

## ROADS AND TRAILS IN THE MINNESOTA TRIANGLE, 1849-60<sup>1</sup>

Within ten years after Minnesota Territory was organized, it serenely approached maturity and took its place among the United States. These were stirring years, filled with vigorous planning and building, with big enterprises and ideas. A region with a population of less than five thousand in 1849 boasted nearly a hundred and seventy thousand inhabitants in 1860. Most of this phenomenal growth took place after 1854. A country which in 1850 appealed chiefly to adventurers, became within four years' time the Mecca toward which thousands of home-seekers turned their faces. A whole wilderness was conquered as the bridge of civilization spanned the mighty Mississippi.

In the story of the early settlement of Minnesota, the steamboat and the humble wagon road play major rôles. The river steamboats carried throngs of settlers into the territory, built up the river towns, and thus laid the foundation for the settlement of the interior country. The wagon roads, poor and flimsy trails, became teeming thoroughfares bearing great caravans of immigrants and creaking freight wagons into the back country. The first center of population in Minnesota was around the mouth of the Minnesota River, where traders in the upper Mississippi Valley had long maintained their posts. Here were St. Paul, St. Anthony, Fort Snelling, and old Mendota, with Stillwater near by, all well-established and flourishing communities. To the south of these settlements was a dense wilderness comprised within a triangle of land bounded by Iowa on the south, the Mississippi on the north

<sup>1</sup> A revision of a paper read before the Owatonna session of the state historical convention of 1930 on June 13. *Ed.*

and east, and the Minnesota and Blue Earth rivers on the north and west. Since immigrants arriving in Minnesota came first to this Triangle, it naturally was settled early in the territorial period. There was scarcely a trace of human habitation in the interior of the Triangle at the beginning of the fifties. Seminomadic Indians roamed over the region. At the junction of the Straight and Cannon rivers, in what became Rice County, a trader named Alexander Faribault had established a trading post in 1826, and there were temporary posts in other parts of the interior; but with these exceptions the wilderness was unbroken. The only semblance of a road in the whole region was the rough trading trail worn by the carts of the trader Faribault as they hauled his cargoes of furs and the goods used in his traffic with the Indians.

One overland route led from St. Paul to the civilized world in 1849. This road, opened in 1848, crossed into Wisconsin at Stillwater and extended to Galena, Illinois. A stage and mail line was established over it, but because of the roundabout route, the lack of sufficient bridges, and the frequently impassable condition of the road the service was not satisfactory.<sup>2</sup> Agitation for changes and demands for new roads therefore began. One of the first evidences of this desire for improved land communication was the spirit of violent criticism which grew up in 1849 of existing mail facilities. The writer of an editorial in a St. Paul newspaper inquired: "Would anyone believe that in the 19th century our government would limit Minnesota, situated here in the very heart of the Republic, to one mail a week?" He did not deem tri-weekly mails unreasonable, and declared that they "ought to be conveyed between Galena and St. Paul in two days each trip." He expressed the hope that there soon would be a "change for the better." In the fall of 1849 the Minnesota legislature

<sup>2</sup> Luella Swenson, "Stage Coaching Days in Minnesota," 3. This is a term paper prepared in 1927 for a course in Minnesota history at Hamline University, St. Paul. The Minnesota Historical Society has a copy.

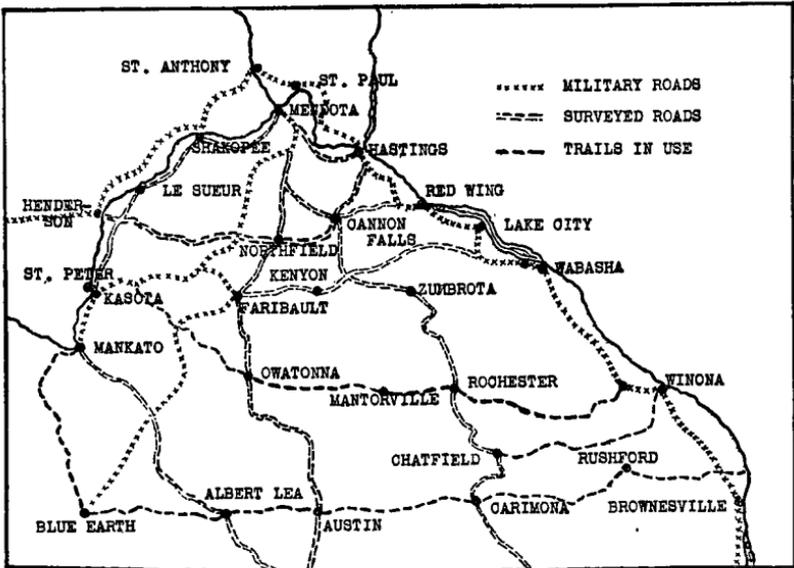
successfully appealed to Congress for the construction of a military post road to the Iowa line via Mendota and Wabasha. Surveys for this road were made in 1850, and early in 1852 it was opened from Hastings to Wabasha — the first surveyed road in Minnesota. In March of that year, the legislature sent a memorial to Congress — which was granted the following September — requesting the establishment of a regular mail route from St. Paul via the Wabasha road to Lansing, Iowa.<sup>8</sup>

