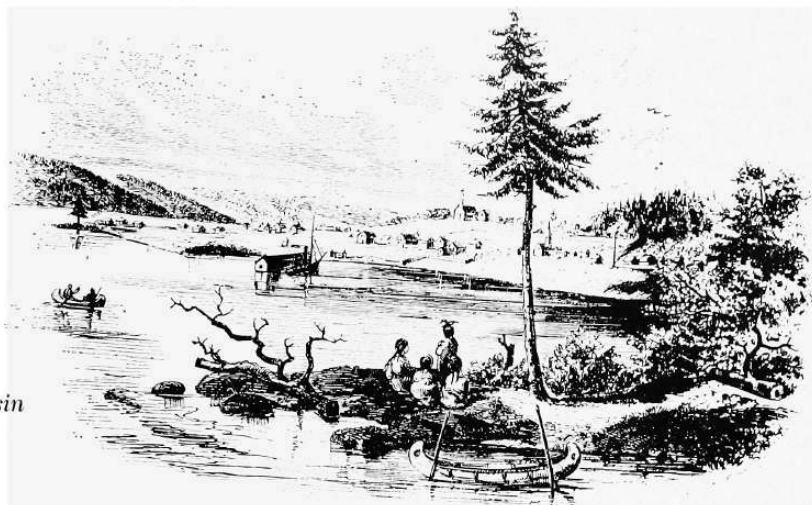


La Pointe, Wisconsin
in 1852



From LA POINTE to the FALLS of ST. ANTHONY in 1846

Edited by JOHN T. FLANAGAN

FROM 1831 until his death in 1858, William T. Porter was associated with sporting magazines which chronicled events of the turf, fishing and hunting episodes, and adventures in the Southwest and the Far West. Contributors to *Spirit of the Times*, the weekly that Porter edited from 1831 to 1856, included army officers, lawyers, editors, missionaries, fur traders, and devotees of sport in all its forms. Most of these correspondents were amateur writers who declined to sign their real names so that Porter's columns were filled with such pseudonyms as Acorn, Obe Oilstone, Falconbridge, Azul, and N. of Arkansas.¹

Research has established the identity of

Mr. Flanagan, a frequent contributor to this magazine since 1935, is professor of English at the University of Illinois in Urbana. He is a long-time summer resident of Chisago City in the St. Croix Valley.

some of Porter's most prolific contributors—for example, Lieutenant J. Henry Carleton and Captain William Seton Henry of the United States Army, both of whom wrote frequently about hunting and punitive expeditions across the western prairies. And it is well known that from 1842 to 1857 Henry H. Sibley furnished eleven articles to the *Spirit* and its sequel under the pen name of Hal—a Dacotah. But many of Porter's writers remain unidentified, and one of them, Rambler, was the author of three interesting letters dealing with a journey from the Sault Ste. Marie to the Missouri River in 1846.²

¹ For a study of Porter and his paper, see Norris W. Yates, *William T. Porter and the Spirit of the Times* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1957).

² Yates, *William T. Porter*, 58–88, 211; Theodore C. Blegen, "Henry H. Sibley, Pioneer of Culture and Frontier Author," in *Minnesota History*, 15:384 (December, 1934).

Rambler explains that a number of circumstances resulted in the trip he described: boredom with metropolitan life, a desire to experience western fishing and hunting, and primarily a passionate yearning—suggestive of Henry Thoreau's interest in prairie botany in 1861—to see the great grasslands of the West.³ His first letter, dated July 25, 1846, is primarily concerned with the number of trout and whitefish caught in fishing on the St. Mary's River as it flows between Lakes Superior and Huron. He asserts that he has seen a sturgeon weighing 110 pounds which had been shot while it leaped into the air. Further news in this first report includes word that John Tanner, the acknowledged murderer of a relative of Henry R. Schoolcraft, was lurking in the vicinity "at liberty, and will remain so unless some sort of effort is made to take him." The letter concludes with Rambler's decision to journey westward to La Pointe, a settlement on Madeline Island in Lake Superior, where on August 10 there was to be an assemblage of Indians awaiting a federal payment.⁴

