

# MINNESOTA HISTORY

---

VOLUME 21

SEPTEMBER, 1940

NUMBER 3

---

## ROADS AND THE SETTLEMENT OF MINNESOTA

IN THE STORY of settlement in America, the difficulty of travel in newly opened areas is a constantly recurring theme. As soon as the settlers of America moved inland from the coastal waters, their troubles began, for there were few roads, and it was no easy task to build them. Yet, the growth of the American nation hinged upon roads, for, until they were built and communication was improved, settlement was retarded. The problem of road building had to be faced anew by each generation of pioneers on the westward march, and by the time Minnesota was reached, the nation had almost a hundred and fifty years of experience in pioneering and road making.

At the time of the organization of Minnesota Territory in 1849, there were fewer than five thousand white persons living in the whole area. Less than a decade later—in 1858—the territory became a state with an estimated population of more than a hundred and fifty thousand. Each decade thereafter showed an astounding increase in population until, at the close of the nineteenth century, when the frontier had all but vanished, the state had a population of more than a million and three-quarters. In 1849, the population centers of Minnesota were at St. Paul, St. Anthony, and Stillwater. Together they had fewer than two thousand inhabitants, but that was more than forty per cent of the people then living in Minnesota. In 1860 the same communities had a combined population of well over eighteen thousand—only about ten per cent of the total state popu-

lation. Half a dozen other settlements were large enough to be called cities, but Minnesota was decidedly a rural state, and rural it was to remain for almost half a century. It was the lure of free or cheap land, presenting an opportunity to gain prosperity or at least a livelihood, which drew people to the frontier.<sup>1</sup>

In the settlement of Minnesota, the rivers played a part of overwhelming importance. No one can gainsay the influence of the Mississippi in that drama, for it was the one artery of travel to the new territory. Had it not been for the river steamboat, settlement in Minnesota would have consisted only of a slow advance of the frontiers from the East and the South.

At the opening of the territorial period, there was an island of settlement in a restricted area at the head of navigation on the Mississippi River. This area was separated from settlements in Wisconsin, Illinois, and Iowa by a wilderness more than a hundred miles in width, penetrated by neither road nor railroad. Only the Mississippi River broke the barrier, and it seemed to fill all communication needs for the tiny settlements about Fort Snelling. From this center, as well as from the older communities on the frontiers of Iowa and Wisconsin, settlement in Minnesota spread out, following navigable rivers, north, south, and west—the Mississippi, the St. Croix, and the Minnesota. Since the lands along the rivers were the most accessible, they usually were the first to be taken up, although, from the agricultural standpoint, they often were inferior to those farther removed from navigable streams.<sup>2</sup> The settlers

<sup>1</sup> William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1: 352; 2: 1, 64; 3: 251 (St. Paul, 1921, 1924, 1926). Included in the figure for 1860 is the population of Minneapolis. The present article is based upon an extended study of the "Development of the Minnesota Road System," completed in 1938. A copy is preserved in the manuscript division of the Minnesota Historical Society.

