

# MINNESOTA

## An American Siberia?



"Close It . . . I'm Not Ready."

William E. Lass

GOVERNOR Willis Gorman, in his message to the Minnesota territorial legislature in January of 1855, complained that "During the past year I have received almost innumerable letters from the middle states propounding a variety of questions about our territory, especially desiring to know if our winters are not very long, and so exceedingly cold that stock freezes to death, and man hardly dare venture out of his domicile [sic]."<sup>1</sup> To Gorman's regret the out-of-state image of Minnesota's long, cold winters was well established even before the territory was created in 1849.

Such negative impressions of Minnesota's climate were based on a variety of observations and assumptions. After Fort Snelling was established in 1819 it was not uncommon for military personnel to comment about the climate in their correspondence. After spending a short time at the isolated post Dr. J. Ponte Calhoun McMahon lamented: "Oh! for the dear, delightful,

swampy south once more! There is a something balmy and renovating in even its slimy exhalations unknown to the vapid atmosphere of this Siberia—Is there no relief for the wicked? or have I by my own folly closed the door against return to the lovely domains of yellow fever?"<sup>2</sup>

Explorers who often caught only a glimpse of the Minnesota country also helped popularize the image of hyperborean winters. In the fall of 1835 the Anglo-American geologist George W. Featherstonhaugh was at Fort Snelling arranging his departure from the area after exploring the Minnesota River Valley. Awakening on October 20, Featherstonhaugh found "that it had been snowing all night; soon after, one of the men came to inform me that it was a hard frost, and that ice had formed on the edge of the river. Winter then had overtaken us."<sup>3</sup> Rushing downstream two days later, snow still on the ground, Featherstonhaugh left Minnesota apparently convinced that winter had come to stay.

Statements such as those by McMahon and Featherstonhaugh were reinforced by the prevailing notion at that time that there was a direct correlation between high latitudes and cold climate. Even a cursory glance at

*Mr. Lass, professor of history at Mankato State University, is the author of Minnesota's Boundary with Canada: Its Evolution since 1783 (1980). This article is adapted from a paper he presented at the 1984 Western History Association annual conference held in St. Paul in October.*

<sup>1</sup> Minnesota Territory, *Council Journal*, 1855, p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> McMahon to Joseph Lovell, Surgeon General, USA, October 2, 1827, U.S. War Department, Surgeon General, Letters Received, Selected Letters Relating to Fort Snelling, 1818-1858, in National Archives Record Group 112, Washington, D.C., copy in Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), St. Paul.

<sup>3</sup> George W. Featherstonhaugh, *A Canoe Voyage up the Minnaya Sotor*, 2:12 (Reprint ed., St. Paul, 1970).

a map of the United States showed that Minnesota was in the far north and therefore extremely cold. There was also a natural tendency, in an age when travel was generally by steamboat, to equate closed navigation and winter. Even an early closing caused by low water was likely to be thought of as part of the approaching winter season.<sup>4</sup>

Minnesota's reputation as an American Siberia was not a particular issue until the territory was formed in 1849. But then, Minnesota promoters, faced with a region of slightly under 5,000 settlers and an estimated 25,000 or more Indians in a vast unoccupied area stretching from Iowa to Canada and from Wisconsin to the Missouri River, became concerned about any criticism that might discourage prospective settlers. Both territorial and state officials were firmly convinced that Minnesota's future lay in agriculture. Thus, to assure development, they had to sell Minnesota as an attractive and potentially prosperous place to live.<sup>5</sup>

Once Gorman had identified the problem of Minnesota's reputedly adverse climate, he admonished the legislators that "This popular error among the citizens of the states must be speedily corrected in some reliable manner."<sup>6</sup> Gorman specifically recommended that the territory appoint a commissioner of emigration to promote settlement. This was but one part of a campaign intended to counteract Minnesota's critics.