By 1850 prospective settlers were calling for roads by which they could reach the rich interior of Minnesota. The territorial government itself had no funds with which to build such roads, nor was it to be expected that Congress would authorize their construction unless some reason could be found to justify their establishment. This justification was found in the fact that during the early territorial years the Chippewa of northern Minnesota were almost constantly at war with the Sioux of the south and west, and the whites themselves were not altogether free from the depredations of these warring red men. So, ostensibly as a means of Indian defense, Congress was asked to provide a system of roads penetrating the back country. Although the consent of that body had been readily obtained for the construction of a military post road from St. Paul to the more settled regions, the scheme of laying out roads to the interior met with serious objections. There ensued in Congress in the spring of 1852 a contest in which the lines of sectionalism became clearly marked; an old story was reënacted — that of the frontier struggling for internal improvements at the expense of the federal government and the settled area opposing such expenditure because but a small number of people would profit thereby. During the discussion occasioned by a memorial asking for the appropriation of

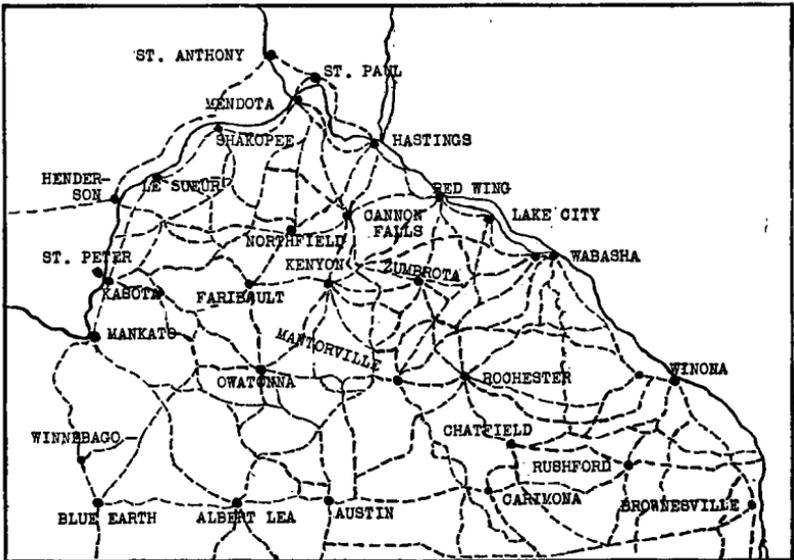
<sup>8</sup> *Minnesota Pioneer* (St. Paul), August 2, 1849; September 9, 1852; *Minnesota Democrat* (St. Paul), March 24, 1852; *Minnesota, House Journal*, 1849, p. 148; 1852, p. 90.

five thousand dollars for surveying the Mendota-Big Sioux road, Representative George S. Houston of Alabama rose to brand this type of road construction as "internal improvement by the government in its most odious form." The federal government had already expended enormous sums in clearing the land of the Indian title, and the frontier was not entitled to more. The position of the West was stated by Henry H. Sibley, territorial delegate from Minnesota, when he said, "The government being the sole great land proprietor is bound, by every consideration of equity and justice, to make its domain accessible to the settler, by means of roads. . . . How, sir, can your lands be sold if the immigrant cannot reach them?" A question was raised as to the military necessity of this road, and the conservative element took the position that if it were constructed to provide a means of entry to the land, and not for military defense, there was no difference between federal road construction in Minnesota and such construction in Kentucky, Indiana, or Illinois. Sibley's argument that Minnesota was "inhabited by the largest and most warlike tribes on the North American continent" was refuted by a statement from the officer who would be in charge of surveying the Mendota-Big Sioux road, in which he declared that his party would be its own escort, "as the Indians were not troublesome in that region." Sibley maintained that this road was necessary, for it would enable troops to march directly to the Indian fastnesses in case of an outbreak. A further objection to the plan was the expense it entailed — the previous Congress had appropriated five thousand dollars for a preliminary survey, to complete the survey would cost at least five thousand dollars more, and the total cost of this road leading into the wilderness would be about two hundred thousand dollars. The eloquence of Sibley and the championship of the western states won government-constructed roads for Minnesota.<sup>4</sup> These were built under the supervision of

<sup>4</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 32 Congress, 1 session, p. 1451-1455.



ROADS IN THE MINNESOTA TRIANGLE, 1854



ROADS IN THE MINNESOTA TRIANGLE, 1860

the war department, and, although not intended purely for military purposes, were commonly called "military" roads. Four of these were built in the Triangle region. The first was the post road along the west bank of the Mississippi river. The second, the Mendota-Big Sioux or Dodd road, was authorized in the late spring of 1852, surveyed in 1853, and opened over the first sixty-five miles of its route in 1855. It cut through the Big Woods in the northwestern part of the Triangle country from Mendota, through Lakeville, to the upper crossing of the Cannon River, thence westward to St. Peter, up the Minnesota to Mankato, and then southwest to the Big Sioux River. In 1853 the third route was opened — the St. Anthony-Fort Ridgely road — following the west bank of the Minnesota River from St. Paul to Henderson and extending westward toward Fort Ridgely. In 1854 the Spirit Lake road, extending from Faribault toward Spirit Lake, Iowa, was laid out.<sup>5</sup>

The rapid growth of settlement along the banks of the two great rivers in the territory brought a flood of demands for roads. The settlers along the Minnesota River yearned for a more direct route out of the territory and a more expeditious mail service than that afforded by the river. The towns along the Mississippi saw the profit to be derived from the trade and travel of the West. On March 1, 1852, Governor Ramsey approved a bill for laying out a road from the "foot of Lake Pepin to some point on the Minnesota River between Flint Prairie and the mouth of the Blue Earth River." This road, however, was not to be built unless the Sioux treaties of 1851 were confirmed by the Senate, then in session.<sup>6</sup> The con-

<sup>5</sup> *House Journal*, 1849, p. 98; 1853, p. 115; manuscript map of "Military Roads in Minnesota, 1849-1859." The latter item is in the War Department Archives; a photostatic copy is in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society. A writer in the *Shakopee Independent* of February 20, 1856, records that the Mendota-Big Sioux or Dodd road "affords a well travelled thoroughfare, easy of access to market."

