



# The 4<sup>th</sup> of July in the 1850s

Matilda W. Rice

ON June 27, 1895, the *St. Paul Dispatch* featured a group of articles written by women who had settled in Minnesota forty years earlier during the territorial years. The following account of one Independence Day was recalled by Matilda W. Rice, who had arrived in the capital city in 1849. She accompanied her new husband, Henry M. Rice, whose habitation in that city was called by Governor William R. Marshall “the turning point in favor of St. Paul.”<sup>1</sup>

Her obituary declared that she was “one of the social and intellectual leaders” and that “Her name will always be associated with the early history of Minnesota and the Northwest.” Yet, as is so often true of women in history, there is little solid information about Matilda Rice. Born a Whitall in Rome, New York, she moved at an early age to Richmond, Virginia. She attended school in Washington, D.C., and four years after her marriage to Rice returned there as the wife of Minnesota’s territorial delegate to Congress.<sup>2</sup>

Contemporary descriptions offer us a woman with a “bright, beautiful countenance, with black hair and black eyes . . . she united the characteristics of a southern beauty with northern tact”; “Youthful, graceful in bearing, and with warm impulses.” Matilda and Henry

Rice were the parents of nine children, at least four of whom died at an early age.

Minnesota Territory must have been quite a change for the woman who spent the first decade or so of her marriage “amid the scenes of her husband’s political battles, and . . . the gay society of Washington life.” Amenities were few in the territory, and social events were often casual, impromptu affairs. But reading between the lines of Matilda Rice’s reminiscence one discerns no regret for the life she left in the East; instead, one finds considerable political savvy, a gentle tongue-in-cheek humor, and a zest for the challenges of her new situation.

ONE Fourth of July, in the early ‘50’s, the good citizens of St. Paul, with the fire of patriotism burning ardently

<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Marshall Catheart, “A Sheaf of Remembrances, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 15:540 (St. Paul, 1915).

<sup>2</sup> Information and quotations here and below are from *St. Paul Dispatch*, October 11, 1906, p. 7; Thomas M. Newson, *Pen Pictures of St. Paul, Minnesota, and Biographical Sketches of Old Settlers*, 138 (St. Paul, 1886); Edward Duffield Neill, *The History of Minnesota: From the Earliest French Explorations*, 500 (Philadelphia, 1858).

in their hearts, attempted to have a procession equal to the occasion. But the multitude of stumps, prevented the keeping of anything like order, and the enterprise was a failure. However, the disappointment of the morning was forgotten in the glorious termination of the day. My husband and I occupied a one and one-half story high cottage on Third street, about a block below the present Metropolitan hotel. We had very few neighbors. The late Rev. Edward D. Neill and his wife lived in a combination building near us, which answered the purpose of dwelling and church, a simple arrangement, very convenient for the pastor. About 8 o'clock, there was a rapping at the door — door bells were unknown in Minnesota then — and on opening it we beheld a gentleman, his face wreathed in smiles, who announced, with an air of delightful anticipation, that there was to be a ball at the American house, which stood on Third street, near the corner of Exchange, and was our swell hostelry — and that if I would consent to be one of eight ladies, they could have two sets. Of course the invitation was accepted. After making as elaborate a toilet as the occasion deserved and our wardrobe permitted, we proceeded to the hotel, where the orchestra, consisting of two "fiddles" and an accordeon [sic], was dispensing alleged dance music in a manner quite in keeping with the surroundings.

But it was better than nothing, and had one merit, that of improving steadily in quality for an hour or so. For in those days a certain amount of alcoholic stimulant was considered an essential aid to the accomplishment of any difficult and intricate feat in the musical line. Accordingly, it was the duty of the host to supply the musicians with a quantity sufficient to bring out any latent talent which they might possess.

On assembling in the "ball room," improvised out of the dining hall, what was our chagrin to find that one of the ladies was unable to come, and consequently it seemed that we could have but one set. But Minnesota men were then, as they are now, equal to any emergency, and one of the gentlemen undertook to fill the vacancy. The boat from Galena had arrived shortly before, and on board was a pretty chambermaid. She readily accepted the ingenious gentleman's invitation, and entered the ball room in a pink dress and a state of elation. For owing to the scarcity of "lovely woman" in those early territorial days, she had been a belle from the moment the boat landed, and, it is said, had received no less than eleven offers of Minnesota hands, hearts and fortunes.

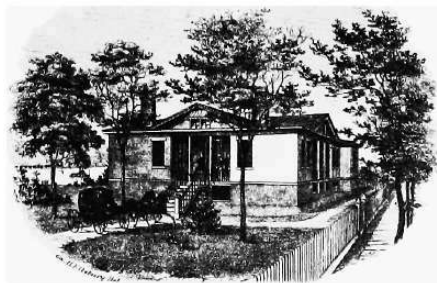
MATILDA W.  
RICE



But here a new complication arose, for the gentlemen, jealous of their social standing, refused to dance with the P. C., and even the one who had brought her from the boat joined, with charming inconsistency, the ranks of the ungallants. There was a politician-statesman, we called him then, present, however, and he saw the opportunity of a lifetime. He would show the people that he was democratic, that he drew no social lines, that his sympathies were with the struggling masses. Before his enchanted vision, his column of votes mounted higher and higher. With a courtly bow, he requested the honor of dancing with the P. C.

So the ball proceeded, and everything went smoothly, until the musicians, beginning to respond to the influence of the brimming cup, endeavored to introduce a new and original feature into the programme — that of combining several different airs. The result was unsatisfactory, however novel the idea may have been, and the violinists, incensed at the prominence which the accordeon manipulator was assuming, resolved to relegate him to the background by the simple but effective expedient of doubling their time, thus leaving him several bars behind. Feeling that for everything under the sun there is a time, we adjourned for refreshments, the "supper" including such light and delicate viands as fried ham, slabs of salt pork swimming in oily loveliness, beefsteak, boiled potatoes, gingerbread (this by special request) and as a crowning glory, cove oysters. These had been brought on the boat from Galena, and were, in our opinion, entitled to a cordial welcome after their long journey.

The fact that there was no "R" in the month did not detract from our enjoyment of them. As we wended our way homeward through the stumps, we "talked over" our first ball in the "land of the Dacotahs."



RES. OF DON H. RICE



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