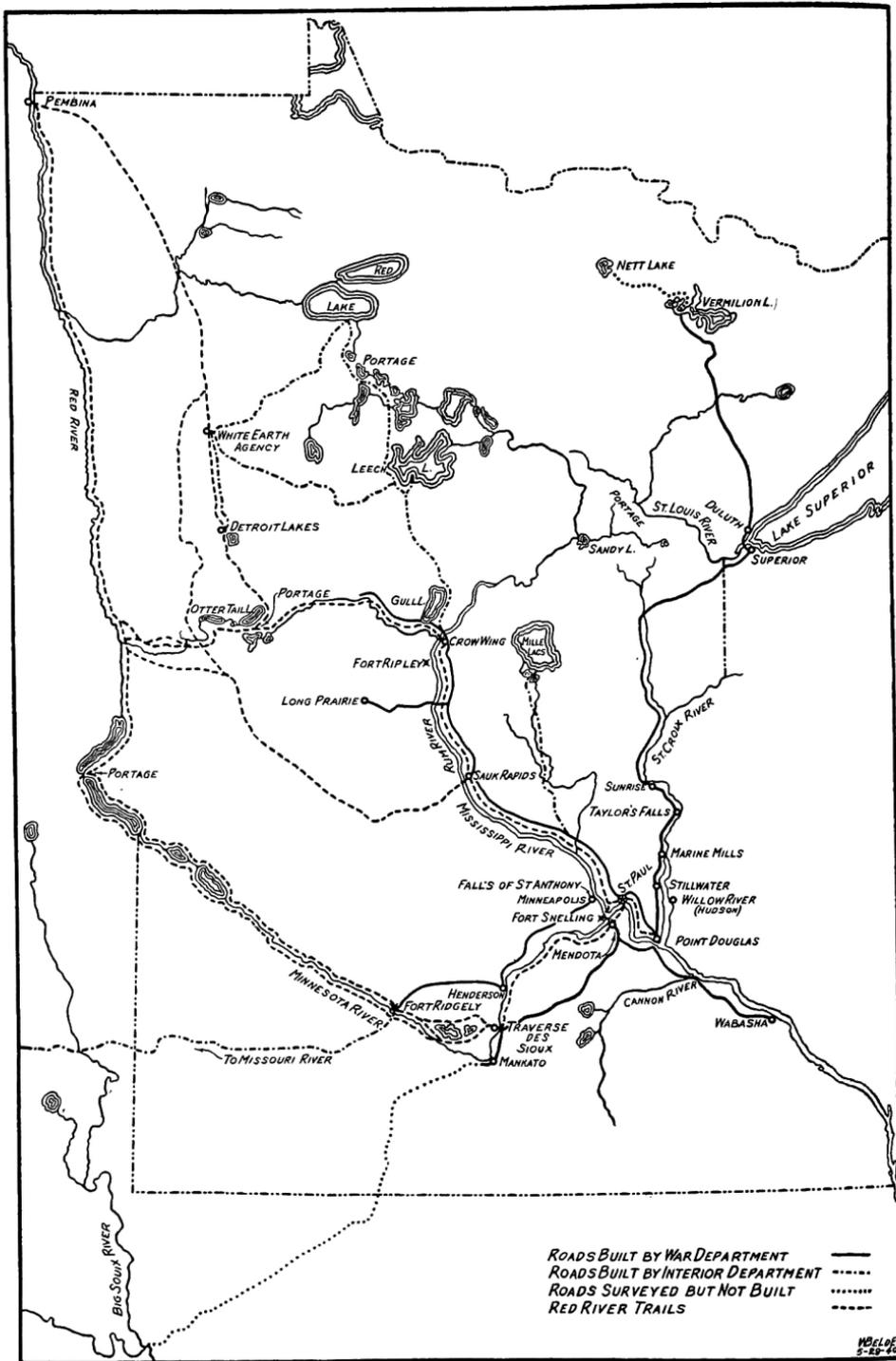
<sup>2</sup> "There is probably not a farm-house, or cabin of a white man, at a distance of ten miles from navigable water, in the whole Territory," reads a statement in the *St. Anthony Express* for January 28, 1854.

were eager to get at the lands in the interior, but the absence of roads was a formidable obstacle.

No means of travel by land from Wisconsin or Iowa to the Minnesota country were open before the organization of the territory. Though the Mississippi River was closed by ice during four or five months of each season, there were few complaints, for the few frontiersmen who lived in Minnesota were self-contained, accustomed to winter's isolation. With the arrival of new settlers, however, the need for a route to the outside country began to make itself felt, for the newcomers, less inured to the hardships of the frontier, complained of the lack during the winter of mail service, of supplies, and of the simple necessities to which they were accustomed in older communities. By the time the wave of immigration was well under way in 1849, they had succeeded in opening a rough trail from the Minnesota country along the east bank of the Mississippi through Wisconsin to Prairie du Chien and communities to the south. The route was too rough for anything but winter travel, however, and the lack of houses along the way made it a hazardous road during that bitter season.<sup>3</sup>

Within the territory itself, there were faint outlines of a communication system. The St. Croix Valley had been open for settlement since 1837, and, although the population was sparse, a few roads had been built there before Minnesota Territory was organized. Rough woods trails led from Mendota and St. Paul to Stillwater, from Mendota to Prescott, and along the west shore of Lake St. Croix to Marine and the lumber camps in the valley of the Sunrise River. Fort Snelling had been garrisoned constantly since 1819, and in the ensuing thirty years the soldiers had opened short trails to such important near-by points as the Falls of St. Anthony, Lake Calhoun, and Lake Harriet.

<sup>3</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. The Minnesota Historical Society has a copy.