<sup>6</sup> *Minnesota, Laws*, 1852, p. 57.

struction of this road established a basis for the rivalry that played an important part in the later growth of the river towns. It brought Read's Landing and Wabasha into direct contact with the Minnesota Valley. The inhabitants of Rollingstone and Winona determined to secure their own road, and in July, 1852, three settlers from the former place laid out a route connecting Winona and Mankato. This route left the military road to Winona a short distance above that place at Rollingstone and extended westward, passing near or through the sites of the present cities of Rochester and Owatonna and then turning toward the northwest until it made connections with the Dodd road just east of St. Peter. On March 1, 1854, the territorial legislature authorized the construction of a road from Red Wing to Fort Ridgely on the "most direct and feasible route," the cost to be borne by the counties through which the road passed, providing it did not exceed a hundred dollars per county.<sup>7</sup> Thus the first westward routes of travel in the Triangle were established.

North and south routes soon became necessary as well as those running east and west. The government road along the banks of the Mississippi did not offer a direct route from Iowa into the Triangle region nor to St. Paul. Agitation, not restricted to Minnesota alone, began for the opening of a road to St. Paul through the central part of this country. In March, 1852, Captain John Wakefield wrote from Allamakee County, Iowa, to James M. Goodhue, the editor of the *Minnesota Pioneer* of St. Paul, advising that a central route be chosen and urging rapid action. In July, 1852, Timothy Davis of Decorah, Iowa, wrote to the same editor, suggesting that a meeting be held in September or October at Decorah to work out the problem of a stage road from Dubuque to the mouth of the Minnesota River. A writer for the *Minnesota Democrat* of St. Paul, commenting on the accessibility of the Triangle by a central route, said: "Take

<sup>7</sup> *Pioneer*, July 28, 1852; *Laws*, 1854, p. 46.

Notice.—Farmers may come with their stock from any of the eastern states to the heart of the best part of Minnesota, where the whole country is open for settlement. The best route is from Dubuque north to the Iowa line, and thence into the Blue Earth and Cannon Valleys." In September, 1852, the same paper called attention to the good road "travelled for the last half century by traders" between Mendota and Alexander Faribault's trading post, and remarked that this could be extended the remainder of the way to the Iowa line with small expense.<sup>8</sup>

Requests for a north and south road appeared throughout 1853. In January, 1854, one writer expressed the need for it as follows:

Let there be a road staked out up this stream [*the Straight or Owatonna River*] and through to Fort Atkinson, or some point easy of access from Dubuque or Galena, and those emigrants who would be deterred from entering Minnesota with their stock and farming utensils by steamboat, would rapidly fill up . . . that best part of our territory, stretching across southern Minnesota east to the Mississippi.

The best interests of our territory require that we should have at once a good waggon road from St. Paul to some point in Iowa, leading to the Mississippi; and if the route I have pointed out is not the best, let someone point out a better, at all events let us if possible have the road.<sup>9</sup>

The house of representatives in 1853 passed a bill authorizing the construction of a road from the falls of the Vermillion River at Hastings in Dakota County, through the sites of the present towns of Cannon Falls, Zumbrota, Rochester, Chatfield, Carimona, and thence to the Iowa line.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *Pioneer*, March 4, July 22, 1852; *Democrat*, August 4, September 22, 1852.

<sup>9</sup> *Pioneer*, January 5, 1854.

<sup>10</sup> This bill was not passed by the territorial council and signed by the governor until 1855. The road, however, was put in use early in 1854. *House Journal*, 1853, p. 193; *Laws*, 1855, p. 142; W. H. Mitchell, *History of the County of Olmsted*, 110 (Rochester, n. d.).

The Minnesota road situation in 1854 is reflected in an editorial entitled "New Roads" in the *Pioneer* for March 14 of the following year:

Nothing tends more directly to the settlement and improvement of a new country than good roads. The want of them the past summer, from prominent points on the Mississippi to the interior of the Territory, was a matter of much complaint on the part of immigrants.

If the roads authorized to be laid out by the legislature at its last session, shall be constructed at an early day, those coming to our territory the approaching season will find the facilities for penetrating to rich farming lands in the interior, very much improved. A good road has been opened from the Iowa line to this city, traversing that part of the territory north and south. From Red Wing on the Mississippi, a road is about to be opened to Henderson on the Minnesota. From Winona on the Mississippi, another road is contemplated, running in a northwesterly direction, to the same point on the Minnesota, passing by Faribault on the Cannon River. These roads will prove of great service to the immigrant, while they will render accessible the valuable agricultural lands on the Root, Driftwood and Cannon river.

