

MINNESOTA HISTORY

VOLUME 27 • PUBLISHED IN SEPT. 1946 • NUMBER 3

“The Beauty of the West” A Minnesota Ballad

Bessie M. Stanchfield

I FIRST HEARD “The Beauty of the West,” a ballad of the Minnesota frontier, in St. Cloud in the spring of 1936. Upon finding it, I began a merry chase for Minnesota songs and information about them, since this song, and others collected later, made me realize the fallacy of the belief that there is no Minnesota folk music. The long hunt for songs that followed my discovery of “The Beauty of the West” has been both happy and fruitful, and it has uncovered many sources for Minnesota folk music that are worth investigation. The song expresses the loyalty of the pioneer Minnesotans for their new home; indeed it reflects the kind of devotion expressed by a visitor from the East who said of Minnesota: “All you there behold serves only to make you love it more, and long to say, ‘It is my home.’”¹ Since the song describes a trek of the pioneer from Ohio to Minnesota, it has a place in the story of the westward movement.

My search for data on and variants of this ballad revealed that it underwent vast changes as it was sung in different countries and states. This fact and the difficulties encountered when I attempted definitely to trace its origin and locate the place where it might last have been sung made me appreciate the truth of the statement that “Folk songs have no beginning and no end. They reflect, in a measure, the inherent character of a race. A tune may be caught up from

¹The remark is quoted by Harriet E. Bishop in *Floral Home, or First Years in Minnesota*, 213 (New York, 1857).

the gleaner in the field and retained in the heart and memory of others who repeat it with added phrase and meaning. The same song may have many variants. Handed down from one century to another, in time we find it adapted to contemporary scale and rhythm."²

Investigation showed that "The Beauty of the West" is a variant of "The Lily of the West," sometimes called "Mary, the Lily of the West" or "Flora, the Lily of the West," a ballad that can be traced back to England, Ireland, and possibly to Scotland. It made its way to America, where many variations of words and tune have appeared in widely separated parts of the country. Four Minnesota variants, three much alike and one quite different, have rewarded my search. Each has its own title—"The Beauty of the West," "The Song of Minnesota," "Minnesota, the Lily of the West," and "The Minne Sota Song." I have found only one Minnesota tune, however, that to which "The Beauty of the West" was sung. In earlier versions, sung and recorded in the East and South, the countries or states from which the singer came differs, the outcome of the suit for the girl's hand varies, and the girl's name appears in numerous forms. Recordings of "The Lily of the West" made in Virginia and the tunes used with some other versions of the song indicate that its earlier forms were sung to melodies of a distinctly modal character—melodies that used the old modes or scales employed by early folk singers.³ "The Beauty of the West," however, belongs to a later period, and its music may be classed with that of the period just preceding the Civil War. It uses the major or Ionian mode to which our ears are well attuned, for it is the commonest scale used today.

Mrs. Elma Snyder McDowell of St. Cloud sang "The Beauty of the West" when I heard it for the first time. As director of vocal music in the city schools of St. Cloud, I had been asked by the local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution to plan and

² Florence H. Botsford, *Folk Songs of Many Peoples*, 2:1 (New York, 1922).

³ See *post*, p. 188. Modal scales may be produced on a piano by playing the white keys only, between D and D for the Dorian mode, between E and E for the Phrygian, F and F for the Mixolydian, G and G for the Lydian, etc. The white keys between C and C form the Ionian mode, the commonly used major mode; those from A to A form the Aeolian or natural minor scale that is also familiar.

produce a radio program that would have both musical and historical appeal for the entire state. I agreed to produce such a program as a class project, since I saw that it held possibilities for developing among my students an appreciation for their community and its backgrounds, and that it also would give them valuable musical training. I knew that at least two members of the local Daughters of the American Revolution, one of whom was Mrs. McDowell, could sing some old unpublished songs, and I believed that collecting these songs would be a vital experience for my students, though I realized that the process of notation would be a difficult task for novices. They, however, were eager to undertake the project, and Mrs. McDowell co-operated by singing her songs again and again. Her helpful and untiring efforts, as well as her inspiring enthusiasm, made it possible for us to obtain both the music and the words. In time, "The Beauty of the West," as well as several other songs that she recalled for us, were incorporated in a skit entitled "Songs of the Minnesota Pioneers." It was prepared and produced by my students, who broadcast it from a Twin City radio station in 1936. In the following year a second program, entitled "The Black Breath of the Iron Horse," was broadcast. It featured an early railroad song and commemorated the completion of the first railroad to Sauk Rapids.

Mrs. McDowell learned "The Beauty of the West" from her father, Fremont Snyder, a pioneer who was taken to Freeborn County by his parents in July, 1857, when he was only five months old. There he grew to manhood, and there he learned the many songs that he later sang to his children and for which he became known throughout his home county. It was said that "all one did was name a song and he sang it." Like most singers, he wrote down the words of songs he wished to remember. Among his papers, his daughter found a piece of advertising print on the back of which were written in pencil the words of "The Beauty of the West." The tune, as recalled by Mrs. McDowell, is in the popular style of the 1850's. The words, however, can be traced back much farther to an English verse, "'Twas When I Came to England," which was recorded in

1839 and later published by Sabine Baring-Gould.⁴ There is reason to believe that other English and Irish versions of the ballad may be still older.

