

THOREAU IN MINNESOTA¹

In 1861, a short year before his death, Henry David Thoreau was already a sick man. A certain consumptive tendency, no doubt inherited from his grandfather, had become less and less dormant; and the disdain for weather and exposure which Thoreau had evinced for years had resulted in a dread affliction of the legs and lungs. Contrary to general belief, Thoreau was not possessed of a strong constitution. His walking feats, his mountain bivouacs, and his rigorous outdoor life are to be attributed more to an iron will which scorned fatigue than to a naturally tireless physique.

As a result of Thoreau's illness, his physician advised him early in 1861 to see what a change of climate would do for him. For once the patient was tractable and consented. At first he desired Ellery Channing, an old Concord friend and companion on many a long ramble, to accompany him on a journey to the West. Channing had lived on the Illinois prairie and could have given Thoreau valuable information about the mode of western life. But Channing was unable to go, and as a result Thoreau chose as a companion Horace Mann, Jr., a son of the distinguished educator and a botanist in his own right. In the early part of May these two departed from Concord on the long trek westward, planning to make their journey by easy stages.²

From a letter to Harrison Blake of Worcester, written by Thoreau barely a week before the departure, one may sketch the itinerary of the two travelers. After stating that

¹ A paper read at the afternoon session of the eighty-sixth annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society on January 21, 1935, in the Historical Building, St. Paul. *Ed.*

² Annie R. Marble, *Thoreau: His Home, Friends and Books*, 174 (New York, 1902); Franklin B. Sanborn, *Henry D. Thoreau*, 310 (Boston, 1882); H. S. Salt, *Life of Henry David Thoreau*, 202 (London, 1890).

"it will be most expedient for me to try the air of Minnesota, say somewhere about St. Paul's," Thoreau wrote that he planned to purchase a through ticket to Chicago with stop-over privileges, as he was especially eager to break his journey at Niagara Falls and Detroit. From Chicago he meant to strike west to Dunleith on the Mississippi, and thence go by boat to St. Paul. On May 11, 1861, he left Concord with about a hundred and fifty dollars in his pocket and personal equipment consisting of such traveling accessories as "a half-thick coat, a thin coat, 'best pants,' three shirts, a flannel shirt, three pairs of socks, slippers, underclothing, five handkerchiefs, a waistcoat, towel and soap."³ Nor must one forget the indispensable equipment of the naturalist: spy glass, notebook, measuring tape, botanical manual, in fact all the paraphernalia which made Thoreau's pockets bulge as he rambled around Concord.

Various notations in Thoreau's journals indicate the stops that the naturalist and Mann made, as well as the impressions they received of the western towns which both saw for the first time. Thoreau, for example, noted the scenery about Schenectady and along the Mohawk, the rumble and spray of Niagara, and the flowers on Goat Island. Chicago, he observed, "is built chiefly of limestone from 40 miles southwest. Lake Street is the chief business one. The water is milky." In northwest Illinois Thoreau first saw the prairie, and on May 23 at Dunleith he watched the great flood of the Mississippi as it swept southward. The following day he embarked for St. Paul.⁴

The traffic on the Mississippi interested Thoreau tremendously. The navigable part of the stream was some sixty rods wide, but the valley between the bluffs stretched for al-

³ Franklin B. Sanborn, ed., *Familiar Letters of Henry David Thoreau*, 444 (Boston, 1894), and *The First and Last Journeys of Thoreau*, 2: 108 (Boston, 1905). Dunleith is now known as East Dubuque, Illinois.

⁴ Franklin B. Sanborn, *The Life of Henry David Thoreau*, 396 (Boston, 1917).

most a mile. Thoreau observed few boats, but he saw many huge lumber rafts floating quietly down the current. Passengers disembarked from the steamer by means of planks thrown toward the shore, and at the various landings men piled cords of wood on the deck.⁵ His description of a river town is particularly vivid:

The steamer approaching whistles, then strikes a bell about six times funereally, with a pause after the third bell; and then you see the whole village making haste to the landing,—commonly the raw, stony, or sandy shore,—the post-master with his mailbag, the passenger, and almost every dog and pig in the town. That is commonly one narrow street and back-yards, at an angle of about forty-five degrees with the horizon. If there is more flat space between the water and the bluff, it is almost sure to be occupied by a flourishing and larger town.