Rambler's second letter, reproduced below, tells how he left La Pointe without seeing the Indian gathering and how he proceeded in two weeks to the Falls of St. Anthony, in part overland and in part by canoe along the St. Croix River. In a third letter, dated at the Missouri River, September 17, 1846, the writer explains that he left Fort Snelling with a guide and horses and headed for a point on the St. Peter's (Minnesota) River which was the residence of Joseph Laframboise. This well-known trader Rambler described as "a very prince in hospitality, and a very Nimrod in anything appertaining to game; and who has a station of the American Fur Company."⁵

From the Laframboise post Rambler left with a Sioux Indian guide, Ap-on-wash-ta, and a half-breed interpreter and factotum, François, with appropriate weapons and horses for the prairie hunting grounds. He describes killing large numbers of ducks and grouse, as well as antelope, deer, and elk, but it was a buffalo hunt which thrilled him

deeply. He was successful in cutting out a fat cow from a herd of fifty animals. Having killed his first buffalo—"one was all I wanted"—he desisted from further slaughter. He butchered the carcass and removed the tongue, various tenderloin bits, some ribs, and marrow bones so that later he could enjoy a feast "the likes of such as New York can't furnish" beside a prairie campfire—even though he lacked bread, pepper, and salt. He went so far as to say that "there is not a Restaurant in all Paris that I'll give the preference to, over those found on the wide Prairies, where the dishes are of one's own providing and cooking."⁶

Not long afterward Rambler and his party were again on the move and were fortunate enough to make their way without interruption to the Missouri River "abreast of a steamboat just coming down from the Yellow Stone" to St. Louis. Hearing that winter had already set in at Fort Pierre (in present-day South Dakota) Rambler abandoned whatever plans he had had for further penetration of the West and "made a most unexpected transition from the wild roaming life and free air of the Prairies, for the unromantic shelter of a steamboat."

Rambler's letters are not of course unique, but they provide vivid and authentic details about an individual safari across Minnesota at a time when such expeditions were both strenuous and hazardous.

³ Rambler, "Life on the Prairies. A Buffalo Chase and Supper," in *Spirit of the Times*, 16:379 (October 3, 1846).

⁴ Rambler, "Fishing at the Falls of St. Mary," in *Spirit of the Times*, 16:283 (August 8, 1846).

⁵ Rambler, in *Spirit of the Times*, 16:379. Joseph Laframboise had been a trader dealing with the Sioux of southwestern Minnesota for many years. When Rambler met him his post was undoubtedly at Little Rock on the Minnesota River near Fort Ridgely. See Willoughby M. Babcock, ed., "Up the Minnesota Valley to Fort Ridgely," in *Minnesota History*, 11:175 (June, 1930). See also Grace Lee Nute, "Posts in the Minnesota Fur-Trading Area, 1660-1855," in *Minnesota History*, 11:378 (December, 1930).

⁶ For the quotations here and in the following paragraph, see Rambler, in *Spirit of the Times*, 16:379.

St. Peters [*Mendota*], August 24th, 1846.

