

OLIVER HUDSON KELLEY

Minnesota Pioneer, 1849-1868

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and

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IN JANUARY, 1966, Miss Smith, a student at Macalester College engaged in a work-study project between terms for the Minnesota Historical Society, did extensive research in the society's collections and elsewhere on the early life of Oliver H. Kelley. Although his work in founding the National Grange is widely known, Kelley himself has always been a shadowy figure. His personal papers have not survived; he has no direct descendants; and the traces of his energetic career are widely scattered among many obscure sources. By searching in newspapers, manuscripts, and census records, Miss Smith succeeded in bringing together enough of these traces so that at least an outline of Kelley's Minnesota years could be reconstructed. On the basis of these notes Mrs. Gilman, editor of this magazine, has written the present article. Its publication honors the centennial of the National Grange, to be observed in December, 1967.

WHEN "FATHER" Oliver H. Kelley died in Washington, D.C., at the age of eighty-seven he was a revered patriarchal figure to most American farmers. He was the grand

old man of the National Grange, which he had founded in 1867 and served as secretary for eleven years. From its beginnings in Minnesota the organization had spread across the Midwest like wildfire during the hard decade of the 1870s, and it had been the first of many groups to cry out on behalf of the depressed and debt-ridden farmer. It had also pointed the way to a fuller social life and a broader educational base in the nation's agricultural communities.¹

With Kelley's fame resting on this single great work, begun at the age of forty-one, it is small wonder that history has neglected the eager young man who stepped off a steamboat at St. Paul in June, 1849, and for eighteen years devoted a large part of his energies to promoting immigration and publicizing the agricultural potential of Min-

¹ On the Grange and Kelley's connection with it, see O[liver] H. Kelley, *Origin and Progress of the Order of the Patrons of Husbandry in the United States; A History From 1866 to 1873* (Philadelphia, 1875); Solon J. Buck, *The Granger Movement* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1913); William D. Barns, "Oliver Hudson Kelley and the Genesis of the Grange: A Reappraisal," in *Agricultural History* 41: 229-242 (July, 1967).

Oliver H. Kelley



nesota. Kelley was from Boston and like many Yankees had migrated west as soon as he turned twenty-one. He had spent six months in Chicago, working in a drugstore and moonlighting as a reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*. Then he moved on to Peoria, Illinois, and to Muscatine, Iowa, where he learned and plied the trade of telegraph operator. In Muscatine he married eighteen-year-old Lucy Earle. The couple promptly decided to try their luck in the new territory of Minnesota.²

One of Kelley's first missions after disembarking with his bride at the frontier hamlet of St. Paul was to find Governor Alexander Ramsey and present a letter of

introduction from a mutual friend in Muscatine. The letter recommended the young couple—especially Lucy—in warmly sentimental terms and assured Ramsey that Kelley “possesses ample business capacity, with active mind; and is anxious for steady employment.”³

The newlyweds soon made themselves at home in the small St. Paul community; both seem to have been lively, social, and outgoing. Less than a month after their arrival they helped organize a Fourth of July celebration at the newly opened American House. Mrs. Kelley presided over the fireworks display and Kelley volunteered a toast at the banquet. Within a few weeks also Kelley had joined Minnesota's first Masonic Lodge and had played an active part in the St. Paul precinct meeting to nominate representatives for the first territorial legislature. When the legislature convened in September, he was elected messenger of the House, and a short time later he was commissioned an “aide-de-camp” to Governor Ramsey.⁴

²Lida S. Ives, “Data Sheets on ‘Father Oliver Hudson Kelley,’” 2, an unpublished manuscript, original in the possession of Mrs. Ives, photocopy in the Minnesota Historical Society.

³J. Williams to Ramsey, June 5, 1849, Alexander Ramsey Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society.

⁴*Minnesota Register* (St. Paul), July 14, 21, 1849; *Minnesota Farmer*, March, 1958, p. 29; Minnesota Territory, *House Journal*, 1849, p. 20; Ives, “Data Sheets,” 4.