About the only larger town that impressed Thoreau was Prairie du Chien, which he reached on May 24. This he termed “the smartest town on the river,” and added that “it exports the most wheat of any town between St. Paul and St. Louis. There is wheat in sacks, great heaps of them, at Prairie du Chien,—covered at night, and all on the ground.”⁶ On the twenty-fifth he saw La Crosse and on May 26 he reached St. Paul. The capital city apparently did not impress Thoreau greatly, for after breakfasting at the principal hostelry, the American House, he took stage for St. Anthony. “At St. Paul,” he observed, “they dig their building stone out of the cellar; but it is apparently poor stuff.” He also noted that wood sold for from three to four dollars a cord.⁷

The following two weeks Thoreau spent in and around St. Anthony and Minneapolis, largely in the company of the

⁵ Sanborn, *Life of Thoreau*, 397.

⁶ *Journeys*, 2: 25, 27.

⁷ *Journeys*, 2: 28. The American House is advertised in the *Pioneer and Democrat* (St. Paul) for May 8, 1861, as follows: “This popular Hotel has long since passed the period when a ‘puff’ could add to its reputation. All that is necessary to satisfy one’s mind that Mr. Spencer ‘knows how to keep a hotel’ is to take a seat, at his table, or look into his sleeping rooms.”

state geologist, Dr. Charles L. Anderson. Together they roamed through the woods and around the shores of Lake Calhoun, botanizing and culling specimens of plant and animal life. Near Minnehaha Falls Thoreau saw the rose-breasted grosbeak eating the seeds of the slippery elm, and on the edge of Lake Harriet he stumbled across the nest of a wild pigeon. Of the flowers he found on Nicollet Island he made a long list in botanical Latin. The birds he was able to identify included among the more common species the pewee, redstart, catbird, goldfinch, oriole, tanager, horned lark, flicker, and killdeer. Rattlesnakes were visible in the small stretches of prairie. But chiefly appealing to the naturalist in Thoreau were the wild crab apple and the prairie gopher, or spermophile, both of which had hitherto been beyond the pale of his experience. Only after much diligent and careful search was Thoreau able to find the crab apple, but the gopher became very familiar to him. His description of the animal which was to become the symbol of the state of Minnesota is meticulously vivid:

Dirty grayish-white beneath, — above, dirty brown, with six dirty, tawny or clay-colored, very light-brown lines, alternating with broad, dark-brown lines or stripes (three times as broad), — the last having an interrupted line or square spot of the same color with the first-mentioned, running down their middle; reminding me of the rude pattern of some Indian work, — porcupine quills, "gopher-work" in baskets and pottery.⁸

It is obvious that Thoreau viewed the settlements along the upper Mississippi not as hamlets struggling to achieve fame and prosperity, but as happy hunting grounds for a naturalist and wanderer who had hitherto been limited to a different terrain with other flora and fauna. More interested in the wild pigeon, the basswood, and the hyssop than in the strange wild life of the primitive civilization that surrounded him, he practically ignored the traders, soldiers, pioneer settlers, and Indians of the region, and contented

⁸ Sanborn, *Life of Thoreau*, 402-409; *Journeys*, 2: 29-37.

himself with a persistent survey of that tangled region of woods and marshes which has since become a prominent residential district of Minneapolis. Yet despite his pre-occupation with the things of the naturalist, Thoreau did jot down a few comments on the white man's life around him, comments which reveal a pleasing sharpness of perception.

He noticed that both the Mississippi and the Minnesota rivers were high, and that at the angle of the two streams rose the "tawny or butterish" limestone walls of Fort Snelling. "The government buildings are handsome," he remarked. The University of Minnesota, he averred, "is set in the midst of . . . an oak opening, and it looks quite artificial." As for the towns at the Falls of St. Anthony, he noted that "St. Anthony was settled about 1847; Minneapolis in 1851. Its main streets are the unaltered prairie, with bur and other oaks left standing." Eighteen or nineteen years earlier, he declared, the mill occupied the main position; at the time of his visit Minneapolis boasted five drugstores.⁹