Throughout its frontier farming period Minnesota's offensive was waged in newspapers, books, pamphlets, broadsides, emigrant and immigrant guides, and other publications issued not only by the government, but by private businesses and organizations as well. Invariably, all of this promotional literature seized on climate as an essential point. This is understandable, because climate had been made an issue by Minnesota's detractors. And it was something in which nearly everyone was interested. This thought was nicely summarized by a Minnesota farmer who wrote on New Year's Day, 1862: "The commencement of my diary begins with something about the weather; indeed, it is the only thing that is sure to occur each day; and it must go a great way toward the filling of the book." Then too, discussion of climate was appealing because it could be approached as an abstraction.<sup>7</sup> It was somewhat akin to speculating about the future. Anyone could have an opinion, because comment about the topic seemed to require no particular knowledge on the part of either the promoter or the reader.

Such comment was usually kept at an elementary level of understanding. Promoters usually rejected meteorological data in favor of testimonials such as that by the transplanted Pennsylvanian J. W. Bond, onetime secretary to the first governor of the territory, who wrote that: "From a residence of over two years in Minnesota, I can safely say that the atmosphere is more



A "GEM" of Minnesota scenery, by J. E. Whitney

pure, pleasant, and healthful, than any I have ever breathed on the continent of North or South America."<sup>8</sup>

Bond's book helped set the tone for the promotional campaign. He and other boosters believed in a positive approach. Consequently, they had a rather extensive list of unmentionables, including blizzards, tornadoes, thunderstorms, and floods. Shrewdly, Minnesota's publicists stressed climate, not weather. They obviously kept in mind the axiom that: "Climate is what you expect, but weather is what you get."

IN THEIR EFFORTS to influence prospective settlers, promoters usually extolled the state's climatic zone, its variety of seasons, its advantageous winters, its superiority to other states, and its uniquely salubrious climate. Minnesota's boosters enthusiastically accepted the thesis that the world's great civilizations had developed in temperate zones. They used this as evidence for their claim that Minnesota with its invigorating and bracing climate was destined for greatness. One zealot linked Minnesota to the broad course of western civilization by asserting: "There seems to be a certain zone of climate within which humanity reaches the highest degree of physical and mental power. That zone included Rome in her great day when the eagles sat upon her seven hills

<sup>4</sup> Ralph H. Brown, "Fact and Fancy in Early Accounts of Minnesota's Climate," in *Minnesota History*, 17:251 (September, 1936); E. S. Seymour, *Sketches of Minnesota, the New England of the West*, 266, 270 (New York, 1850).

<sup>5</sup> Minnesota Territory, *Council Journal*, 1849, p. 8, 13; William Watts Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1:316 (Rev. ed., St. Paul, 1956).

<sup>6</sup> Minnesota Territory, *Council Journal*, 1855, p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> John R. Cummins, *Diary*, Cummins Papers, MHS; Brown, in *Minnesota History*, 17:244.

<sup>8</sup> J. W. Bond, *Minnesota and Its Resources*, 64 (New York, 1853).

and the Tiber was frozen to its bottom. That zone, rizing [sic] northward by some immutable law of nature, brought out from the Saxon family all its decided features of character, and revived in the land of Shak[e]speare and Schiller, of Alfred and Hofer, all the valor and almost all the intellect of the ancient Republic. That zone struck this country where the pilgrim and the Quaker landed, and has ever since been streaming across the continent in one unbroken path of progress and glory. It is the good fortune of this Territory to lie not only within that zone, but within its very apex."<sup>9</sup>

Extending this reasoning, some boosters contended that Minnesota, because of its temperate location and climate, would become the "New England of the West." Like New England, it would become a center of commerce, learning, accomplishment, and genius. They thought St. Paul would emerge as the hub city, emulating Boston, the hub city of New England.<sup>10</sup>

According to the publicists, Minnesota's seasons had a unique variety, somehow unshared even by neighboring Iowa and Wisconsin. All agreed that fall, which they often described simply, though erroneously, as "Indian summer," was the best season because of even temperatures and low humidity. Spring was said to be the worst because of its dampness, and summer was always mentioned in connection with the desirable growing season. But a particular point was made of winter. Writers felt obliged to defend Minnesota winters, because critics pointed out the long, cold winters as a special detraction. Promoters always kept in mind that they were not writing for people who lived in Minnesota, but rather for people they hoped to lure there. Perhaps some of this promotional verbiage would have been seconded by many residents, but other aspects of it must have appeared ludicrous.<sup>11</sup>

Minnesota's publicists insisted that its winters had been misrepresented by people outside the state. To experience winter, they asserted, was not nearly as bad as hearing about it. Outsiders were admonished not to put too much faith in thermometers, because Minnesota had exceedingly dry air that made its climate seem warmer than more southerly areas that experienced higher temperatures but also higher humidity. Promot-

ers liked to tell about men working outside in the winter without heavy coats. Naturally, this was stated as a commonplace, rather than an exceptional occurrence.