When the trails were opened up, throngs of immigrants flowed into the land. In the spring of 1854, a road was laid out following the old traders' trail to Faribault's post and the Straight and Cedar rivers to the Iowa line. In June of that year, Dr. William W. Finch, one of the commissioners appointed to survey the road, reported heavy traffic over the route before it was surveyed. At one time he saw a train of "30 immigrant wagons, filled with Norwegians and 150 head of cattle, following on their way to Traverse, Mankato and other towns on the river. . . . Two hundred wagons have been seen on the road at one time,—many of which came from Wisconsin. . . . The greater number of emigrants who come into our territory is by the overland route."<sup>11</sup> The story is the same for all the Triangle during 1854. Wherever there were roads, settlers came pouring in, choking through

<sup>11</sup> *Laws*, 1854, p. 64; *Daily Times* (St. Paul), June 30, July 6, 1854.

clouds of dust during the dry weather, wallowing and struggling through mud and mire when it rained, clogging the ferries, and filling the frontier inns to overflowing. Towns sprang into existence where but a few months before there had been virgin wilderness. The forests melted away and houses showed through the tangled undergrowth wherever a wearied idealist had found his Eden. The Triangle flourished when access to its riches was secured.

During the years from 1849 to 1854 a foundation for a road system was laid, and in the years that followed the structure was completed, providing the means by which the greater part of the white population in the Triangle got to the land. Feeder roads without number were constructed — short, rough trails, along township lines, through hitherto trackless forests and over rolling prairies, bringing in the farmers who made this the most populous region in Minnesota. In 1855 the legislature authorized the construction of nineteen roads in the Triangle region and in 1856 more than twice that number. Numerous trails, marked only by the imprint of wagon wheels that had gone before, led into the interior. Freeborn County, at the south of the Triangle, had one surveyed road in 1857. Yet trails made by the wagons of incoming settlers who could not wait for surveyed roads to be opened extended to all parts of the county.<sup>12</sup> Other counties reported similar developments. The legislature often authorized the survey and construction of roads after they had been in use for months or even a year or two.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *Laws*, 1855, p. 49-53; and numerous references, indexed under "Territorial Roads," in the volume for 1856. "There are good roads centering here from all directions, though strange to say, with one exception no roads have ever been surveyed within the county limits," runs an article in the *Southern Minnesota Star* of Albert Lea for July 9, 1857. The issue also contains a map showing trails in Freeborn County.

<sup>13</sup> The legislature of 1855 authorized the construction of a road from Winona to Carimona, but the road had been used in the fall of 1854. Similarly, the legislature in 1856 authorized the construction of a road

Because communication was so inadequate the people directed their energies toward the construction of railroads. The years 1857 and 1858 saw the bitter fight over the famous "Five Million Loan" measure, by which the credit of the state to the amount of five million dollars was extended to aid in the construction of railroads. In southeastern Minnesota as early as 1855 plans had been made for the construction of a road, to be called the Transit Railroad, which was to extend from Winona to Mankato or St. Peter. Railroad agitation grew to such proportions that it quite overshadowed other problems of the day. Roads, while desirable, were not deemed as necessary as railroads. In places it was quite definitely assumed that road facilities were ample for the time. Houston County reported "5400 miles of road, and from the knowledge our readers have respecting the situation of these roads, no one will claim we are not pretty well supplied with them." It was the mania for railroads at the expense of the more humble wagon road that prompted the editor of the *St. Peter Courier* to write: "In our eagerness for Railroads we are forgetting those common avenues through which in reality are flowing our wealth. . . . This road business is a matter of concern to us, and the best time to attend to it is now."<sup>14</sup>

The settlement of the Triangle was vitally tied up with the development of a system of transportation and communication operating independently of the steamboat. The early attempts at railroad construction were abortive, and they blasted the reputation of the railroad companies for some time. Communication was necessary, however, and the counties of the interior were hindered in their growth until some system of roads should be developed. Indeed, it was the laying out of such a system that made possible the growth of Rochester from Rochester via Marion, Chatfield, and Richland Prairie to the Iowa line over the same route as was authorized in 1854. *Laws*, 1855, p. 49-53; 1856, p. 140.

<sup>14</sup> *St. Peter Courier*, June 26, 1857; *Hokah Chief*, September 25, 1858.

in Olmsted County, which was platted on July 25, 1854, and made a stagecoach station the same day. Similarly, Zumbrota in Goodhue County, established as a colony by an association of eastern men in 1856, grew and endured because a reliable route of communication with the territorial capital and with the rest of the United States ran through its main and, one suspects, only street. Countless similar instances can be quoted. Carimona — lonely, isolated village in the interior of Fillmore County — became an important port of call for all stage lines on the eastern interior route from St. Paul to the Iowa line. It boasted a sumptuous hotel, and was the terminus of a stage line running from Winona via Chatfield.<sup>15</sup> The village flourished until the coming of the railroad to Minnesota, when the decline of stagecoaching left it isolated and led to decay. Its heyday was the day of the stagecoach and the freight caravan.