FEDERAL ROADS AND RED RIVER TRAILS

Most important of the routes of travel in Minnesota, however, were the great wilderness roads laid out during the first half of the nineteenth century by the Red River traders, who hauled supplies and furs between Mendota and St. Paul in the south and Pembina and the Red River settlements to the north. Three main routes of travel connected these two centers of population. One—the first to be opened—led from Pembina up the west side of the Red River to Lake Traverse, down the Minnesota Valley from Big Stone Lake to Traverse des Sioux, and, finally, to Mendota. A second route, laid out during the 1840's, turned east from the Red River at the point where it is joined by the Bois des Sioux, flowing north from Lake Traverse, and, following the Sauk River Valley, crossed the Mississippi near the modern city of Sauk Rapids. The trail then followed the east bank of the river to St. Paul. A third route extended in a southeasterly direction from Pembina to the vicinity of present-day Thief River Falls. There it turned southward and followed the sandy beaches left by glacial Lake Agassiz to the vicinity of Detroit Lake. From there it wound its way through the lake region about Otter Tail Lake and down the valleys of the Leaf and Crow Wing rivers to the Mississippi. The caravans crossed the river by ferry, and then the route continued along the east bank of the river to St. Cloud, where it joined the Sauk Valley trail. A cut-off trail, extending from a point on the Sauk Valley trail near Elbow Lake to the Crow Wing route above Detroit Lake, made it possible for the caravans on either route to continue their journey on the other without great hardship or loss of time.<sup>4</sup>

This rudimentary system of roads did not solve the communication problems of the frontier, for the trails did not

<sup>4</sup>Grace Lee Nute, "The Red River Trails," *ante*, 6:278-282. The Red River trails have been mapped in detail by WPA draftsmen working under the direction of Mr. Willoughby M. Babcock, curator of the museum of the Minnesota Historical Society. The maps are in the possession of the society.

lead to the lands of greatest agricultural promise. Some settlers reached the St. Croix Valley, it is true, over roads built before 1849, but that area was small and the lands were not of the finest quality. The Red River trails followed the valleys of the Mississippi, Minnesota, and Red rivers, all three of which shortly were found to be navigable by small steamboats. From the standpoint of access to the agricultural interior, therefore, the Red River trails did little to help the settlers.

Minnesota was opened for settlement at a period in American history when the internal improvement program of the government was at its height. In the frontier states this program was an immense pork barrel into which all might dip. The pioneers, therefore, asked themselves why Minnesota should not benefit from the bounty of the government. If other states could obtain grants for the construction of canals and military roads, why could not Minnesota receive appropriations for roads, which were badly needed not only by private citizens but by the government itself? When Henry Hastings Sibley went to Washington in the fall of 1848 as the representative of Wisconsin Territory, his constituents expected him to urge Congress to appropriate funds for a system of roads in the new territory which, it was hoped, would be organized that session. One of his friends wrote to him shortly after he reached Washington that "the interests of the country require that something should be done. And at the present time there is not sufficient number of settlers . . . to effect anything by their own labor."<sup>5</sup>

Sibley was unable to persuade Congress to appropriate funds for roads in Minnesota during the first session he was in Washington. When he returned in the fall of 1849,

<sup>5</sup> Henry L. Moss to Sibley, November 20, 1848; Orange Walker to Sibley, November 7, 1848, Sibley Papers, in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society. Both letters refer to petitions for roads that were being prepared by residents of Stillwater and were shortly to be forwarded to Washington.

however, he took with him memorials from the territorial legislature praying for appropriations for roads. Pressure by the people on the frontier, Sibley's own persuasiveness, and the substantial support he received from western Senators and Congressmen won the initial appropriation for government roads in Minnesota. The amount was not large — it was only forty thousand dollars — but it was the first in a long series of appropriations for roads and bridges in Minnesota which eventually reached the high total of about half a million dollars.<sup>6</sup>

The government roads formed a network over the whole area of Minnesota, centering in the region about the head of navigation on the Mississippi and spreading out like the spokes of a wheel. One road extended northward through the St. Croix Valley toward Lake Superior, and eventually connected that inland sea with the navigable waters of the Mississippi River. A second followed the western bank of the Mississippi southward to the foot of Lake Pepin, a guarantee of contact between St. Paul and spring traffic on the Mississippi below that ice-locked lake. A third road followed the Minnesota Valley southwestward to the great bend of the river, where Mankato now stands, then led across country in the direction of Council Bluffs. A fourth followed the Mississippi northward as far as the new fort — first called Fort Gaines but afterward renamed Fort Ripley — near the mouth of the Crow Wing River. Roads of lesser importance from the standpoint of the immediate needs of the territory served to bind the scattered Indian agencies of Minnesota to the center of government.

These roads did not serve the purpose desired by Minnesotans, although they improved existing transportation facilities. They supplemented the navigable rivers, which were

<sup>6</sup> *Laws*, 1849, p. 165, 169, 172, 173; *Statutes at Large*, 9:439; *Statement of Appropriations and Expenditures for Public Buildings, Rivers and Harbors, Forts, Arsenals, Armories, and Other Public Works, from March 4, 1789, to June 30, 1882*, 337 (47 Congress, 1 session, *Senate Executive Documents*, no. 196 — serial 1992).

usually icebound four or five months every winter, and were sometimes too low for navigation in the summer. The new roads guaranteed a regular flow of supplies, mail, and passengers, and they were so planned that they facilitated the protection of the frontier—the real justification for their construction—but in themselves they did not lead the people to the land. Hard-headed Congressmen were not responsive to that need of the frontier.