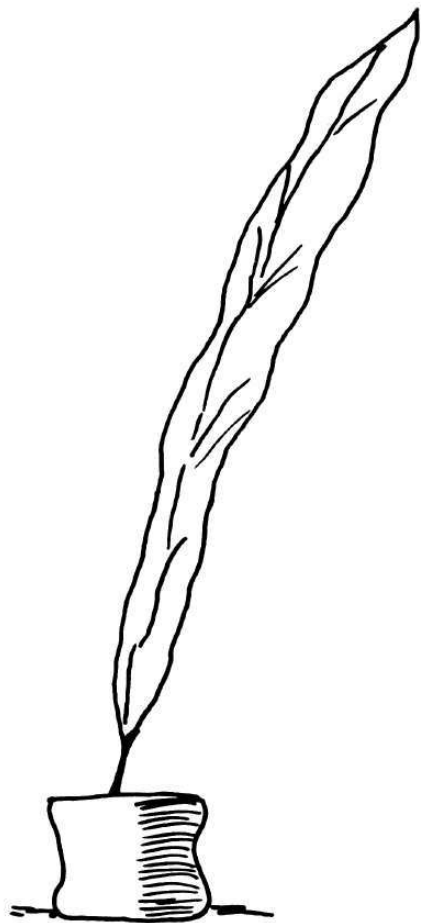
Dear "*Spirit*." — La Point[e] was left behind two weeks since, and after various adventures, one time "launching my bark" on the water, — another time plodding along that most unromantic of all ways, with gun in hand, across a portage — or again bestriding some (I wish I could say *gallant*) steed across the Prairies — behold me now on the threshold — "in limine pede" [*foot in the door*] — of the Great Prairie! After two months of round-a-bout-ing in steamboats, rail-road cars, and stages, whizzing, puffing, rattling along, with wings borrowed from lightning, here finally I am arrived to where such things are unknown — where the only "*track*" is a "*trace*," and with a veritable flesh and blood horse, instead of an *iron* one.

The Payment had not come off when I left La Point[e]. The Indians had been called for the 5th, but word had come on the 10th that Government had not appropriated, as yet, the money for the payment, and so the Indians, being there, had to wait Uncle Sam's leisure — a great injustice to them, as this is the time of gathering their wild rice, which is their great reliance for subsistence. The provisions and goods had, however, come on, and they were feasting and gorging as much as they could desire, and provisions for forty days (which, with the three day's rations allowed by Government, they have either to consume or leave behind), will probably all be used up by the time of the payment, say about the 25th.⁷ An Indian, for all he's so straight and noble-looking, high-spirited and copper-colored, &c., is, to say the least, a great glutton — and with a stomach capable of going without food for a long space of time when he has nothing, or of containing a most enormous quantity when he has abundance[.] I wrote from La Point[e] something concerning them.

Two voyageurs and a canoe took me to the foot of the Bay [*Chequamegon*], opposite La Point[e], and to the beginning of the Portage. Owing to the approaching payment, which is the great *fete* here for the whole year, it required extra inducement to get any of these fellows to go.

Once landed on shore, and our journey veritably

⁷ For the Treaty of 1842 made at La Pointe on October 4 which provided for twenty-five annual payments of \$12,500 to the Chippewa, see United States, *Statutes at Large*, 7:591. The payment referred to apparently was not made until early September. 29 Congress, 2 session, *Senate Executive Documents*, no. 1, p. 261 (serial 493).





commenced, looking among the bushes, a narrow and not over distinct trail is seen, and this we have to follow for eighty miles, to the head waters of the St. Croix.⁸ My *materiel* for camping, living, &c., is packed on the backs of my two voyageurs, Le Gros and Oscar. This *packing* is done in this wise—a blanket is spread on the ground, and the sides turned over a long strap, which is doubled across it, and is called a “portage collar.” The things to be carried are then placed on the blanket, the ends of which are then drawn up, and the straps tightly drawn and tied together, bringing everything into a compressed space, the ends *drawing up* a good deal, after the manner of a lady’s reticule—as they used to have them. A broad piece of the strap remains outside, from which, after being pulled over the head, resting against the forehead, the pack depends. These fellows carry in this manner my heavy packs. A good packer will go at the rate of forty miles in a day, with an eighty pound pack—mine had about that weight a piece.