In no case in the development of the interior did a community grow that did not possess good road communication. In the fifties an outstanding criterion for the selection of a town site seems to have been the presence of a good wagon road connecting it with other parts of the country. In July, 1853, a writer, urging the eligibility of Faribault in Rice County as the seat of settlement for a colony of New Englanders, referred to the location as being of primary importance because "the government military road, running from the foot of Lake Pepin, on the Mississippi, to the great bend of the Minnesota at the mouth of the Blue Earth, which is being opened this year, passes through our settlement. The great winter mail and stage route from St. Paul to Dubuque, Iowa, must pass through this section. . . . From necessity there must build up a large inland town." A little later an observer recorded of Rochester: "The great Dubuque and St. Paul road passes through here, where it is intersected by the

<sup>15</sup> A. T. Andreas, *Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Minnesota*, 239 (Chicago, 1874); *St. Paul Advertiser*, March 7, 1857.

principal thoroughfare from Winona westward. . . . In summer, Rochester is a sort of grand encampment for the meeting streams of emigration upon both these roads. We counted one hundred emigrant wagons last summer . . . on the outskirts of town, their occupants huddled in groups around a dozen or more fires." An earlier writer looked upon the site of Marion — now dead, but filled with wistful memories of the dreams of greatness held by its founders — and said: "We are on the direct road from Winona to Rochester, about forty miles from Winona, and eight from Rochester . . . eleven from Chatfield, and but one half a mile from the main stage road from Dubuque to St. Paul."<sup>16</sup> The importance of road communication was not lost on those early settlers. Where they built in such a way that the railroads found it to their advantage to come through the towns, the settlements have prospered to this day. Where obstacles forced the railroads to neglect them, they suffered and died. The road gave them their initial impetus, the railroad assured their progress.

The problem of mail communication was a strong factor in securing new and improved roads. In 1849 three branch mail lines and the route from the settled states to Minnesota, only a small part of which lay within its boundaries, served the territory. The spread of the system of mail communication was a slow process. In 1854 twenty-one new land mail routes were created. Seven of these fed the Triangle region, following the lines of roads that had been established previously. Although authorized during this year, they were not all put into operation at once. For example, the first delivery on the overland route from the Mississippi River at Minnesota City to Traverse des Sioux was not made until November, 1855, when the road from Winona to St. Peter was opened.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *Minnesotian* (St. Paul), July 30, 1853; *St. Paul Advertiser*, March 14, 1857; *Winona Republican*, December 11, 1855.

<sup>17</sup> *St. Peter Courier*, November 6, 1855; Wilhelm F. Hempel, "Postal Service in Minnesota to 1858," 17. A copy of the latter item, a term paper

The inadequate mail service of the early fifties brought forth numerous complaints, and mass meetings were held, memorials were sent to Congress, and wordy protests were published in the newspapers in efforts to secure remedies for the situation.<sup>18</sup> At Winona the editor of the *Argus*, in the issue for September 25, 1855, complained bitterly that during the previous week there had been but one mail from St. Paul, although the government contract called for daily service. "Where is the fault?" he writes. "It is vexatious to be thus snubbed, especially when we know that we are entitled to a better treatment." At Faribault the first regular mail service was granted in 1854, although settlement had made an active beginning in 1851. This service was supplemented in the fall of 1855 by the cross-country mail from Winona to Mankato. On July 9, 1857, the editor of the *Southern Minnesota Star* of Albert Lea exulted over the arrival of the "first regular U. S. mail that has ever come to this town at the expense of the Department," and he boasted of "regular mails from Mankato, Mitchell [Iowa], Red Wing." In 1858 the postmaster-general announced a hundred and twenty-six routes in Minnesota, of which fifty-five provided service wholly or in part for the Triangle region.<sup>19</sup>

Mail-service facilities developed greatly during the territorial period. In 1849 there were only four land mail routes in Minnesota. By 1854 these had been increased to twenty-five and by 1856, to forty-nine. From 1856 to 1858 the number more than doubled. The Triangle comprised about a fourth of the settled area of Minnesota in 1860 and received almost half of the mail service provided for the entire state. Inasmuch as almost two-thirds of the entire population lived in the

prepared for a course in Minnesota history at Macalester College, St. Paul, in 1927, is in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>18</sup> *Minnesota Democrat*, March 24, 1852; *St. Peter Courier*, March 11, 1856; Hempel, "Postal Service," 2, 16, 17.

<sup>19</sup> *Daily Pioneer and Democrat* (St. Paul), February 23, 1858.

Triangle, however, the region did not receive the service to which it was entitled. The increase in mail facilities, although great, was still far behind the growth of settlement, and the people were still handicapped in their efforts to conquer the wilderness. Mail routes were very essential bonds of civilization—connecting links that helped to bind together the isolated posts of the frontier. They promoted intercourse and maintained the community of interest. To traverse the country with such a network, trails were necessary. The spread of the system of roads is measured by the spread of the mail routes in the territory. The struggle of the people to secure adequate mail service was identical with their struggle to secure adequate roads.