The tendency to take the best winter days and make them appear characteristic of the entire season was also evident in promoters' claims that there was little wind, temperatures were stable and not likely to fluctuate rapidly, and there was actually little snow, which did not drift because of the alleged calmness.

Winter's greatest advantages were said to be its unique beauty exemplified by sparkling ice crystals and an occasional aurora borealis. Seasonal sports such as sledding, sleighing, horse racing on ice, and ice skating, as well as entertainments such as lyceums, plays, and musical performances were also lauded. And what could be said about the really cold winter days? They were not cold; they were bracing, invigorating, or salubrious.

It was not enough that winter was beautiful, enjoyable, and healthful, but, according to promoters, it also created greatness in the character of Minnesota's people. With winter looming before them they would have to work harder during the growing season to prepare for it; thus winter encouraged industry, thrift, seriousness, and morality. In turn, winter offered rest and relaxation from summer's toil. It was pronounced a time for contemplation and sharing of ideas, which would contribute to an intelligent and innovative populace. Winter thus was an essential element in shaping the character of Minnesota and Minnesotans.

SINCE Minnesota's climate was portrayed as unique and beneficial, comparisons to other states were inevitable. Minnesota's boosters had three particular targets—California, the neighboring states of Iowa and Wisconsin, and the South. California, which was luring thousands of immigrants during its gold-rush period, was seen as one of the main competitors. James Madison Goodhue, publisher of Minnesota's first newspaper, invited his readers to "Contrast the two regions. California, is on the western verge of the continent, while Minnesota is in the very heart of it. There you may look for speculation, gambling, vice; here, you will find industry, morality and virtue. California is in a latitude which has never proved favorable to the highest development of human greatness, while Minnesota, embraces the latitude of those nations of the earth which in all ages have produced the most vigorous minds and the greatest aggregate of intellectual and moral force."<sup>12</sup>

Explaining the essential difference between the climates of Minnesota and Wisconsin taxed the imagination. But Minnesota's earliest promoters found support in the opinion of Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, discoverer of the source of the Mississippi River. In a "Memoir on the

<sup>9</sup> *DeBow's Review* (Washington, D.C.), 21:72 (July, 1856).

<sup>10</sup> Mary W. Berthel, *Horns of Thunder: The Life and Times of James M. Goodhue Including Selections from His Writings*, 82 (St. Paul, 1948).

<sup>11</sup> Here and four paragraphs below, see Seymour, *Sketches of Minnesota*, 271-273; Bond, *Minnesota and Its Resources*, 65-67; *DeBow's Review*, 21:73; C. C. Andrews, *Minnesota and Dacotah*, 100 (Washington, D.C., 1857); Harriet E. Bishop, *Floral Home: or, First Years of Minnesota*, 129-132 (New York, 1857).

<sup>12</sup> Berthel, *Horns of Thunder*, 96.



History and Physical Geography of Minnesota," first published in 1851, Schoolcraft reported "the prevalence of a valley current, from the tropical latitudes up the Mississippi."<sup>13</sup> These warming breezes, he noted, carried northward nearly to the Mississippi's source thereby giving that part of Minnesota a milder climate than those sections of Wisconsin on the same latitude.