Even the most optimistic advocates of an extensive program of road building at the expense of the federal government realized, however, that most of the burden of constructing roads must rest upon the shoulders of the people themselves. They were content to have the federal government mark out the main lines of the system and to use their energies for building the trails to the land itself—an undertaking that taxed the financial resources of the frontier. Thus the first territorial legislature enacted legislation designed to open roads through wilderness country in advance of settlement or contemporaneously with the occupation of the land, and succeeding legislatures followed suit.<sup>7</sup>

At first road building was complicated by the fact that the land west of the Mississippi still was Indian country, although numerous squatters had moved onto it. Until the treaties of 1851 were negotiated no attempt was made to open roads in this great area. The legislature of 1852, however, confident that the treaties would be ratified and the lands opened to settlement, directed that a ferry be established across the Mississippi at Reads Landing and authorized the opening of a road westward from that point to the Minnesota River, thus connecting the new Minnesota country with Wisconsin. Not to be outdone by the squatters at Reads Landing, the ambitious members of the Rollingsstone colony, near the present site of Winona, and the

<sup>7</sup> *Laws*, 1849, p. 83.

settlers at "Bonnell's Landing, opposite Prairie La Crosse," opened their own roads into the interior toward the Minnesota River. The settlers at Traverse des Sioux, weary of delay in the construction of a military road from Mendota up the Minnesota Valley, built the Dodd Road from their community to St. Paul in 1853. Another road was opened from Red Wing to the Minnesota River in the summer of 1854.<sup>8</sup>

Great as was the reliance of the frontier on the steamboat, the pioneers were not content with the river and the unsatisfactory Wisconsin road as their sole means of contact with settlements downstream. They began to agitate for an all-Minnesota route to Dubuque and the settlements in northern Iowa. By 1854 the movement had progressed enough so that two roads were ordered laid out. One of them was to extend from Reads Landing to the Iowa line—a continuation of the military road along the Mississippi. The other was to follow an old cart trail of fur trade days from Mendota to Faribault, and thence southward by way of the valleys of the Straight and Cedar rivers to the Iowa line. A mail route over one of these roads was promised, but the contractor for the mail decided instead to open a road of his own, which passed through the Minnesota wilderness midway between the two. It was not until the following year, however, that the legislature legalized the opening of the latter road, and in the meantime it had become a well-traveled thoroughfare with thriving settlements, such as Rochester, along its route.<sup>9</sup> Settlers at Mankato opened a road from their community to Fort Dodge about the same time, thus making still another route to the land

<sup>8</sup> *Laws*, 1852, p. 54, 57; 1854, p. 45, 46; *Minnesota Democrat* (St. Paul), June 30, July 28, October 20, 1852; July 6, 13, 20, 1853; April 5, 1854; *Minnesota Pioneer* (St. Paul), December 9, 1852; *Weekly Minnesotian* (St. Paul), July 17, 1852; *Daily Minnesotian* (St. Paul), July 25, 1854.

<sup>9</sup> *Laws*, 1854, p. 64, 69; 1855, p. 142; *Democrat*, July 12, 19, 1854; *Daily Minnesotian*, June 1, July 18, 1854.

available for settlers. North of the Minnesota River, roads were opened through the dense forests of the Lake Minnetonka region from the Falls of St. Anthony to Henderson, and thence west to Fort Ridgely, to which point roads also were pushed out from Mankato and Traverse des Sioux on the Minnesota River. To aid settlers on the west bank of the Mississippi River, a road was built from Minneapolis to Sauk Rapids, and, as the demands of the settlers increased, a whole network of roads materialized in the Big Woods region between the upper Mississippi and Minnesota rivers.<sup>10</sup>

The opening of the Sault Ste. Marie canal in 1855 established the importance of the Great Lakes in the scheme of communication in Minnesota and assured the growth of the settlements at the head of Lake Superior. By the end of the territorial period, that region was regarded as a primary point to which roads must be opened. Construction of the military road authorized by Congress was proceeding too slowly to suit the impatient frontiersmen, who opened roads of their own between Lake Superior and St. Paul. As settlement advanced along the upper Mississippi to Little Falls and Crow Wing, roads were explored from these points and St. Cloud around the northern end of Mille Lacs in the direction of Lake Superior. As early as 1856 a stage line was in operation between Lake Superior and St. Paul, and, during the closing years of the decade, freight and supplies were hauled in considerable volume over a road from Superior to Little Falls and St. Cloud.<sup>11</sup>