After less than a year in St. Paul, however, Kelley succumbed to townsite fever. The location of the hour was Itasca, on the east bank of the Mississippi near present-day Elk River. An attempt to make the projected city the temporary territorial capital in place of St. Paul had been narrowly defeated in the legislature, and speculators were pouring into the area. The Kelleys followed the rush. Autumn of 1850 found them established on the riverside claim that was to be Kelley's permanent Minnesota home and eventually his monument. For Lucy it was soon a grave; she died the next April, just as spring was returning to the upper Mississippi, and left behind an infant daughter.⁵

To care for the child, Kelley's mother traveled from Boston. Sorrow struck again in October, 1851, when little Lucy also died. By that time, however, the older Mrs. Kelley had grown to like the country so well that she joined Oliver in persuading the rest of the family to migrate. Within a few years a number of Kelley's relatives, including his parents and two brothers, were living in the neighborhood.⁶

LITTLE LAND in the region had yet been broken for farming, and for two or three years Kelley's interest centered in the development of Itasca. At first the town's prospects looked good: it was backed by several of the territory's more substantial citizens, including Ramsey; it was located on one of the Red River trails, which linked St. Paul with Pembina and the British settlements; and at its levee the little steamer "Governor Ramsey" called regularly as it plied the river between St. Anthony and Sauk Rapids. Itasca also had an active Indian trade, in which Kelley himself engaged for a time. The discontented Winnebago continually wandered south and east from their unpopular reservation at Long Prairie and sought food, weapons, and liquor at a number of trading points along the eastern bank of the Mississippi. Itasca became foremost among these in 1853, when a treaty signed

by Governor Willis A. Gorman granted the restless tribe a reserve along the Crow River, which flowed into the Mississippi from the west at a point almost opposite the town. Although the treaty was never ratified, a large and unruly community of Winnebago immediately settled at the mouth of the Crow, where they lived in anticipation of trouble with nearby bands of Chippewa.⁷

"Those were glorious days," Kelley wrote in later years with exaggerated satire. "A thousand houses, an immense military depot, and hundreds of boats lying at the levee; martial law ruled supreme; war-dances invigorated the people, and fired the Indian heart; loud were the speeches, and great deeds of valor from the warriors resounded from street to street. Big were the expectations of the white population . . . [but] the great war proved a great fizzle."⁸

The prosperity of Itasca also fizzled two years later, when the Winnebago were moved to a tract on the Blue Earth River in southern Minnesota. Within a short time the town had disappeared — all but the post office, which still remained in 1868, when Kelley addressed a letter to the secretary of the Minnesota Historical Society: "As a relic of the past I send you herewith the first stake ever driven and the last to be found on the site of the ancient city of Itasca. . . .

⁵ *St. Paul Press*, July 9, 1865; *Minnesota Pioneer* (St. Paul), April 24, 1851; *Minnesota Territory, House Journal*, 1849, p. 124; William Henry Kelley, *Genealogical Gleanings Relating to the Kelleys of Brentwood, N. H.*, 12 (St. Paul, 1892); United States Manuscript Census Schedules, 1850, Benton County, p. 11, in the Minnesota Historical Society. The Kelley homestead was purchased by the National Grange in 1935 and in 1961 was presented to the Minnesota Historical Society for permanent preservation. It has been designated a National Historic Landmark by the National Park Service. Lucy Kelley's grave is unmarked, but its approximate location has been determined through family recollections and old photographs.

⁶ Kelley, *Genealogical Gleanings*, 12.

⁷ Kelley, *Genealogical Gleanings*, 12; *Minnesota Pioneer*, March 27, 1850; *Minnesota Democrat* (St. Paul), July 12, 1854; *Sauk Rapids Sentinel*, June 26, 1868; William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1: 318, 479 (St. Paul, 1956).

⁸ *St. Paul Press*, July 9, 1865.

*The first
Grange office
at Itasca*



Should the history of Itasca ever be written, a great deal of information might be secured, which would be of value to the rising generation, especially to young men starting out in life, particularly if about to embark in town site speculations. . . . Treasure this stake, for it never can be replaced. There never will be another Itasca, there never can be.”⁹ One suspects that a bit of Kelley’s youth went with it.