Well, here we are at the Portage. I take my gun—a Colt’s revolver—my men swing their packs, and we’re off; the bushes around the landing place are parted, the trail struck, and we commence our march in the forest. And such a route as that trail leads one over! Through thickets a deer wouldn’t go through, and swamps and *swails*, wading creeks and small streams of all sizes, climbing over, or worming around, fallen trees, stumbling amongst protruding roots and tangled brush-wood. And the rate of going is such as never is seen out of the backwoods, I believe. A packer, with his load suspended from his forehead, and his body inclined forward to an angle that seems a *leetle* beyond the centre of gravity, goes with a kind of *trot*, endeavoring, apparently, to get his feet ahead of his load; and though he never seems to do it, he gets along over the ground at a rate that a *shinner* in Wall street, near three o’clock, with a note to meet and no funds, would envy.⁹ Never in my life have I seen such a gait by anything on two legs. A racking horse imitates it very nearly—but no mortal man, save an Indian or a Canadian, can approach to it.

Le Gros trots ahead; on top of his pack is mounted my Spanish saddle-frame—such an one as you have

⁸ The source of the river is a small spring located just north and east of Solon Springs, Wisconsin. See James Taylor Dunn, *The St. Croix; Midwest Border River*, 5, 42 (New York, 1965).

⁹ A “shinner” is one who rushes about, borrowing money hurriedly, as for the payment of one’s notes.

in your office — and the peaked ends are continually catching in over-hanging branches and projecting limbs, oftentimes nearly overturning Le Gros, pack and all — who recovers himself with a *sacré*, and goes on again.

Noon comes — a rest of an hour, and we munch hard bread right heartily, and drink from the cool stream at our feet, and then off again, tramp, tramp. The sun, scarcely seen during the day, no longer shows his rays upon the tree tops even. We stop by a small stream; our fire is soon kindled. I mount a fly, or a string and a pole, and try to catch some little fish. Le Gros sneaks along the edge of a little lake close by, intent on shooting some unsuspecting duck. Oscar has already put some hard biscuit in water, preparatory to making “soft Tommy,” and the frying pan is on the fire, to make, with fat bacon, hard bread, and duck (if we get him), a species of “lobscouse,” both of which sea dishes seem to have won an eternal respect in the eyes of my voyageurs, who, the savages, seem not to have known that things were to be eaten any other way than *au naturel* [*sic*].¹⁰

Oh! how that supper is enjoyed, seated around the frying pan, I with a spoon, they each with a broad bladed jack-knife! finishing with a cup of good coffee — (commend me to the *essence* as imported, it makes as good coffee as the Cafés in Paris can afford).

“And now, Le Gros, cut some branches of the Balsam, for my bed, and as it looks like rain, make a frame for my tent cloth; then pile up my baggage and cover that up!”

How useful is India Rubber [*sic*]! Tent, and everything, down to a water proof suit, are made of it. “Now, then, to your blankets and to sleep.”

It is dark — stretched on my blankets beneath my tent-cloth, I can look out on the open lee side upon the fire — see my men each in his blanket, with feet to the fire, already asleep — hear the low muttering of the thunder in the distance, or see the faint flash of lightning playing among the dark clouds on the horizon. Something seems moving among the leaves near by; the ear is strained, and footsteps are distinctly heard, patting along. They are of some wolf, perhaps Bruin himself prowling around, and occasionally the wailing howl of one may be heard far off. The wind sighs among the tree tops, and some of the branches groan in con-

¹⁰ “Tommy,” in military slang and English or Scottish dialect, means a loaf or hunk of bread. “Lobscouse” is a combination of meat with vegetables, usually stewed.



cert. Presently, pattering drops give evidence of rain — the smouldering fire is almost out, and the dense darkness is only illumined by the lightning, which has become sharper and more frequent. The rain now descends rapidly — hisses among the fire embers, soaks into the blankets of Le Gros and Oscar, who stop snoring for a minute, turn over again, and go on as before. And I remain snug under my cover, wakeful and contented, watching and listening.