The one event of Thoreau's Minnesota sojourn, however, which compelled him to observe carefully the people and the country, since it deprived him of the opportunity to ramble in the woods, was a trip up the Minnesota River to the Redwood agency, the scene of a payment of annuities to the Sioux Indians. This trip was a gala affair in the annals of the frontier communities, long prepared for and invested with much factitious brilliance. For days before the departure of the boats for the agency, the local papers carried announcements in rather florid terms. On June 12, 1861, the *Pioneer and Democrat* of St. Paul informed its readers that on the following Monday an excursion up the river would take place and that several thousand Indians would be assembled at the agency. "We would inform strangers who

⁹ *Journeys*, 2: 32, 37, 41, 42.

may be amongst us that this excursion will give them a better opportunity of seeing wild, frontier life, and the sports of the red men than they could otherwise have. There will doubtless be a large attendance from this city." And four days later the same paper declared with a bold flourish: "HO! FOR THE PAYMENT!—Remember that the Frank Steele and Favorite leave for Red Wood, at 4 o'clock, on Monday afternoon, accompanied with the Great Western Band, and a bevy of beautiful ladies and brave men." But perhaps the peak of the enthusiasm was reached by a writer in the Minneapolis *State Atlas* of July 3, who described the party on the "Frank Steele":

We had a very choice and select company, among whom were Gov. and Mrs. Ramsey . . . Horace Mann, Jun., son of the lamented statesman, Samuel May, Esq., Henry D. Thoreau, Esq. the celebrated abolitionist, &c.—there being about 25 or 30 ladies. It is very rarely that an excursion party is assembled combining such a degree of sociability, refinement, intelligence and culture as this. It was, in fact, composed mainly of the *creme de la creme*—the rich yellow skim from the mottled milk of frontier society. In all the trip, I heard hardly one profane or boisterous word, and did not see one rude loafer, nor one tippy man.

This quotation is of special importance since, so far as the writer knows, it is the only direct reference to Thoreau made by the Minnesota press. With this solitary exception, the journalists of St. Paul, St. Anthony, and Minneapolis were apparently ignorant of the fact that a "celebrated abolitionist" was in their midst.

On June 17 the "Frank Steele" started up the Minnesota River for the Redwood agency, carrying Governor Ramsey, Thoreau, the Indian agents, and a German band from St. Paul, also "a small cannon for salutes, and the money for the Indians (ay, and the gamblers, it was said, who were to bring it back in another boat)."¹⁰ Thoreau's comments on the trip are of special interest today since they indicate vividly the importance and kind of navigation that

¹⁰ Thoreau, *Familiar Letters*, 451.

was common on the Minnesota when drouth had not shrunk the river to a pitiful skeleton of its earlier magnitude; and they also reveal the quickness of an eye which had hitherto been focused largely on the streams of New England. The Minnesota River, Thoreau said in a letter to Frank Sanborn, "flows through a very fertile country, destined to be famous for its wheat; but it is a remarkably winding stream, so that Redwood is only half as far from its mouth by land as by water." He observed that in the whole distance covered by the boat there was not a straight reach of water a mile in length; as a consequence, "the boat was steadily turning this way or that." At some of the bends, indeed, it was customary for the passengers to alight and walk over the intervening land, as more than one isthmus measured only a stone's throw in width but two or three miles around.¹¹

To one accustomed to piloting an Indian canoe along Maine rivers or rowing and drifting along the lazy Muskettaquit, the navigation practiced on the Minnesota River was strange indeed. The "Frank Steele" was a large boat, a hundred and sixty feet long, and the water was lower than normal. "In making a short turn," Thoreau said, "we repeatedly and designedly ran square into the steep and soft bank, taking in a cart-load of earth,—this being more effectual than the rudder to fetch us about again; or the deeper water was so narrow and close to the shore, that we were obliged to run into and break down at least fifty trees which overhung the water, when we did not cut them off, repeatedly losing a part of our outworks, though the most exposed had been taken in." Frequently the boat grounded, and in such a predicament a windlass and cable would be fastened to a convenient tree. But before the vessel was straightened out once more upon its course, it often swung sideways and completely blocked the stream. "It was one consolation to know that in such a case we were all the while

¹¹ Thoreau, *Familiar Letters*, 448.