THE YANKEE settler was shrewd enough to realize, however, that the future of Minnesota lay not in the Indian trade but in the land. He turned to agriculture with an enthusiasm surprising for a city-bred man. Since he had received a better-than-average education and had no rural background to draw upon (his father was a tailor), Kelley became a confirmed “book farmer.” Far from apologizing for this, he campaigned eagerly

for more experimentation, advanced methods, and exchange of information among farmers. In December, 1853, he wrote to the *Prairie Farmer*, published in Chicago: “I circulated your paper and procured a few subscribers. Last year there were but two converts to book farming; this year we number a dozen or more.”¹⁰

On his farm he built one of the first frame barns erected north of St. Anthony and sowed the first timothy hay. He experimented over the years with everything from buckwheat to apples, from melons to asparagus. Hard pressed by the drought of 1863, he installed an elaborate irrigation system and became the Minnesota agent of J. D. West’s patented pumps. He is also said to have owned the first mechanical reaper in the state. As a practical farmer he seems to have been moderately successful, moving steadily away from grain and stock raising and in the direction of horticulture, vegetable gardening, and the nursery business, as nearby city markets became more accessible.¹¹ Yet there always remained about him a touch of the promoter, a little of the smalltime politician, and even more of the journalist.

He was an active joiner. In 1852 an agri-

⁹ Minnesota Historical Society Archives, Correspondence, June 12, 1868.

¹⁰ *Prairie Farmer*, 14:83 (February, 1854); Kelley, *Genealogical Gleanings*, 9.

¹¹ Ives, “Data Sheets,” 4; *St. Paul Press*, July 9, April 12, 1864; *Pioneer and Democrat* (St. Paul), March 17, 19, 1856; *Anoka Star*, December 26, 1863; June 25, 1864; April 30, 1865; *Sauk Rapids Sentinel*, May 22, 1868.



*Temperance Lane Kelley
during the 1870s*

cultural society was organized in Benton County and for four years he served as its corresponding secretary. In this capacity he arranged speakers for meetings, wrote incessantly to farm journals, touting the area's agricultural progress, and for a while he acted as purchasing agent for local farmers in ordering equipment from St. Louis. He was also active in launching the territorial agricultural society in January, 1854. A later decade found him serving on the first executive committee of the Minnesota Fruit Growers' Association.¹²

Having become known locally as "a graceful writer," he began contributing a regular column on agriculture to the *Sauk Rapids Frontiersman*. This he continued through 1855 and into early 1856, at the same time serving as the paper's agent in southern Benton County and in Wright County. Eventually his talents became known as far as Washington, and he wrote a ten-page essay on Minnesota which was published as part of the report of the commissioner of agriculture for 1863.¹³

Meanwhile Kelley had again proved himself susceptible to townsite fever, which reached epidemic proportions in Minnesota during the late 1850s. With his brother Charles, he surveyed and platted North-

wood, located on the Mississippi just above the mouth of the Crow River in Wright County. The site was not far from his original claim, though on the other side of the Mississippi. A post office was established there, and in March, 1856, Kelley was appointed postmaster. Soon the new town boasted a hotel, a store, and a school, as well as a burgeoning industry. The versatile Kelley had discovered a pumice-like substance on the bank of the river which he began to package and market under the name "Excelsior Metal Polish." The enterprise apparently did not long outlast Northwood, which, like many another Minnesota "paper town," vanished after the panic of 1857. The post office was discontinued in November,

¹² *Prairie Farmer*, 14:83 (February, 1854); *Minnesota Pioneer*, November 29, 1854; *Sauk Rapids Frontiersman*, May 3, 1855; *Pioneer and Democrat*, January 1, 1856; *St. Paul Press*, October 6, 1866; Darwin S. Hall and R[eturn] I. Holcombe, *History of the Minnesota State Agricultural Society*, 7, 19 (St. Paul, 1910); Kelley to Alexander Ramsey, October 7, 1854, Ramsey Papers. Benton County then included the present Sherburne County and parts of Mille Lacs, Morrison, and Crow Wing. See Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1:247.

¹³ *Frontiersman*, September 20, 1855; January 3, 1856; 38 Congress, 1 session, *House Executive Documents*, no. 91, p. 31-41 (serial 1196). His first column in the *Frontiersman* appears on April 26, 1855, and the last on April 3, 1856.