The Red River, no stranger to American travelers, also beckoned to frontier businessmen. In the winter of 1858, Anson Northup hauled a little steamboat from the Missis-

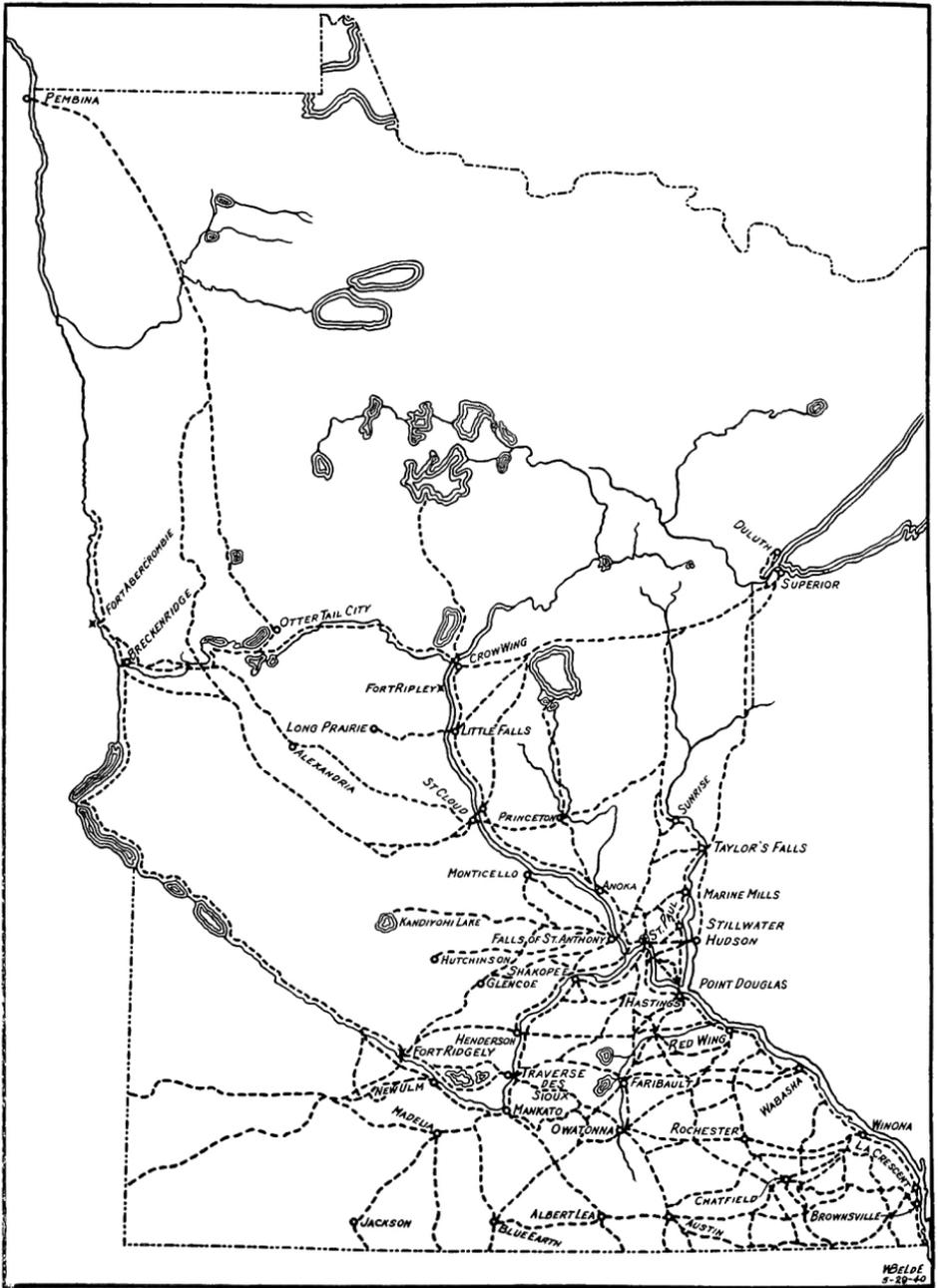
<sup>10</sup> *Democrat*, November 17, 1852; April 5, 1854; *Pioneer*, June 9, August 18, 25, December 1, 1853; *Laws*, 1854, p. 68.

