "To the headwaters of navigation on the Mississippi . . . the Red River of the North, and the commerce of Puget's Sound," was considered by many to be the high spot of the evening. His response, portraying the riches of the upper country and advocating a north-south railroad to secure these great advantages of wealth, produced a marked impression on the audience "for the earnestness, eloquence and zeal he threw into the subject."¹⁹ Even Major Van Vorhes, so roundly denounced not too long before by the banquet's presiding officer, Warden Delano, took a prominent part. When the dinner was over at three o'clock in the morning and the 1857 railroad jollification had come to a brilliant end, it was felt that those responsible had certainly risen to the grandness of the occasion and that an event had taken place which the *Daily Times* of March 21 felt "will ever remain memorable in the history of Stillwater."

THE ST. CROIX VALLEY was enthusiastic and optimistic that night, happy in the hope that the Minnesota and Pacific Railroad would soon begin construction from its eastern terminus at Stillwater west to St. Paul, as its charter specified. In

1858, however, the Minnesota and Pacific began grading the roadbed not at Stillwater but at St. Paul, building northward up the Mississippi; Stillwater's bitter complaints were met with complete indifference. Ironical, therefore, was one of the evening's toasts: "To Stillwater . . . may her future progress be appropriately symbolized by the steam and majestic power, the near development of which we now celebrate."²⁰

After the great financial panic of 1857 and the outbreak of the Civil War, railroads were all but forgotten. It was not until 1862 that trains first ran from St. Paul to St. Anthony. The St. Croix Valley had to wait until 1867 when a tired and discouraged Stillwater formed an independent company of its own and built the Stillwater-White Bear road. Only then did the iron horse finally reach the valley.²¹

On the afternoon of December 29, 1870, another banquet was held, this time at a new hotel, the Sawyer House. After fourteen years of working and waiting and hoping, the opening of a railroad into Stillwater was celebrated. But this time there was no jollification, no "Go-it!", no fireworks, as there had been in 1857. Perhaps the joy of the some hundred and fifty people who assembled from St. Paul, Duluth, and Stillwater was not as unconfined as it had been for the first celebration, but there was rejoicing, and the day was pronounced a success. Stillwater's leading citizen, John McKusick, summed up the whole affair by expressing his satisfaction that "all the troubles, and battles, and trials, and bickerings" were finally over. The railroad which the St. Croix Valley had long needed was at last a reality.²²

¹⁷ Nichols diary, March 19, 1857.

¹⁸ The banquet is described in the *Union* of March 20 and the *Daily Times* of March 21.

¹⁹ Taylor's speech is reported in the *St. Paul Advertiser* of March 28 and the *Daily Times* of March 21.

²⁰ *Union*, March 20, 1857.

²¹ *Stillwater Messenger*, February 10, 1871.

²² *Messenger*, January 6, 1871.



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](#).