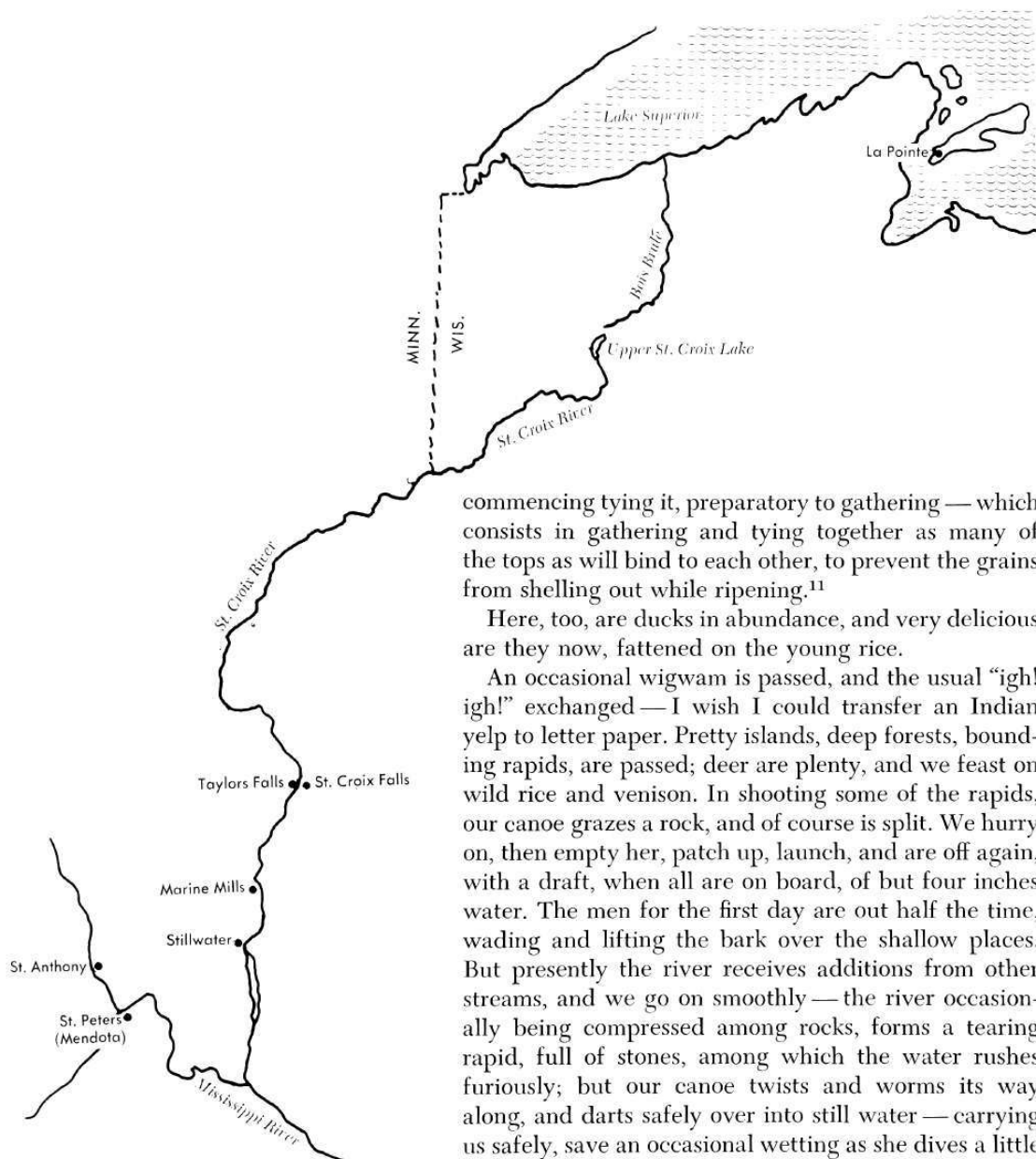
And now the storm has commenced — the rain pours, sharp flashes of lightning run zigzag along the heavens, and the thunder rattles and crashes — roars, and is lost in mutterings. One sharp flash, brilliantly lighting up the surrounding forest, and almost blinding the eyes — a startling clap of thunder — and see! a tall pine near is shivered by the stroke, and burning splinters throw a dismal light around the dismantled tree. They are extinguished, and all is darkness and rain again.