damming the river, and so raising it." Snags and sawyers were so numerous that the hull of the boat scraping against them made a constant and peculiar music, and on one occasion the steamer collided with a large rock. But as long as the boiler did its work nothing serious could happen. Thoreau saw too that the singular navigableness of the Minnesota River was due to its very crookedness. "Ditch it straight, and it would not only be very swift, but would soon run out." At some seasons of the year, he learned, navigation was practicable as far as Big Stone Lake, and in times of high water steamers might even pass into the Red River.¹²

Thoreau estimated the distance by water up the "long and crooked river" from St. Paul to the Redwood agency as between two hundred and fifty and three hundred miles, whereas the proverbial crow need not fly more than a hundred and twenty miles between these points. En route he observed many forms of bird and animal life, noting especially the wild pigeon in enormous flocks, swallows, kingfishers, and jays, turkey buzzards and herons, ducks and turtles. By the evening of the second day, the boat had reached Fort Ridgely, and by nine o'clock on the morning of June 20 it docked at the agency. The last settlement Thoreau saw before reaching Redwood was New Ulm, which consisted largely of Germans. "We left them a hundred barrels of salt, which will be worth something more when the water is lowest, than at present."¹³

At the Redwood agency, Thoreau found a mere Indian village, with a store and a few houses thrown in for good measure. Although it was barely on the edge of the plains, he reported that he walked three miles and could see no tree on the horizon. He was told that buffaloes were feeding some thirty miles away, yet he failed to see any—a

¹² Thoreau, *Familiar Letters*, 449.

¹³ *Journeys*, 2: 46-53; Sanborn, *Life of Thoreau*, 410-412; Thoreau, *Familiar Letters*, 451.

failure which must have been one of the disappointments of his trip. If one is to judge by the paucity of comment, the Indian council, ostensibly the reason for the excursion, failed to impress Thoreau. This is the more surprising when one recalls the eagerness with which he studied relics of the red man around Concord, as well as his interest in the Indian lore of the Maine woods. But it must be remembered that he was a sick man and was probably unable to indulge all his natural inclinations. At any rate, he heard the Sioux eloquence, candidly observing that in comparison with that of the white man it had the advantage of truth and earnestness, and he saw the principal chief, Little Crow. Furthermore, he noted the apparent restlessness of the Indians and attributed it to the cavalier treatment accorded them by the whites. "They were quite dissatisfied with the white man's treatment of them, and probably have reason to be so." Thoreau's observation gains added significance when one recalls that the Sioux Outbreak of August, 1862, occurred little more than a year after the naturalist's visit. His sharpness of perception and his suggestion that there was something deeper than the usual unrest among the Sioux seem almost prophetic today. After the ceremonies were concluded the Indians performed a dance, about which Thoreau, beyond expressing a mild interest, says little. About thirty dancers participated, he noted, "and twelve musicians with drums; others struck their arrows against their bows. Some dancers blew flutes and kept good time, moving their feet or their shoulders, — sometimes one, sometimes both. They wore no shirts."¹⁴ One cannot help feeling that Thoreau looked upon the dance as an excrescence, that he would have much preferred seeing the Sioux in the intimacy of village and wigwam life. Men on dress parade never appealed to the philosopher of simplicity. Yet the western Indians as a whole failed to impress Thoreau as did the red

¹⁴ *Journeys*, 2: 54-56; Thoreau, *Familiar Letters*, 452; Sanborn, *Life of Thoreau*, 412.

men of Maine and eastern Canada. He was more interested in itemizing in botanical nomenclature the flowers and plants that he found around Redwood than in dissecting the peculiarities of the followers of Little Crow.