<sup>11</sup> *Laws*, 1853, p. 56; 1854, p. 43; 1855, p. 51; *St. Anthony Express*, December 1, 1855; *Daily Pioneer and Democrat* (St. Paul), January 5, 22, June 4, November 17, 1856; George H. Primmer, "Pioneer Roads Centering at Duluth," *ante*, 16: 282-288, 293.

sippi River at Crow Wing across country on sleds to the Red River. In the spring of 1859 it was launched on this stream and christened the "Anson Northup," thereby inaugurating a romantic era of steamboating on that narrow, treacherous stream, which brought Pembina and Fort Garry close to the American market. To complete the connection between the Red River country and the Minnesota settlements, a stage company, early in the summer of 1859, opened a road through the woods from St. Cloud, along the route of the Sauk Valley trail, to Fort Abercrombie, the new frontier fort on the Red River. In the closing days of the decade, the stockaded stage stations along the line of the road were developing into such communities as Sauk Centre, Alexandria, Brandon, and Elbow Lake.<sup>12</sup>

Between 1858 and 1865, the rate of settlement in Minnesota lagged considerably behind that maintained during the earlier years. First among the basic causes of this situation was the panic of 1857. Its effects were felt in Minnesota late in the fall, and from that time until the end of 1859 the state was in the grip of a severe financial depression. Scores of frontier business ventures, based more on optimism than on money, failed in an almost incredibly short time. Farmers who had purchased their lands on credit saw their mortgages foreclosed and their homes sold over their heads. Real-estate speculators, relying upon a rising land market not only for profit, but for their very livelihood, found that they held title to worthless land. Throughout the state men sold out, or were sold out, and a migration from the state began. Had it not been for the accidental discovery that there was a lively market for the roots of the ginseng plant, which grew in abundance in the forests of southern Minnesota, the hardships might have become so severe as

<sup>12</sup>Arthur J. Larsen, "The Northwestern Express and Transportation Company," in *North Dakota Historical Quarterly*, 6:47 (October, 1931); Russell Blakeley, "Opening of the Red River of the North to Commerce and Civilization," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 8:48.



THE MINNESOTA ROAD SYSTEM OF 1860

WELDE  
5-29-60

to depopulate entire districts. As it was, the frontier line stood still, or, in places, even moved back. When the gloom lifted, Minnesota had first to take up the slack in its frontier line before it could hope to advance farther west.

A second basic cause for the slackening rate of settlement was the wars in which the nation and the state became involved between 1861 and 1865. With the outbreak of the Civil War, immigration into the United States from Europe almost stopped. Inasmuch as a large proportion of the immigrants belonged to the agricultural class, which naturally sought the cheap lands of the frontier, the effect upon Minnesota settlement was immediate and appreciable. Furthermore, the outbreak of the war reduced the stream of immigration into Minnesota from the East. In August, 1862, the Sioux Indians, who still lived in considerable numbers on a reservation along the Minnesota River, went on a rampage, and the ensuing Indian war, lasting for almost three years, proved to be a most severe setback to the development of the state. The unrest engendered in the minds of settlers, both on the frontier and in well-settled areas, resulted in a mass emigration from the threatened areas. Whatever settlement there was during this period took place in the older sections of the state, where there was little danger of Indian attack. Not until the Indian danger was removed was settlement on the frontier restored to normalcy.

There are indications, however, that, even without these calamities, the rate of settlement in Minnesota would have slowed down. The steamboat was important in the economic life of the state, because it provided a means of transporting supplies at low cost. It was not only isolation which prevented inland communities from growing as rapidly as those on navigable streams. Transportation by land under the best of conditions was expensive, and the poorly constructed roads of the frontier reduced pitifully the load that could be hauled on wagons or sleighs, thereby still further

increasing the cost of transportation. It was possible to haul produce or goods short distances by team for a profit, but the longer the distance to be traveled, the greater were the charges for transportation that had to be added to the cost. Eventually, such charges reached a point where people could no longer afford to buy the goods.

Such a condition prevailed on the fringes of the frontier in Minnesota at the end of the fifties. It was not unheard of, for example, for farmers to make trips of a hundred and fifty miles to such markets as Winona to dispose of their surplus wheat, and businessmen—even those of a bustling center like Mankato—sometimes had to freight their goods from Winona, especially when drought restricted navigation on the smaller streams. In 1861 it was estimated that the average Minnesota wheat farmer lived nearly eighty miles from a town on a navigable stream. During the season of grain buying, the congestion of grain wagons at the market centers was so great that the farmers frequently had to wait in line for two or three days before they could unload. Farmers who had to travel great distances realized that there was no profit in wheat growing at current prices. It was only a desperate need for cash which induced them to make the journey at all.<sup>18</sup>

The frontier country was united in a desire to find a cure for the barrier of distance which discouraged settlement in the rich but isolated western lands. Without navigable rivers, the one practicable means of making such lands accessible was the construction of railroads. The idea of building railroads was no new one in Minnesota, for almost as soon as the territory was organized, railroad agitation began. At one time it was suggested that rails be laid on the ice of the Mississippi River so that trains might furnish