Iowa was often treated less like a neighboring state than as part of Minnesota's conceptual South. The "South" to Minnesota publicists was sort of a "Greater Dixie." It included not only the Southern states of the Civil War, but usually Indiana and Illinois and sometimes Iowa. This "South" was denounced as hot, humid, swampy, unhealthy, unproductive, and conducive to indolence. In essence, it was portrayed as antithetical to Minnesota's northernness. In attempting to explain the movement of Illinoisans to Minnesota, a well-known St. Paul newspaperman who served as the first official statistician of the state of Minnesota, asked rhetorically: "what then, is the ground of this intense and widely-developed discontent with Illinois on the part of those who had thoroughly tried it? Notoriously, and first of all, *the unhealthiness of the climate*. This is a sufficient explanation of the remarkable exodus of young families, fleeing from their new homes, with their shivering flocks, before the besom of fever and ague, as the mothers of Bethlehem fled with their babes before the murderous sword of Herod."<sup>14</sup>

The claim that Minnesota had a salubrious climate developed mainly through comparisons to Minnesota's perceived South. Assertions about the area's healthful-

ness were made in the first promotional literature of the territory, but they reached their zenith in the late 1860s and early 1870s. Henry Hastings Sibley, while serving as the first territorial delegate to Congress, wrote that "sickness has no dwelling place" in Minnesota. And editor Goodhue flatly proclaimed that "Never has a case of fever and ague originated here."<sup>15</sup>

The reputation of the unhealthy South was solidified by the association of such diseases as malaria and yellow fever with warm climates. Before the germ theory was well developed, such diseases were commonly attributed to poisonous air. This was particularly believed about malaria, which was supposedly caused by miasma—the vapor emitted from swamps. (The word "malaria" itself, which is a contraction of the Italian *mala aria*, translates as "bad air.")

Because Minnesota was free of miasma and its air was generally cool, its climate allegedly assured people freedom from an entire lexicon of ills and ailments, including, as one publicist detailed, not only malaria and yellow fever, but also chills, fever, ague, enlarged spleen, liver ailments, dropsy, kidney diseases, eye infections, derangements of stomach and bowels, various

<sup>13</sup> Schoolcraft, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 1:112 (St. Paul, 1872).

<sup>14</sup> Joseph A. Wheelock, *Minnesota: Its Progress and Capabilities*, 119 (Minnesota Commissioner of Statistics, *Second Annual Report*, St. Paul, 1862).

<sup>15</sup> H. H. Sibley, "Description of Minnesota," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 1:42; Berthel, *Horns of Thunder*, 86.

**WINTER SPORTS**, including tobogganing, were a feature of the 1888 carnival held in St. Paul to celebrate the season.



JOHN W.  
McCLUNG



bilious diseases and, lastly, the interesting disease named "etc."<sup>16</sup>

Such statements stimulated fanciful beliefs that the climate would indeed work wonders. Readers of J. W. McClung's *Minnesota as It Is in 1870* were treated to a description of the state's miraculous climate by an individual who had made a steamboat trip up the Mississippi to St. Paul. "As the pale invalid proceeds northward, his blood thrills with new sensations of vigor, caused by the change of air. His appetite increases. His weight and strength increase. As he nears his destination, and sees the limpid clearness of the now diminutive Father of Waters, he feels as though he was approaching the fabled Fountain of Youth, where with one bath he may wash age, and wrinkles, and diseases away.

"He reaches Minnesota. He sleeps long and soundly; he eats voraciously; he improves; he is cured."<sup>17</sup>

ALTHOUGH lavish claims for Minnesota's salubrious climate persisted throughout its frontier years, there was a change in emphasis following the Civil War, when victims of consumption, as tuberculosis was then called, were assured that Minnesota's milieu would relieve, if not cure, their affliction. Detailed cases for its curative

<sup>16</sup> Girart Hewitt, *Minnesota: Its Advantages to Settlers*, 28, 29 (St. Paul, 1867).

<sup>17</sup> J. W. McClung, *Minnesota as It Is in 1870*, 66 (St. Paul, 1870).

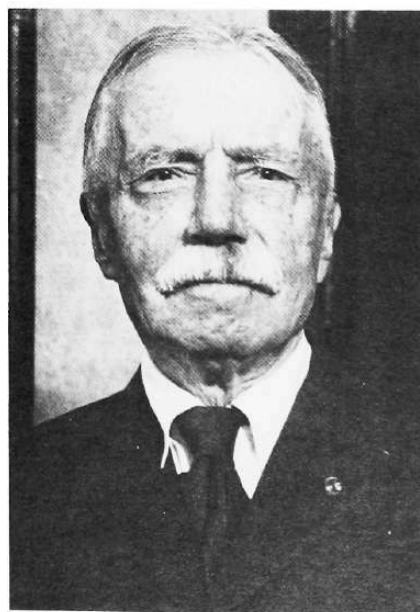
<sup>18</sup> Bill, *Minnesota: Its Character and Climate*, 57-126 (New York, 1871); Mattocks, *Minnesota as a Home for Invalids*, 139-142 (Philadelphia and St. Paul, 1871).