Thoreau remained at the agency only one day. On the night of June 20 the "Frank Steele" lay halfway between Redwood and Fort Ridgely, and it paused half of the following night some fifteen miles above Mankato. "Our boat had pushed over a tree," Thoreau recorded in his journal, "and disturbed the bats, which were beaten out. We take in a cartload of earth, then swing round the river-bars, and pull off by the capstan." June 23 found him at Red Wing, safely back from his five hundred mile cruise deep into Indian country—a week's excursion for which the round-trip fare was ten dollars.¹⁵

At Red Wing Thoreau wrote a long letter to Frank Sanborn, his friend and biographer, detailing his adventures briefly and indicating his desire to return to Concord. He informed Sanborn that he was reading his mail on top of the great isolated bluff that overlooks the valley and that remains the most conspicuous feature of the landscape at Red Wing today. The height of the bluff he estimated at four hundred and fifty feet and its length at half a mile. "The top, as you know," he wrote, "rises to the general level of the surrounding country, the river having eaten out so much. Yet the valley just above and below this (we are at the head of Lake Pepin) must be three or four miles wide." Like many travelers before and since, Thoreau was deeply impressed by the magnitude of the Mississippi River, which he termed "the grand feature hereabouts." He thought that too much could not be said about its grandeur and beauty. He was particularly impressed by the physical dimensions of the stream, as well as by its comparative freedom from rapids. "Steamers go up to the

¹⁵ *Journeys*, 2: 58, 119.

Sauk Rapids," he remarked, "above the Falls, near a hundred miles farther, and then you are fairly in the pinewoods and lumbering country. Thus it flows from the pine to the palm." Finally, Thoreau, all his life a woodsman and a surveyor, was impressed by the forests of the trans-Mississippi country, and he saw clearly that the early prosperity of towns like St. Anthony and Minneapolis was due to the lumber industry. Talking, as was his wont, with lumberjacks and timber cruisers, he came across many Maine men who had migrated westward and who liked to compare the streams and forests of Minnesota with those of their homeland. One woodsman told Thoreau that the Mississippi and its tributaries made the floating of logs relatively easy, but the timber was knottier than that in Maine.¹⁶

When Thoreau and Mann left Concord they intended to be away three months, but time palled, and the end of June found the travelers ready to resume their homeward trip. On the twenty-sixth the two left Red Wing on the "War Eagle" for Prairie du Chien, whence they took the train to Milwaukee. June 30 found them at Mackinac, where they lodged at the Mackinaw House and rested for five days. They returned to Concord via Toronto, Ogdensburg, Vermont, and New Hampshire.¹⁷

One can only conjecture the reason for this abbreviation of the stay in the West. Thoreau returned to Concord in the middle of July, 1861, somewhat improved in health but still far from well. In a letter to Daniel Ricketson he alluded to the Minnesota trip but complained that his cough continued and intimated that he might have to resort to travel again.¹⁸ Possibly he was homesick, weary of strange scenes and unfamiliar topography, he who preferred Concord to all the world. The avidity with which he read letters from home would suggest such a conclusion. The

¹⁶ Thoreau, *Familiar Letters*, 446-448.

¹⁷ Marble, *Thoreau*, 174; Sanborn, *Life of Thoreau*, 415.

¹⁸ Thoreau, *Familiar Letters*, 455.

journey to Minnesota, an excursion of some thirty-five hundred miles, was the longest that Thoreau had ever made, and it is probable that he tired of constant travel by train and boat; he would have preferred his own legs as a means of locomotion. Possibly also he realized that there was no cure for him, and he desired to spend his final lingering days in the setting endeared to him by nature and man. In any event, he never left home again. In the ensuing winter the disease made terrifying inroads upon a weakening constitution, and on May 6, 1862, he died.

Thoreau's visit to Minnesota is of significance only when one considers what materials it might have afforded him for future books. Unfortunately there are few literary echoes of his penetration into the trans-Mississippi frontier settlements. But even his affliction with an incurable illness could not prevent him from taking pleasure in familiarizing himself with flora and fauna which did not flourish in his native New England. And there is the testimony of Sanborn that despite Thoreau's apparent apathy toward the habits and environment of a strange race of red men, one of the chief disappointments of his life was that he did not live to include his Minnesota notes on the Sioux in a volume dealing with the American Indian. Furthermore, it is known that Thoreau read with great interest not only the accounts of early travelers in Minnesota, but the publications of the Minnesota Historical Society as well.¹⁹ Even in sickness, his comments suggest an intelligence of observation and a sharpness of judgment which few men of the time were able to focus on a pioneer environment. It is indeed a heavy loss that Thoreau did not live to do for the woods of Minnesota and the land of the Sioux what he had already done for Concord and for Maine.

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¹⁹ *Journeys*, 1: xxxvi, 2: 68-72.



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