Up in the morning at daybreak, and off — another trotting for a few miles, and a pretty Lake reflects the fire which is cooking our breakfast. Many a pretty Lake we pass, set, mirror-like, in a frame of dense forest, and fish and duck are in all of them, and help to furnish food for hungry voyageurs. Beautiful groves of pine there are, more tall or stately than such the world cannot afford — shooting up branchless to a great height, and tufted at top by a few branches, palm-like. What gallant masts would some of these make! The wind agitates the tops, and the trunks move slowly from side to side — giving a singular appearance — so many of them, all silently moving and receding to and from each other, as if holding intercourse in some mysterious manner.

There is one singular spot we passed. It is what is called a prairie or barren, being about four miles across, covered with a stunted growth of grass, and a few stunted shrubs. It reminds one of the moors in Scotland; it is a succession of hills, and I almost imagined myself on the Cheviot Hills. To help the resemblance, whirr! goes a grouse, and then another! They are marked down — the repeater, which has three charges left in it, is unslung, and presently, bang! bang! we have two grouse for supper, and these, with a pheasant shot by Le Gros, make a beautiful meal, and we feast at night.

Four days from La Point[e] finds us at the end of the Portage, and in a bark canoe, commencing the descent of the St. Croix, winding along its circuitous course among Lakes and rice fields, where the Indians are now





commencing tying it, preparatory to gathering — which consists in gathering and tying together as many of the tops as will bind to each other, to prevent the grains from shelling out while ripening.¹¹

Here, too, are ducks in abundance, and very delicious are they now, fattened on the young rice.

An occasional wigwam is passed, and the usual “igh! igh!” exchanged — I wish I could transfer an Indian yelp to letter paper. Pretty islands, deep forests, bounding rapids, are passed; deer are plenty, and we feast on wild rice and venison. In shooting some of the rapids, our canoe grazes a rock, and of course is split. We hurry on, then empty her, patch up, launch, and are off again, with a draft, when all are on board, of but four inches water. The men for the first day are out half the time, wading and lifting the bark over the shallow places. But presently the river receives additions from other streams, and we go on smoothly — the river occasionally being compressed among rocks, forms a tearing rapid, full of stones, among which the water rushes furiously; but our canoe twists and worms its way along, and darts safely over into still water — carrying us safely, save an occasional wetting as she dives a little too deep, in her plunge downwards. Verily these voyageurs are never more at home than when in a canoe, and on the river or lake.

Three days more saw us at the Falls of St. Croix, and from thence (where commences the saw mills that supply St. Louis with lumber,) there is little of interest

¹¹ Rambler probably refers here to the St. Croix Flowage, located just below the village of Gordon, Wisconsin. Dunn, *The St. Croix*, 268.

save some bold scenery. The route from Still-water, at the head of Lake St. Croix, to St. Peter [*Mendota*], is through a beautiful Prairie, interspersed with oak trees. Here in a grove, there scattered singly, and with occasionally one of those curious mounds that has attracted so much speculation; from the top of one of them which I ascended, was one of the prettiest views imaginable — I have never seen more beautiful Park scenes.¹²

The Falls [of] St. Anthony are interesting. They resemble Niagara in a measure, though the fall is but 24 feet perpendicular, having a “good Island” &c., in a similar manner.

Fine black bass are caught here in abundance, and delicious fish they are. Grouse — both kinds — are here in quantities. What think you of a Pike the Indians say they caught a short time since eleven feet in length? I shall enquire into this.

I start immediately for the Prairie. My horses are procured and my guide engaged.

In haste yours, Rambler.

¹² In addition to the early saw mill at St. Croix Falls were those at Marine Mills and Stillwater.

THE VIEW of La Pointe on page 137 is taken from David Dale Owen, *Report of a Geological Survey of Wisconsin, Iowa and Minnesota* (1852), the voyageurs in the drawings on pages 140 and 141 are from Samuel H. Scudder, *The Winnipeg Country* (1886), and the falls shown below are from *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, July, 1853.

The Falls of St. Anthony as they looked about 1850





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](#).