Based on absolute need, the stagecoach, about which such a halo of romance has gathered, came to occupy a position of real importance in Minnesota. In later years the railroad took the place of the stage as a means of transportation, but during the fifties and far into the sixties stagecoaches rumbled across the prairies of Minnesota, the principal means of communication for an entire people. Hence, they were vital factors in the securing of new roads. They were operating in Minnesota early in 1849, when a regular stage line was running between St. Paul and St. Anthony. Shortly after its establishment, a stage was run from St. Paul, via the Wisconsin route, to Dubuque, where it connected with the mail stage lines from the East.<sup>20</sup> The fact that satisfactory mail and passenger service over this route was impossible was of primary importance in the opening of the first road on the west side of the Mississippi River. In the program of propaganda spread to secure the completion of the latter road, the lure of the stagecoach was very evident. In the issue of April 22, 1852, the editor of the *Pioneer*, advocating the completion of the "west" road, wrote: "On the west side,

<sup>20</sup> Swenson, "Stage Coaching Days," 3.

there are no hills, no rivers but Cannon river to bridge, no streams that would be a hindrance — nothing to prevent a good road, and everything to encourage a settlement all the way; and if this road were opened, there would soon be towns . . . daily stages, and Minnesota would never be caught again on the 16th of April, isolated." The need for the road was great, and it would be built if necessary "by subscription, or the labor of our own hands." The people of Iowa were vitally interested in it, for they had constructed one north to the Minnesota line, and were anxious to secure the continuation of this route to St. Paul. In July, 1852, a correspondent of a St. Paul paper wrote: "There must be something suggested to start the ball. The route will be I presume a four horse post coach one."<sup>21</sup>

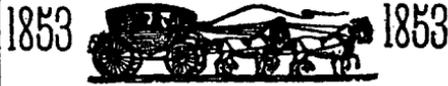
In January, 1853, a stage line from St. Paul to Mankato was established, marking the beginning of this means of transportation in the Triangle. In 1854 the line from St. Paul to Dubuque by way of Cannon Falls, Rochester, and Carimona became an actuality. In 1855 stage lines were established between Winona and St. Peter and Winona and Chatfield. In 1856 lines were opened between St. Paul and Dubuque on the Straight and Cedar River route, between Red Wing and St. Peter, and between Hastings and the Minnesota Valley at St. Peter. A writer for the *St. Peter Courier* of January 7, 1857, gleefully recorded the growth of the lines of communication between the Minnesota River Valley and the Mississippi River towns. St. Peter, he declared, was fast securing connections with all the Mississippi River towns, lacking only a line between St. Peter and Wabasha. In 1857 stage lines were extended from La Crescent, opposite La Crosse, to Mankato; from Red Wing to Albert Lea; from Mankato to Mitchell, Iowa; and from La Crosse, by way of La Crescent, to Chatfield. In 1858 the network was further extended by the establishment of lines from Lake City to Rochester,

<sup>21</sup> *Pioneer*, July 1, 22, August 26, 1852.

Owatonna, and Mankato; and from Brownsville westward toward Blue Earth; and of several short lines which were outgrowths of the larger systems.<sup>22</sup> By 1860 the region was crisscrossed with lines running in all directions and the stagecoach had become a fundamental part of the everyday life of the communities.

The value of the stagecoach as an institution was enhanced as time went on by its combination with the mail service. As mail routes were designated, they followed the lines of the major roads, which were the routes of the stagecoach lines. The stagecoach companies, therefore, took over the delivery of the mails as a profitable side line. This combination of industries occurred first on the stage line extending from St. Paul to Galena in the fall of 1850, when M. P. Ormsby advertised the "United States

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**WILLOUGHBY & POWERS** will continue their semi-weekly trips between St. Paul and Prairie du Chien until the opening of navigation, immediately after which they will commence running

### DAILY LINES

of Four-Horse Coaches between

*St. Paul and St. Anthony, and St. Paul and Stillwater.*

They have recently purchased at the East several new and elegant

### CONCORD COACHES,

which will be here to take their places in these lines immediately after the opening of navigation.

The public may rest assured that the proprietors have none but the best of teams, accompanied by careful drivers; and that they will devote their utmost energies to insure comfort and safety on all occasions.



At An extensive Livery Stable at the corner of Fourth and Roberts streets. Particular attention given to the accommodation of Pleasure Parties, upon liberal terms.  
27-tt **WILLOUGHBY & POWERS.**

## A STAGECOACH ADVERTISEMENT

[From the *Weekly Minnesotian* (St. Paul),  
March 19, 1853.]

<sup>22</sup> *Pioneer*, January 6, 1853; November 6, 1854; *Democrat*, March 14, 1855; *St. Peter Courier*, November 6, 1855; *Winona Express*, September 18, 1855; *Southern Minnesota Star*, July 9, 1857; *Chatfield Republican*, January 31, 1857; *Rochester Democrat*, May 20, 1858; *Rochester Free Press*, May 12, 1858.

Mail Stage Line to Minnesota." In 1852 the firm of Wil-  
loughby and Powers advertised the "United States Mail  
Stage" to Prairie du Chien.<sup>23</sup> Throughout the territory, the  
stage lines adopted the secondary industry. In general, the  
reasons for this are easy to understand. Both the stage lines  
and the mail service were required to adhere to strict schedules.  
In designating carriers for the various routes, sealed bids  
were called for, and the contract was given to the lowest bidder.  
The stage line had the burden of a fixed overhead expense,  
which was lightened by the compensation for carrying the  
mail. It could, therefore, give this service at a lower figure  
than a private contractor.