<sup>18</sup> Henrietta M. Larson, *The Wheat Market and the Farmer in Minnesota, 1858-1900*, 18-25 (New York, 1926); Arthur J. Larsen, ed., *Crusader and Feminist, Letters of Jane Grey Swisshelm, 1858-1865*, 142 (St. Paul, 1934).

communication during the months when winter cut off the territory from the rest of the nation. That scheme never materialized, but the dream of railroads was kept alive throughout the territorial period. It was not until 1862, however, that the railroad came to the aid of the pioneers in their conquest of the frontier. That summer ten miles of track were laid between St. Paul and St. Anthony on the line of the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad. By 1865 trains were operating over two hundred and ten miles of trackage in the state. Two years later a railroad was completed to the Iowa line, making possible an all-rail connection to Chicago. By 1867 a railroad constructed westward from Winona had reached Waseca. Another, starting at Mendota and following the Minnesota River, had reached Le Sueur by 1868. From St. Paul and St. Anthony a branch line of the St. Paul and Pacific reached St. Cloud in 1866, and the construction of the main line westward from Minneapolis toward the Red River Valley began the following year. It was completed in 1871. Northward from St. Paul a railroad was built to Duluth, and the opening of this road in 1870 made feasible the construction of a great railroad westward from Duluth—the Northern Pacific. By 1872, the road was completed to the Red River at Moorhead. So rapidly did the railroad system develop that by the end of 1872 there were almost two thousand miles of road in operation in the state. By the end of the decade the railroad mileage had increased to more than three thousand, and by the end of the century that figure had more than doubled.<sup>14</sup>

The construction of railroads hastened the occupation of the frontier, for, in relation to the unsettled interior, towns along railroads assumed a position similar to that which

<sup>14</sup> Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2: 328–330; message of Governor William R. Marshall, January 10, 1868, in *Minnesota, Executive Documents*, 1867, p. 24; Railroad Commissioner, *Reports*, 1872, p. 42; Railroad and Warehouse Commission, *Reports*, 1900, p. 3. For a detailed discussion of early railroad agitation in Minnesota, see Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1: 327–350; 2: 37–58.

river towns had held in an earlier period. Then the steamboat took settlers and supplies to the frontier. Later, when the frontier had advanced beyond the reach of steamboats, the railroads extended to, and sometimes beyond, the frontier, and the lands which had been inaccessible were readily reached by land-hungry settlers. On this new frontier, or series of frontiers, the processes of the advance of settlement were the same as those enacted during the territorial period. Wherever the frontier was located, roads had to be opened before the wilderness could be conquered. The story of the development of the trails about such a community as Alexandria during the late 1860's and early 1870's is essentially the same as the record of road building in southeastern Minnesota during the 1850's, and it was repeated in the regions farther west during the 1870's and 1880's. When the last frontier areas in northern Minnesota were settled at the close of the nineteenth century, the struggles which the pioneers went through to open roads were similar to those experienced by their earlier counterparts. In all instances the settlers were striving to open routes to markets—whether on rivers or railroads.

In 1866 St. Cloud was the northern terminus of the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad and the center for a large forwarding and freighting business serving numerous small communities to the north and west. The railroads took supplies to St. Cloud, where they were reloaded into wagons and hauled over rough wagon roads into the interior. Thus, the inland communities were brought closer to civilization, and, with the establishment of new wagon roads which opened wide areas of agricultural lands to settlement, immigrants thronged in. For a hundred miles or more, merchants and businessmen turned to St. Cloud as the source for their supplies.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *St. Cloud Democrat*, August 23, 1866; *St. Cloud Journal*, September 13, 27, 1866; September 5, 1867; May 28, 1868; *Sauk Centre Herald*, September 17, 1868.

Alexandria was located ninety miles from St. Cloud on the crooked stage road to Fort Abercrombie. The citizens of Alexandria knew that, if plans materialized, a railroad would eventually be built through their community, but until that time arrived they were dependent upon wagon roads. As a consequence, they were deeply interested in the improvement of their road to St. Cloud. They were well aware that the cost of transporting goods by team as compared with rail was excessive. They estimated, for example, that it cost merchants \$1.25 to transport a hundred pounds of freight by team from St. Cloud to Alexandria — three times the cost of transportation by rail. In 1868 the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad Company began to build its main line west from Minneapolis over a route somewhat south of Alexandria. In October, 1870, the main line reached Benson, only forty-eight miles from Alexandria. Then the ambitious citizens of Alexandria turned away from St. Cloud. Almost a year earlier they had cut out a wagon road to Benson and had made arrangements for the inauguration of stage service as soon as the railroad reached that point. Soon a stage line was operating on a daily schedule, and a prosperous freighting business was being conducted. The ties that bound the community to St. Cloud were severed, because "in these railroad days the saving of forty-five miles of staging is a great object."<sup>16</sup>

