

A WINTER'S JOURNEY to MINNESOTA in 1852

Described by JOHN P. OWENS

WHEN Minnesota became a territory in 1849 its capital city was still a wilderness hamlet cut off from communication with the outside world as soon as the Mississippi froze and navigation ceased. No road of any kind connected St. Paul with the settled country to the south and east. Mail, when it came, was brought by dog sled or on foot over two hundred miles of treacherous river ice.

Late that year steps were taken to remedy the situation. Probably at the behest of Henry M. Rice, who had been awarded the mail contract for 1850, a party of builders and surveyors headed by Hiram Knowlton of Hudson (then Willow River), Wisconsin, undertook to lay out a road between that town and Prairie du Chien.¹ On Christmas Eve, 1849, Knowlton addressed a letter to the editor of the *Minnesota Pioneer*, reporting: "We have found a very direct and easy route for the road, which is now blazed and marked through the entire distance; which, by the chain, is 223 miles. We have proved the road; having come through with two loaded wagons. We passed above the head of Rush river; and the other small

streams we have bridged. A span of good horses can now haul 18 or 20 hundred pounds through the whole distance. Stopping places may be found at the end of every day's journey but two." From Hudson the route went east, crossing the Red Cedar River at the present site of Menomonie, Wisconsin, and the Chippewa River at the mouth of the "Clearwater" (now Eau Claire). Thence turning southeast, it followed approximately the line of U.S. Highway 53 to Osseo, at the Buffalo River (then better known as the Beef River), and went on in a southeasterly direction to Black River Falls. From that point it headed south through Sparta and eventually turned southwestward to arrive at Prairie du Chien.²

The mail went through, and a pair of partners named Amherst Willoughby and Simon Powers commenced a stage service, consisting of an open sleigh drawn by four horses. This they continued and improved for the next three winters, until a better road was opened west of the Mississippi. The pleasures and difficulties of a winter journey to Minnesota over the Knowlton route were vividly described by John P. Owens, editor of *St. Paul's Weekly Minnesotian*, in the following essay published on December 11, 1852.

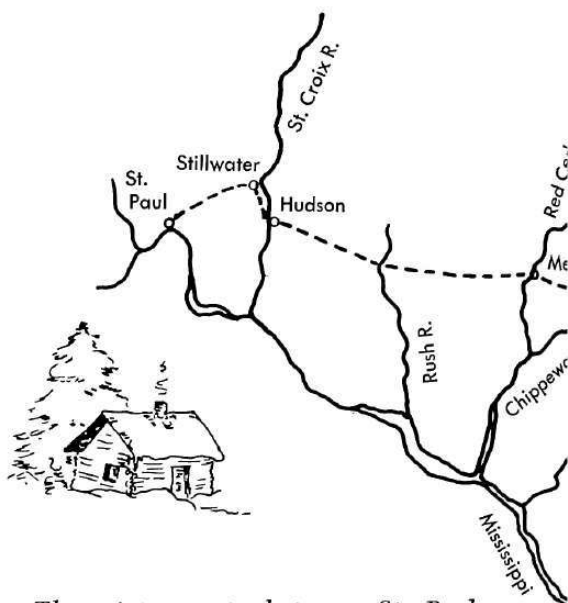
FOR THE information of those who may wish to make the journey to Minnesota before the opening of navigation, and those of our citizens who intend going down dur-

¹ J. Fletcher Williams, *A History of the City of Saint Paul*, 249 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 4, 1876); Henry A. Castle, *History of St. Paul and Vicinity*, 1:208 (Chicago and New York, 1912). An easier route through Minnesota was impossible, since all of the state west of the Mississippi was Indian territory until 1852.

² *Minnesota Pioneer* (St. Paul), January 2, 1850; Williams, *Saint Paul*, 296; George Forrester, ed., *Historical and Biographical Album of the Chippewa Valley, Wisconsin*, 373 (Chicago, 1891-92).