1859, and the store and schoolhouse were moved to nearby Dayton.¹⁴ The hotel fell to ruin and may have been what Kelley had in mind, when he wrote of Minnesota in 1863: "Occasionally one passes, in travelling, the ruins of some deserted house, which upon inquiry, proves to be a hotel of a town site which was mortgaged for treble its real value in 1857, and 'thereby hangs a tale.'"¹⁵

By 1864 Kelley had surmounted the hard years of sod-breaking, Indian scares, and financial panic. He had become widely known and respected as one of the early settlers in central Minnesota, and he was raising a family. A year after Lucy's death he had married Temperance Baldwin Lane, a young schoolteacher who was, like himself, a native of Boston; thereafter, at regular intervals of two years, four small daughters had appeared: Julia, Fanny, Grace, and Garaphelia.¹⁶ His farm was a show place of the neighborhood. Nevertheless, he was restless.

In 1860 his parents had returned to Massachusetts, and after a try at farming,

his brother William had moved to St. Paul, where he entered on a lifetime career as a bookkeeper in the First National Bank. Other relatives also had given up breaking Minnesota's soil. Among them was Nathaniel Hall, Mrs. Kelley's brother-in-law, who had settled with his family near Northwood some time before 1860 but had soon left Wright County.¹⁷ Kelley's soaring hopes for the prosperity of Itasca and Northwood had come to nothing, and after two years of severe drought in 1862-63, the future of farming looked grim.

Though busy with installing an extensive irrigation system, Kelley accepted that spring an appointment as "regular correspondent" for the *National Republican* of Washington and wrote to a number of prominent citizens, soliciting their contributions. "I have since 1849 written and had published, out of our State, over eight hundred letters regarding Minnesota and it has become an old story," he told John H. Stevens. "I now seek some new matter by way of soliciting suggestions from others. I claim to be as full of public spirit as a dog is full of fleas . . . and I am no seeker of office. My scribbling is my recreation—gratuitous."¹⁸

Better pay was necessary, however, probably to meet the heavy costs of his investment in irrigation. In the fall of 1864 he received through his old patron, Ramsey, a job as clerk under the commissioner of agriculture and packed his bags for the trip to Washington. Characteristically, he made his presence in the nation's capital count in two ways: he not only worked for the government but served as a correspondent for the *St. Paul Press*. The articles he wrote consisted mainly of popular gossip and sightseer's observations.¹⁹

Spring took him back to Minnesota with an assignment from Commissioner Isaac Newton to tour the state and report fully on its agricultural advantages. At the same time he became an agent for Daniel A. Robertson's St. Paul nursery and seed store, and he may have doubled as a sales-

¹⁴ Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge, *History of Wright County Minnesota*, 2:783 (Chicago, 1915); list of post offices in Minnesota, compiled and indexed by Newton D. Mereness, on file in the Minnesota Historical Society.

¹⁵ 38 Congress, 1 session, *House Executive Documents*, no. 91, p. 36.

¹⁶ Kelley, *Genealogical Gleanings*, 13; United States Manuscript Census Schedules, 1860, Sherburne County, p. 4.

¹⁷ Kelley, *Genealogical Gleanings*, 10; notes by L. P. Burlingham, *Minnesota Grange Papers*; Warren Upham and Rose B. Dunlap, *Minnesota Biographies*, 394 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 14, 1912); United States Manuscript Census Schedules, 1860, Wright County, p. 75.

¹⁸ Kelley to Stevens, March 16, 1864, John H. Stevens Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society. Though this letter seems to have been the first personal contact between the two men, their acquaintance ripened into friendship and eventually business association. The Stevens Papers for the 1870s contain numerous letters from Kelley concerning land promotion schemes in Florida.

¹⁹ Kelley, *Origin and Progress of the . . . Patrons of Husbandry*, 11; *St. Paul Press*, November 30, December 7, 11, 17, 21, 24, 1864; January 1, 10, 28, February 3, 11, 14, March 4, 1865.