The popularity of Benson lasted less than a year, however. In the summer of the following year, the head of the railroad reached Morris, which was still closer to Alexandria. Immediately a wagon road was built to the latter point in order that the shortest route to the railroad might be utilized. Two years later the busy road to Morris had degenerated into a little-traveled country road, for construction was resumed on the St. Cloud branch of the St. Paul and Pacific, and it was extended to Melrose, even closer

<sup>16</sup>*Alexandria Post*, April 7, November 20, 1869; January 15, October 1, 15, 1870; May 27, 1871.

to Alexandria. For more than five years, Melrose was the market for Alexandria, for work on the railroad was suspended from 1873 until 1878. During the summer of 1878, however, construction was resumed, and in November of that year the railroad reached Alexandria, definitely ending the frontier character of that community's growth.<sup>17</sup>

While the people of Alexandria were so keenly interested in their own problem of communication, that town was itself the center toward which the country beyond it turned. For a decade Alexandria was the last town of any size on the wagon road to the Red River Valley, and it became the market center for the settlers in the country beyond. For several years the flour mill at Alexandria was the only one in that part of the state, and the pioneers who were building Otter Tail County settlements such as Elizabethtown, St. Olaf, Clitherall, Otter Tail City, and Fergus Falls made regular pilgrimages of forty or fifty miles to Alexandria for flour or feed. The appearance on Alexandria streets of teams from Rush Lake, near present-day Perham, however, provoked the editor of the Alexandria newspaper to exclaim: "Think of it, ye dwellers in towns and cities, who all your lives have had your barrels of flour rolled to your doors — one hundred and fifty miles to mill!" He did not comment on the fact that merchants of his own community were making trips of a hundred and eighty miles to the railroad for the goods which stocked the shelves of Alexandria stores.<sup>18</sup>

Like Alexandria, the communities on the remote frontier turned from one railroad town to another in the search for shorter routes to the railroad. The construction of the

<sup>17</sup> *Post*, June 24, September 16, 1871; February 8, 15, 1873; August 2, November 15, 1878.

<sup>18</sup> *Herald*, June 11, 1868; *Post*, December 2, 1868; June 26, 1869; January 21, 1871. Alta Kimber, in "The Coming of the Latter Day Saints to Otter Tail County," *ante*, 13:391, relates that settlers at Clitherall hauled their grain to Cold Spring near St. Cloud to have it ground into flour.

main line of the St. Paul and Pacific weaned the trade of some communities from Alexandria, and the building of the Northern Pacific Railroad from Duluth drew away others. By 1878 all had found outlets to the railroads over routes other than those through Alexandria, and the heavily traveled thoroughfares of the 1860's and 1870's assumed the aspects of lonely country roads.

Similar stories may be told of frontier settlement elsewhere in the state. In the prairie regions of southwestern and western Minnesota, however, the process was carried on more slowly than in the wooded central and eastern parts. A few settlers usually migrated into a prairie frontier in advance of the railroad, and it was only when a railroad had established lines of communication that such regions boomed. Communities such as Marshall, Windom, and Worthington were railroad towns, and many of them were laid out by the railroad companies themselves. The remoteness of the prairie regions from navigable waters upon which to float their products to market was one reason for their slow development. Another is the fact that building materials were lacking. Sod shanties provided shelter for man and beast, but they were temporary, and, at best, unsatisfactory. Until some economical means was devised for taking building materials to the prairies and wheat from them, settlement lagged. Wagon roads did not satisfactorily solve this problem, for distances were too great. The answer was the railroad, which became the great settlement agency of the prairies.<sup>19</sup>

Once the railroads had been built, however, the story of settlement repeated itself. Areas fifty or seventy-five miles away from a railroad became fit for occupation after the construction of roads to a railroad town. The advance guard of settlers outlined a system of wagon trails leading

<sup>19</sup>Agnes M. Larson, "The Golden Age of Lumbering in Minnesota," in *Minnesota Alumni Weekly*, 32:438 (April 15, 1933); Larson, *The Wheat Market and the Farmer*, 55-60.

from the railroad. When the frontier was well enough developed to support a railroad, the iron horse replaced the stagecoach and the freight wagon, and wagon roads, which had held so important a place in community life, became simple country roads. Thus railroads and wagon roads complemented one another throughout the period of settlement in western Minnesota, just as rivers and roads had done earlier in the eastern part of the state.

ARTHUR J. LARSEN

MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
ST. PAUL



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](#).