<sup>19</sup> Helen Clapesattle, "When Minnesota Was Florida's Rival," in *Minnesota History*, 35:215, 221 (March, 1957).

effects were made by Ledyard Bill, Dr. Brewer Mattocks, and McClung, who subtitled his book "Its General Resources and Attractions for Immigrants, Invalids, Tourists, Capitalists and Business Men." Bill, in his book *Minnesota: Its Character and Climate*, adhered to the then common notion that consumption was caused by unfavorable climatic conditions and advised its victims to seek refuge in the coldness of Minnesota. Mattocks, a well-known St. Paul doctor and author, generally urged consumptives to move to Minnesota, because it had a "tonic climate." He did, however, tell the desperately ill who wrote him for advice to stay at home. "G. H. of Mississippi" asked: "How is Minnesota for chronic affection of the liver, and dyspepsia, accompanied with chronic lung complaint? For years I have been thus afflicted. Do you think a residence in your State will help me?" Mattocks noted, "On the back of the letter the poor man writes as follows. : 'I will state I am greatly emaciated, very feeble, scarcely able to walk; appetite poor, digestion miserable; doctors disagree as to the damage done my lung; can't stand cold, am worse in winter.'"<sup>18</sup>

The results of Minnesota's campaign to recruit invalids apparently exceeded expectations. One cured consumptive observed: "Minnesota all the year round is one vast hospital. All her cities and towns, and many of her farm houses, are crowded with those fleeing from the approach of the dread destroyer." Evidently hundreds if not thousands of people moved to Minnesota to improve their health. The health seekers included such noteworthy individuals as William Worrall Mayo, father of the famed Mayo brothers, novelist Edward Eggleston, journalists Joseph Wheelock and Henry Castle, and Dr. Brewer Mattocks himself.<sup>19</sup>

DR. BREWER  
MATTOCKS



While the promotional literature obviously exaggerated, there is ample testimony that many who came to Minnesota firmly believed its climate had helped restore their health. How can these testimonials be explained? To begin with, misdiagnosis was commonplace. If recovery occurred after the individual left an area of bad air or climate, then naturally any relief was attributed to the change. The general lack of familiarity with psychosomatic illnesses was undoubtedly another factor. Many people evidently felt better, whatever the reason for it, after moving to Minnesota. Conditioned by society's linkage of climate and disease and probably preconditioned by the publicity about Minnesota's beneficial climate, new residents found it easy to attribute any health improvement to the local environment. Then too, there was the distinct possibility that Minnesota's air, which was usually dryer than that of the South and East, was beneficial for some minor respiratory ailments.

Minnesota's campaign to attract consumptives and other afflicted people had slowed considerably by about 1880 and was halted soon afterward. The closing of the state's farming frontier coincided with the completion of a railroad through the Southwest to southern California, which made it easy for health seekers to reach dry, warm climes. Then, in 1882, Dr. Robert Koch of Germany identified the tubercle bacillus. His discovery clearly showed that climate was neither the cause nor the cure of tuberculosis, as the disease soon came to be known.<sup>20</sup>

After the health movement had abated and the hyperbole had subsided, Minnesotans went about more serious business. Recognizing that the climate was indeed harsh they gradually adapted their crops, their fruits and livestock, and themselves to it.

---

<sup>20</sup> J. Arthur Myers, *Invited and Conquered: Historical Sketch of Tuberculosis in Minnesota*, 33, 39 (St. Paul, 1949).