*The restored
Kelley house at
Elk River*

man during his travels through the state that summer. Certainly he also plied his pen, for in addition to his reports to Newton, he wrote two lengthy series of articles on Minnesota — one for the *St. Paul Press* and the other for the *Boston Post*. Though the ground covered was the same, the first was slanted for local consumption and the other aimed at prospective immigrants.²⁰

Kelley's journalistic style was chatty and jocular after the fashion of the time. His essays suggest a sociable, inquisitive man with great reserves of optimism and good will but no noteworthy insight. Aptly titled "Rambles Through Minnesota," the articles published in the *Press* described trips up the Mississippi and Minnesota river valleys. Kelley's reports on industries, the growth of towns, crops, soil, and weather were interspersed with recollections of old settlers, tips to travelers on the best eating places, advice to farmers on how to poison gophers, and bits of cracker-barrel philosophy. His growing interest in horticulture was evident throughout: everywhere he looked for apples.

From Redwood Falls, the westernmost point he reached, had come reports of valuable coal deposits. Kelley made a particular point of looking into the matter for his readers, and after touring the area, confidently predicted a great mining industry, for "THE COAL IS HERE IN AN IMMENSE QUANTITY, and can be obtained by working into the river bank above high water mark as readily as you can dig cellars in the sand stone under the bluff in St. Paul."²¹

Early in November, 1865, Kelley was recalled to Washington by Newton, who assured him of an appointment in the South for the winter. After several weeks of impatient waiting he discovered that Newton was wavering, so the Minnesotan took steps

²⁰ *Anoka Star*, April 30, 1865; *St. Paul Press*, June 24, 29, 30, July 1, 7, 9, 13, 14, 15, 19, 28, 29, August 3, 4, 23, 25, 30, September 1, 1865; *Boston Post*, May 24, July 1, 8, 29, August 12, September 8, October 9, 18, 1865.

²¹ *St. Paul Press*, August 4, 1865. Kelley was mistaken. The deposits were lignite and never proved worth the cost of development. See Wayne E. Webb and J. I. Swedberg, *Redwood: The Story of a County*, 421 (Redwood Falls, 1964).

to assure the appointment. According to his own account, he carried his case directly to President Andrew Johnson, and in an interview during January, 1866, the president promised him the commission. He received it the same day, and two weeks later he left on his second tour within a year — this time for the purpose of collecting facts to aid immigration and agricultural reconstruction in the South. As on his previous trip, he not only sent official reports to Washington, but also wrote newspaper articles.²²

IT WAS during this southern tour that the idea of a farmers' organization began to develop in Kelley's mind. Still a dedicated Mason, he found himself accepted as a brother member by Masons throughout the South despite the general antagonism exhibited toward northerners. Why not develop a similar organization among the nation's farmers, he wondered. The South was overwhelmingly agricultural. Such an organization would bring men of the North

and South closer together, and farmers of both sections would have a channel through which to co-operate in working for their common good.²³

He returned to Washington in April, then went on to Massachusetts, where he visited family and friends. While there, he discussed the new idea with his wife's twenty-seven-year-old niece, Caroline Hall, whom he had known earlier during her family's residence in Wright County and had continued to correspond with. Encouraged by her enthusiastic reaction, he went back to Minnesota and spent the summer on his farm, plowing and pondering.²⁴

With the coming of winter, financial pressures or simply the desire to be on the move took him again to Washington, where he began to pull strings for another appointment. On December 21, 1866, Joseph A. Wheelock, editor of the *Press* and Ramsey's political hatchet man, wrote from St. Paul to tell the senator of his concern at hearing that Kelley was being considered for a position as secretary to the Senate post office committee. "Kelley is very much of a humbug," Wheelock wrote.²⁵ "He is a greenhorn — given to small dickerings without a particle of discretion, and it would never do to take him into your confidence, if you ever take anybody into your confidence — which I doubt." The editor suggested another candidate for the job, "who