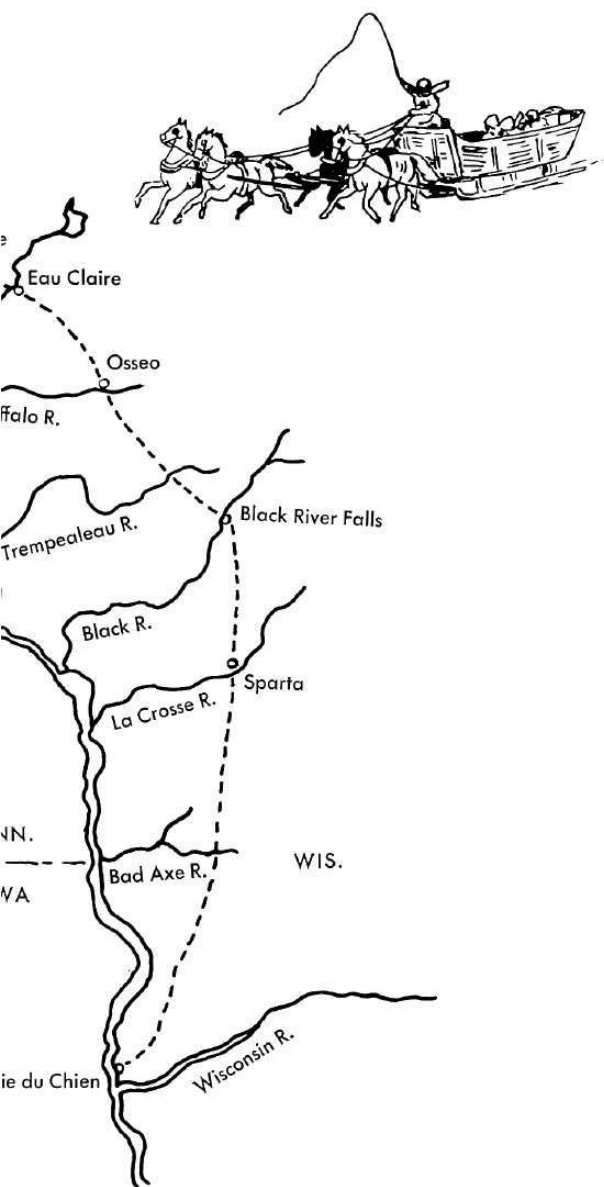
ing the winter on office-seeking missions or other business, we will give a brief sketch of our experience in regard to the mail route and the accommodations upon it. — At the outset, it is but just to remark, that Minnesota is solely indebted to the enterprising proprietors of the line, Willoughby & Powers, for the excellent advantages which the road through Wisconsin to Prairie du Chien now affords for winter travel. During the past fall, they bridged all the small streams that are not fordable; and where the dwellings of settlers were too far apart for “stations,” they have erected comfortable double cabins, and placed excellent and accommodating families in them, in order to give to the traveler a desirable home. So rapidly is the country settling all the way up from Prairie du Chien, that this expedient was only necessary at two points — Beef river and the head of Rush river. These two stations, for accommodations in every particular, are equal to the best houses on the road. We are under especial obligations to Mr. and Mrs. Miller, of the Rush river house, for extra attentions on the night of Wednesday of last week, after a dreary ride of thirty miles in the dark, part of the time through a drenching rain. The proprietors [of the line] also expended much labor in cutting the road through heavy forests, and rendering some of the worst hills easy of ascent and descent, so that during the season of hard weather and good sleighing, any respectable span of horses can, with ease, draw twenty hundred over any part of the road.

The journey in Willoughby & Powers’ line is made in open sleighs. Some people down in the States, taking into consideration the severity of winter weather up this way, may become intimidated at this announcement; but what is sleigh-riding worth, if you are enclosed as in a jail, and can see nothing of the beauties of the winter scenery as you pass along? Of all the abominations we ever knew in traveling, save us from a covered sleigh. Those journeying over this route, however, will need,



The winter route between St. Paul and Prairie du Chien, 1849-52

of course, to provide themselves amply with clothing. — To commence at the foundation, they must, if they would be comfortable, cast aside their boots, put on two pair of thick woolen socks, over them a pair of buckskin moccasins, and over all a pair of buffalo overshoes. This will protect the feet from the least sensation of cold, if they are not allowed to become damp. One pair of woolen drawers is sufficient if your pants are thick and heavy, though two would be better. Over the pants, wear a pair of overalls or leggings. A good thick overcoat as the outside dress for the body is far preferable to a cloak—in fact, a cloak is a thorough nuisance. Heavy “Indian,” or fur mittens (not gloves) for the hands; a good cap (throw your hat away or put it in your trunk,) to come well over the ears, and such other head, face and neck rigging in the way of “helmets,” “comforters,” &c., as will suggest themselves to you, and then two Mackinaw blankets, which are really indispensable for various uses, and you are completely equipped to stand, with comfort, any degree the thermometer ever reaches along this road. We have been thus minute in describing the body gear necessary for



a winter trip to Minnesota, owing to the fact that some of our young and ardent friends from many degrees south of here are going to undertake it in a few weeks, and being unused to such extra preparations while traveling in comfortable railroad cars at home, they might, unless thus advised, start out from Galena some pleasant winter morning, and find themselves awfully used

³ The reference is to the Trempealeau River.

up by the time they reached here. Then they would have a dreadful poor opinion of Minnesota, which we wish to prevent, if possible, and will prevent, if they but heed our advice.