*A CHICAGO newspaper's perception of Minnesota as a theater of seasons, photographed in 1944*





Part of this realistic approach was to take care of one of the legacies of the drive to attract invalids to Minnesota. Many consumptives found Minnesota's climate to be of no help and many other people contracted the disease in Minnesota. Consequently the state, in a massive public health movement, expended much effort and funds in ultimately controlling tuberculosis.<sup>21</sup>

THOUGH the Minnesota promoters ignored meteorological data, the United States Army Signal Corps and later the federal Weather Bureau collected it, and in light of these observations we have a clear statistical record of Minnesota's weather.<sup>22</sup> Surely this exercise in quantification has at last dispelled erroneous notions about Minnesota's climate, or has it?

Minnesota's legendary cold is still well publicized by such things as the remark of a World War II correspondent shivering on the Russian front that: "'People from Minnesota would feel at home,'" the common use of Minnesota settings for national wintertime advertising of such products as Sears Diehard batteries and Prestone, the heavy media coverage of the record cold spell of 1978, and such reports as a magazine feature on the state in 1973. The authors of "Minnesota: A State That Works" included such descriptions as Minnesota's

<sup>21</sup> Myers, *Invited and Conquered*, 592-624, 676-691: see also Philip D. Jordan, *The People's Health: A History of Public Health in Minnesota to 1948*, 266-286 (St. Paul, 1953).

<sup>22</sup> Brown, in *Minnesota History*, 17:261.

<sup>23</sup> James Gray, *Pine, Stream & Prairie: Wisconsin and Minnesota in Profile*, 21 (New York, 1945); *Time*, August 13, 1973, p. 31, col. 1.

<sup>24</sup> The slogan of "Minnesota, Theatre of Seasons," which has been popularized by WCCO-AM radio, Minneapolis, was coined by Cecil Kaercher, an Ortonville lumber dealer in 1949. Kaercher won a contest cosponsored by WCCO and the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis to select a slogan for the centennial observance of the formation of Minnesota Territory. Later Kaercher named an Ortonville restaurant in which he had a financial interest the "Theatre of Seasons." It is still operating under that name; *Ortonville Independent*, February 24, 1949, p. 1; interview of James Kaercher by William E. Lass, July 30, 1984, notes in author's possession.

A version of the Duluth story featuring a streetcar operator rather than a cabbie is published in Dora Mary Macdonald, *This Is Duluth*, 13 (Duluth, 1950). See also *Time*, August 13, 1973, p. 33, col. 2.

"winters are as hard as the Ice Age" and "Winter, which brings down ferocious cold from the polar icecap, used to be a comparatively closed-down season, a deep hibernation. Snowmobiles, for better or for worse, have changed that."<sup>23</sup>

Like their forebears, present-day Minnesotans offer various defenses. They praise the state's "theatre of seasons." They talk knowingly, but erroneously, about how it is not as cold as it used to be. They joke about the state's climate with such quips as: "Yes, I remember last summer well. I went on a picnic that day," or by telling the story of the Duluth cabbie who responded to a question about how he liked summers in Duluth with: "I don't know yet, I've only lived here fourteen months." They lapse into reiterations of the traditional claims that hearing about a Minnesota winter is worse than experiencing it, and that the cold winter air is exhilarating and beneficial. In the *Time* article, several Minnesotans commented about the state's winters. One was quoted as saying that winters "build character." Another said that they "are a great blessing to us. You don't get the weak-kneed beachboys here. They can take it for one winter, then leave," and a third believed that "You have to be strong and productive to survive here."<sup>24</sup>

Claims and counterclaims that are strongly reminiscent of those used over a century ago persist, but so also does the notion that Minnesota is uniquely cold. The story is told of a farmer who lived near the Minnesota-Wisconsin border. All his life he had supposed he lived in Minnesota, but one day he was visited by a crew who asked permission to survey his land, because they had received information that the state line in his vicinity might be misplaced. He said: "Sure, go ahead," and anxiously awaited the results. Soon the surveyors were back to inform him that the boundary line was indeed wrong and that he actually lived in Wisconsin. That night, the farmer wrote in his diary: "Thank God! No more cold winters."

THE CARTOON on p. 149 by Jerry Fearing appeared in the *St. Paul Dispatch*, December 3, 1976; the engraving on p. 152 from a Truman W. Ingersoll photo is in the *Northwest Magazine*, February, 1888, p. 7; the photo on p. 154 is from the *Chicago Tribune*, January 25, 1944, all others are in the MHS audio-visual library.



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](#).