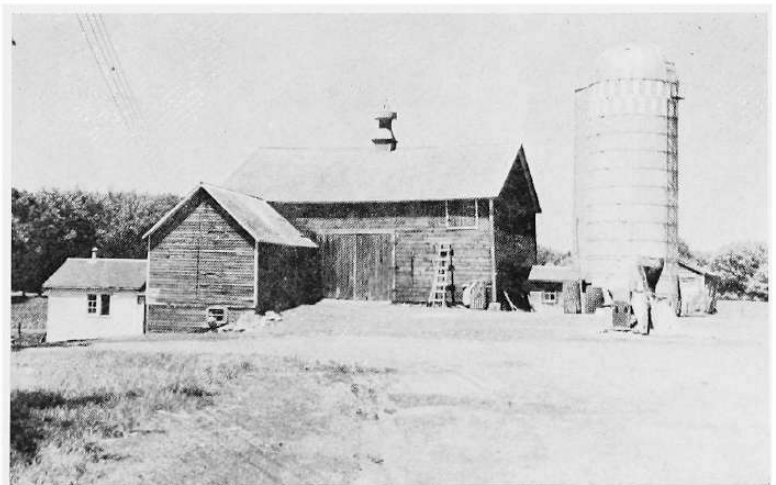
²² Kelley, *Origin and Progress of the . . . Patrons of Husbandry*, 12; *St. Paul Press*, February 10, 1866.

²³ Kelley, *Origin and Progress of the . . . Patrons of Husbandry*, 13–15.

²⁴ Kelley, *Origin and Progress of the . . . Patrons of Husbandry*, 15.

²⁵ Wheelock to Ramsey, December 21, 1866, Ramsey Papers.

*The frame barn built
by Kelley on
his Elk River farm,
shown here in 1959*



could besides make an extremely desirable correspondent for the St. Paul Press. Kelley wouldn't. He is too much like his own green corn." Ramsey heeded the words and bypassed Kelley for the Senate committee, but he got him a clerkship in the post office department instead — possibly for old times' sake.

Compared with the keen and cynical Wheelock, Kelley was in truth a simple man. Even then he was privately dreaming of a great brotherhood of farmers that would unite the depressed and isolated men and women who tilled the soil; "Encourage them to read and think; to plant fruits and flowers, — beautify their homes; elevate them; make them progressive." This vision he described in a letter to a friend and added: "I long to see the great army of producers in our country, turn their eyes up from their work; stir up those brains, now mere machines. . . . set them to thinking, — let them feel that they are human beings, and the strength of the nation, their labor honorable, and farming the highest calling on earth."²⁶ No one could have then predicted that this particular dream was the one to answer the wordless yearnings of thousands across the nation's farm belt — that promoted with the single-minded fervor of a man like Kelley, it would give birth to

a movement which in a few short years was to shake the social and political foundations of the Midwest.

From his quiet niche in the post office department Kelley worked throughout 1867, busily filling in the outlines of his grand scheme. Caroline Hall contributed many ideas, among them the vital one of including women in the organization on an equal basis with men. Kelley took into his confidence a select circle of sympathetic friends, mostly other government workers. Six of them, with him, became founders of the Order of the Patrons of Husbandry, better known as the Grange, which was formally established on December 4, 1867.²⁷

Kelley returned to Minnesota early in 1868, but thereafter his activities were centered on the Grange. He had at last found his life's work and an outlet for all the restless energy that over nearly two decades had contributed to the building of his adopted state.

²⁶ Quoted in Kelley, *Origin and Progress of the . . . Patrons of Husbandry*, 22, 24, 30.

²⁷ Kelley, *Origin and Progress of the . . . Patrons of Husbandry*, 15–48.

THE PICTURES on pages 331, 333, and 334 were taken from Kelley's account of the Grange; the one on page 336 is by Eugene D. Becker, and that on page 337 is from the National Park Service.

HENNEPIN COUNTY "RESURRECTIONISTS"

THE EDUCATED people among Minnesota's early pioneers were profoundly curious about the little-known past of the land they settled. This is evident in discussions held at early meetings of the Minnesota Historical Society and in the fact that digging "relics" from Indian mounds was a favorite Sunday afternoon pastime. Now and then a fantastic find was an-

nounced which proved on investigation to be either an honest mistake or a hoax. One report, however, has been of genuine interest to present-day archaeologists. On December 5, 1863, the Anoka Star published the following letter from Oliver H. Kelley, a pioneer settler well known in later life as the founder of the National Grange. It was written from Dayton in Hennepin County:



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