The mail-stage combination produced an efficient and, one  
might almost say, altruistic service to the public. There were  
times when the stages failed to keep to their schedules, to be  
sure, and there were times when the mails were not delivered  
on the appointed day. There were even occasions when mail  
was lost as the result of some mishap on the road. The  
proprietors and drivers usually acted in good faith, however,  
and the blame for such accidents was rarely traceable to them.  
There were many times when thought of personal gain  
seemed to give way before a desire to serve the public. Thus,  
the editor of the *Pioneer*, in the issue for August 2, 1849,  
made the statement that the proprietor of the stage line  
operating between St. Paul and Stillwater furnished free mail  
service for the people of these places. Again, in 1858, M. O.  
Walker, who had become the most prominent mail-stage opera-  
tor in the state, was subjected to criticism for service given  
on his line in the Minnesota Valley. A writer for a local  
paper in defense of Walker stated that his lines, although they  
received pay for only a tri-weekly mail service, had for a year  
been furnishing a daily delivery without extra charge. The  
defense continues: "Our country is new, and our roads

<sup>23</sup> *Minnesota Democrat*, December 31, 1850; November 17, 1852.

rough and bad. Neither horseflesh nor ash and maple wagons can stand everything. We are pretty well off now in our mail facilities. The best policy is to let well enough alone. We may get let down to a tri-weekly mail which would not be so pleasant." <sup>24</sup>

The competition of stagecoach companies produced distinctly beneficial results for the people. Early in the territorial period the proprietors of two stage companies operating between St. Anthony and St. Paul clashed over the trade between these two cities. Fares sank to almost nothing and the conflict was bitterly waged. The end of this first stagecoach war brought with it a stabilizing of rates, improved service, and better roads between St. Anthony and St. Paul. In 1852 two companies were operating on the route to Galena. To secure the good will of the public, one of them, the firm of Willoughby and Powers, announced that it had thoroughly repaired the road and that it was providing excellent accommodations for passengers and "Good and comfortable STAGES on the entire route." <sup>25</sup> Here again, competition operated to secure improved roads and traveling conditions.

In the spring of 1858 the energetic proprietors of the town site of Lake City began an earnest campaign for the trade of the interior country, of which Rochester was the center, by opening a new road from Lake City to Rochester. An intensive advertising campaign was carried on in the Rochester papers, and in June, 1858, the firm of Burbank and Company, which operated the lines of the Northwestern Passenger and Express Company, was subsidized to the extent of five hundred dollars to establish a regular line of stagecoaches from Rochester to Lake City. A stage line had been in operation between Winona and Rochester since early in 1855. Winona had come to regard Rochester as its tributary territory. No particular

<sup>24</sup> *St. Peter Courier*, January 1, 1858.

<sup>25</sup> Swenson, "Stage Coaching Days," 6-8; *Minnesota Democrat*, September 9, December 8, 1852.

efforts were made to please the citizens of that region because Winona had been the only logical place in which they could trade. The firm of Burbank and Company initiated a fare of two dollars on its stages to Lake City—twenty-five cents lower than the fare charged by the Walker line between Winona and Rochester—and trade started to flow the other way. The Walker line, of course, had to meet this price, and thus the war began. Daily stages were put on the road to Lake City by Burbank and Company. Walker retaliated by placing daily stages on both the Winona and Lake City roads. Fares to Lake City dropped to twenty-five cents each way, and the public gleefully reaped the benefit. One observer recorded that the fares were “just what you’ve a mind to give, and in a little while, as the rivalry increases, the question to passengers will be ‘at what price will you ride with us?’” With the end of the conflict the charges for freight and express transportation as well as those for stage fares were stabilized, and the rates were appreciably lower than they had been before there was competition on the route. More important, however, was the immediate improvement in roads. The citizens of Winona, spurred on by the efforts of the Walker agent, raised over four hundred dollars for the improvement of the road to Rochester. In addition, a new road had been opened from Rochester to the Mississippi.<sup>26</sup>

Echoes of the strife were heard from other parts of the Triangle region. In Chatfield the people watched the conflict with great interest. They, too, had felt Winona’s neglect of their interests and the inconvenience occasioned by the Walker line’s poor service. Their complaints were as real as those at Rochester, and the application was made to the local situation. “Winona will get her eyes open, after a while, to her true interest. . . . Rochester has already, it seems, found a better

<sup>26</sup> *Rochester Democrat*, May 20 to July 1, 1858; *Rochester Free Press*, May 12 to June 2, 1858.

way to the river via Lake City; and Chatfield will, ere long, do the same, at Homer, or La Crosse." <sup>27</sup>

The stagecoaches were responsible for the construction of many roads and the improvement of many more. In some instances, the companies suggested to the local governments along their routes that better service would be possible if there were better roads, whereupon the taxpayers undertook to repair them. In other cases the companies did the work of repairing the roads. Such was the case of the Burbank line, which in 1858 secured the contract for carrying the mails from La Crosse to St. Paul. To insure the three and a half day driving schedule required by the contract, the firm undertook to improve the existing roads. That fall the sum of three thousand dollars was expended for repairs and the construction of bridges on the road from Wabasha to Winona. For this service, no compensation was asked beyond the patronage of the people.<sup>28</sup>

On through the fifties and far into the sixties stagecoaches rattled across the prairies or through the dark forests of the Triangle region. They constituted the one reliable means of communication on the far frontier of settlement, bringing to the settlers their mail, their freight, and their friends. Effective and efficient operation of the stage lines required roads — not the good roads of the present day, but roads over which heavy coaches loaded with mail, express, and passengers could be drawn. The stagecoach was an important factor in the struggle for good roads.

Construction of the numerous roads and trails that traversed the Triangle region during the fifties resulted in considerable legislation. Road-building meant expense even though it entailed only removing inconvenient boulders, chopping down trees that could not be avoided, blazing trees here and there,

<sup>27</sup> *Chatfield Republican*, June 2, 1858.