The rapid settlement of the country during the past two years, between Prairie du Chien and the Falls of Black river, has rendered the traveling over that portion of the route, so far as accommodations are concerned, equal to any stage route through Illinois or the older portions of Wisconsin. In fact, we can safely say that the fare, as a general thing, is superior. — Accommodating travelers being a “new thing” with the hardy pioneers of the Bad Axe and La Crosse valleys, perhaps induces them to do their utmost for the comfort of the wayfarer, and spread before him, at the cheap rate of two bits per meal, all that their luxurious fields and prolific forests and streams afford. At all events, venison, fish and fowl was the order of the day all the way through, seasoned with such kindly acts of frontier hospitality as to make one feel at home upon almost all occasions. . . . But heaven preserve us from ever again sitting at the board or sleeping in the beds of the present landlord of the Black river hotel! For the sake of brevity, however, in our remarks, and good feeling toward the proprietors of the line, we will “skip the hard places” — in fact, this is the only one on the line; and we hope the proprietors will also be able to skip it in a few weeks. At least, we advise them to. . . .

Fifteen miles this side, we strike the fertile valley of Mountain Island river. (We, contrary to general custom, give the English name for convenience.)³ But one settler has, as yet pushed his way into this valley, and he a Maine Yankee, you might swear as soon as you see his establishment. His name is Merrill, a clever, whole-souled fellow. He only commenced operations last spring, and now has some thirty acres broken and under fence, a neat and comfortable frame cottage finished, with barn and out-buildings attached. — Although early in the day,

we are to take dinner here, and before we enter, high expectations are uppermost in our stomachs at the idea of a good Yankee dinner, after four meals of pine-bark soup, seasoned with saw-dust, at the Falls. We enter the tidy dwelling, and are kindly greeted by the neat and pretty wife of our good Maine friend, and induced almost to dance for joy at the savory odors of the dinner, in process of cooking. O ye generation of sinners, who about St. Paul and St. Anthony, last summer, were wont to sneer at and deride the people from Maine — calling them “Greybacks,” and other opprobrious epithets — merely because of their attachment to a certain law — ⁴ O, that ye could once be compelled, as we were, to live at the Falls of Black river one day, and then partake of one of Mrs. Merrill’s dinners! How readily would you “take back” all you have said, and swear that this whole north-western country were a desert without an oasis, but for the hardy, enterprising Yankees of Maine! — Let no one who may travel this road, ever pass Mr. and Mrs. Merrill’s without eating or sleeping.

We tarried that night at the Company’s station at Beef river — called in honor of our driver the “Morton House” — which is excellently well kept by a Mr. Brown and his lady; and taking an early start the next morning, drove to Gilbert’s Mills at the crossing of the Menomonee [*Red Cedar*], fifty miles, by three o’clock P.M.⁵ Here is another station at which the sumptuous farer at the best hotels of the cities deserves to be kicked, if he finds any fault with the table. — Mrs. Gilbert is embalmed in the grateful recollections of every traveler over this road. She is a Kentucky lady, and knows how to “do up things” after the fashion of the far-famed hospitality and fine living of that good old State. — Venison, both of elk and deer, with fresh trout from the adjacent brook, coffee and tea — not dish-slop — with sugar and cream, and hot rolls with good, fresh butter are present upon her table at every meal, and invite the weary and hungry to a sumptuous feast in her forest

home. Besides, she is a sociable, accomplished and exceedingly entertaining lady, which would even make much poorer fare than hers acceptable, after a long ride upon a wintry day. Long live Mrs. Gilbert! If provisions give out here in St. Paul before spring, we intend going down to the Menomonee, and boarding with her until thawing-out time.

By the accommodating disposition of *Elias*, who had driven us up from the Chippewa, and the driver who was to succeed him, and take us through the “Big Woods” — commencing where we then stood and extending to the head of Rush river, thirty miles — we were, contrary to custom, enabled to get through that night.⁶ Starting at four o’clock, we had a gloomy drive of seven or eight hours through a forest the most solitary, heavy and dense in the North-West, and celebrated all over this country as the haunt of elk, deer, bear and other large game innumerable. The next day, from the Rush river station, we had an easy drive to St. Paul.

We have only space to remark, that the man who desires to visit Minnesota in the winter season, and is deterred for fear of difficulties and sufferings on the road, is either a great dunce, or is very chicken-hearted, and would never amount to a great deal after he got here. The road is in excellent order, the mode of conveyance safe and comfortable, the drivers careful and accommodating, the fare plenty, and as good (save in the instance we have noted) as upon any stage route in the West. What more do you want?

⁴The “Maine Law,” enacted in 1851, forbade the manufacture and sale of intoxicating liquors within that state.

⁵Gilbert’s Mill was one of a cluster of lumber mills that eventually gave rise to the community of Menomonie. The proprietor of the station was Oliver Gilbert, who, like his wife, Lourentia, was a native of Kentucky. See Forrester, *Chippewa Valley*, 142, 147, 564.

⁶The road crossed the Rush River in the township of that name near the southern border of St. Croix County. See Augustus B. Easton, ed., *History of the St. Croix Valley*, 2:911 (Chicago, 1909).



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](#).