<sup>28</sup> *Winona Republican*, November 3, 1858.

or driving stakes into the prairie sod to indicate the track. The federal government bore the expense of constructing a few roads, built presumably to facilitate defense in case of attack by the hostile Indians. Such roads formed only a small part of the total fabric at the end of the territorial period, yet they were vital and so located that they provided access to much of the interior. The greater part of the money for road construction during the fifties came, however, from other sources. The territorial legislature of 1849, recognizing that much construction would have to be done during the ensuing years, passed "An Act to provide for laying out Territorial Roads in the Territory of Minnesota and for other purposes." Section 5 limited all territorial roads to a width of sixty-six feet. It further provided that all roads established according to the provisions of the act should be public highways and should be maintained by the counties through which they passed. The cost of laying out roads was to be borne by the territorial treasury. The task of maintenance belonged to the counties.<sup>29</sup>

All roads constructed during the first few years after 1849 were established by special bills passed by the legislature, which had charge of all road construction and acted upon all petitions for the establishment of roads. During these years only roads actually and vitally needed were requested. After 1854, however, there was a change in the tenor of the demand for roads. The quickening of the tide of immigration brought a flood of petitions from settlers eager for road communication. The legislature in 1856 was called upon to locate ninety-seven roads in the territory, forty-five of which were in the Triangle region.<sup>30</sup> The expenses for surveys and construction became items of considerable size. The activity in road legislation aroused much criticism. It was no longer neces-

<sup>29</sup> Minnesota Territory, *Acts, Joint Resolutions and Memorials Passed by the First Legislative Assembly, 1849*, p. 83.

<sup>30</sup> *Session Laws, 1856*, p. 116-152.

sary for the territorial government to assume the expense of road making, since, in large part, the roads were now passing through settled country. In a letter published in a Minnesota Valley paper in 1856 one citizen wrote:

Our legislature during the present session has been little better than a Commissioner's Court; and it is a disgrace that a stop has not been put to this class of special enactments long before this. Let the legislature pass a general law, regulating ferries, roads, etc. . . . With a contemporary we say: "Territorial roads should properly be provided for, and that ferries are a public convenience, no one of course denies. But when you contract a Territorial debt of one hundred thousand dollars at least, merely to pay surveyors and commissioners for laying out roads past every man's farm in the Territory . . . we think it a duty on our part to endorse any action which looks to the checking of such inordinate and reckless legislation."<sup>31</sup>

During the extra session of 1857, the legislature passed "A Bill for an Act relating to Public Roads," providing for the election each year of two road commissioners for each county with the power to lay out and alter roads within the limits of a county. Roads might be altered or new roads laid out upon written application to the road commissioners by twelve persons living within the limits of the county. The expense of laying out and constructing roads was to be borne by the county.<sup>32</sup> The legislature of 1858, in codifying the laws of the state, made certain changes in the road laws. Under the terms of the township organization act, twelve or more citizens living within one mile of a proposed road could petition in writing for the laying out of a road or the alteration of an old one. In addition, the townships of a county were divided into road districts with commissioners in charge of each. A poll tax law required a stipulated amount of labor on the roads within the limits of a county from each male over twenty-one. Under the township act of 1858 this labor,

<sup>31</sup> *St. Peter Courier*, February 12, 1856.

<sup>32</sup> *Laws*, 1857, extra session, p. 245-249.

however, was restricted to the road district within which the citizen lived. The editor of the *Mantorville Express* commented:

One of the most immediate and important results of our township organization will be the establishment of a thorough and effective system of operations in the working of our highway. . . . Under the present law, the Township is divided into small road districts, and each group of neighbors labor on the roads in which they are most interested.<sup>33</sup>

This legislation of 1857 and 1858 solved the problem of road construction in Minnesota for some time. It took the burden of payment from the state as a whole and placed it where the persons using the roads most would pay for them, and it relieved the state of the promise of an overwhelming indebtedness. The legislature in 1857, by its provision in the matter of local petitions, partly remedied the evil of indiscriminate road legislation. The township act of 1858 went further by requiring that the persons so petitioning must live within one mile of the proposed road. Thus, only persons who had an actual need for a road could secure one.

In the brief span of ten or fifteen years a wilderness was conquered. Verdant forests and virgin prairies were subdued as the white man's frontier advanced with miraculous speed. Contributing to this transformation were two elements — a population eager for land, and the opportunity that was open to all to secure it. The factors that made this growth possible included reliable steamboat lines and, more important, the beginnings of an adequate road system. Probably more settlers reached Minnesota, and certainly more people reached their homes in that state, by land than by water. The roads of the interior, stretching for mile upon mile across the wilderness, bore upon their surfaces the burden of the great migration that settled the Triangle region of Minnesota. The

<sup>33</sup> *Statutes*, 1849-58, p. 205-220; *Mantorville Express*, April 17, 1858.

needs of the incoming throngs for access to available land, for adequate protection from the Indians, for the opportunity to market their produce, for mail service at all times of the year, and for adequate stagecoach service, combined with the rivalries of towns, made the construction of roads imperative. The roads of the Minnesota Triangle region were slender threads that tied the whole interior country together — sensitive arteries that gave the scattered communities their life.

ARTHUR J. LARSEN

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