"The Beauty of the West" traces a route commonly followed by settlers who migrated to Minnesota from Ohio in the 1850's. They usually went by train to Galena, the railroad terminal, and then by steamboat to Winona, where many an early traveler left the river, was "recruited" into the new territory, and started off with his chest upon his back. While trudging along over ice-bound lakes, breaking his way through forests, or sweltering in the sun on the prairies, he searched for a suitable spot for a home. "The Beauty of the West" strongly hints the attractions of Minnesota, the friendliness of its people, and the desirability of the "gopher girls." The music and the words, recorded just as Mrs. McDowell sang them, follow.



When first I left old Buck Eye,
 Location for to find,
 I heard of a distant country,
 In language most divine.
 A land of milk and honey,
 And waters of the best,
 They called it Minnesota,
 The Beauty of the West.

But when I came to Galena,
 I didn't like the town.

⁴ Sabine Baring-Gould, *Songs of the West*, 118-121 (London, 1890). See also page 17 in the back of this book.

The streets they were too narrow,
 And winding was the ground.
 I stepped up to my tavern
 And wrote upon my chest,
 "I'm bound for Minnesota,
 The Beauty of the West."

I jumped on board a steamer,
 The Northern Belle by name,
 She soon let loose her anchor,
 And we were off again.
 She rang her bell at Winona,
 And landed me and chest
 In this said Minnesota,
 The Beauty of the West.

And when we got recruited
 A-rambling I did go.
 I wandered the state all over
 I trailed it through and through.
 It's when I came to a cabin
 It's I a welcome guest
 In this said Minnesota
 The Beauty of the West.

And so they called us Gophers⁵
 As you will understand.
 We're good as foreign beggars
 Or any in the land.
 We're not the little gophers,
 The gardeners are in quest,
 But Minnesota gophers,
 The Beauty of the West.

⁵ The "Origin of the Name 'Gopher State'" is discussed by Judge Charles E. Flaudra in his *History of Minnesota*, 242-245 (St. Paul, 1900). It is generally believed that the term originated as the result of a cartoon satirizing the "Five Million Loan Bill" of 1858. The drawing, which shows the "Gopher Train" drawn by nine striped rodents with human heads, is reproduced in William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 2:49 (St. Paul, 1924). Dr. Folwell declares (2:45) that the railroad loan bill "did not appear in the legislature, at least in its final form," until February 24, 1858. Thus "The Beauty of the West" probably was not sung as herewith recorded until sometime in that year. It is significant that the version appearing in the *Minnesota Republican* for February 26, 1858, two days after the railroad bill was introduced, used the appellation, whereas that published in the *Saint Peter Courier* on June 26, 1857, does not mention gophers. Both versions are reprinted in the present article. *Ed.*

The gopher girls are cleaner,
 The gopher girls are kind.
 I scarcely thought of Clara,
 The girl I left behind.
 They're girls of rank and beauty
 And tempers of the best,
 In this said Minnesota,
 The Beauty of the West.

The gopher girls are cunning,
 The gopher girls are shy,
 I'll marry me a gopher girl
 Or a bachelor I'll die.
 I'll wear a stand-up collar,
 Support a handsome wife,
 And live in Minnesota
 The balance of my life.

Another version, entitled "The Song of Minnesota," was found in the *Saint Peter Courier* of June 26, 1857, by Dean Theodore C. Blegen of the graduate school in the University of Minnesota. The paper includes this comment: "We insert the following piece of poetry at the request of a subscriber — Joe. It originally appeared in the *Southern Minnesota Herald*, printed at Brownsville, M.T." An attempt to find the ballad in the incomplete files of the *Herald* now available has been unsuccessful.⁶ No mention of the music to which it should be sung appears in the *Courier*, but it is possible that the tune of Mrs. McDowell's version was used. The verses, as they are printed in the *Courier*, follow:

Come all ye noble emigrants that are inclined to roam
 Into this Western Country, to seek you out a home,
 If you will be advised by me, I'll tell you what's the best,
 Come settle in Minnesota, the Lily of the West.

O, Michigan is not the place, nor Illinois the same,
 The soil and climate can't compare in raising of the Grain,

⁶ The file owned by the Minnesota Historical Society was examined, as was a single issue in the New York State Library at Albany. The verse, as it appears herewith, was copied from the issue of the *Courier* for June 26, 1857, in the Minnesota Historical Society's file of that paper.

For here our noble Farmers raise abundance of the best,
In this plentiful Minnesota, the Lily of the West.

In Eighteen Hundred and Fifty Four, I left my native shore,
My worthy friends and native home never to see them more;
Besides, my aged parent I left among the rest,
And sailed for Minnesota, the Lily of the West.

When I viewed this pleasant country, it filled me with surprise,
To see those large Prairies, and fields of Grain likewise;
You call into a cabin, you are always a welcome guest,
That's the fashion of Minnesota, the Lily of the West.

I viewed those jolly Farmers, a toiling at their ploughs,
Likewise the pretty Maid, a milking of the cows;
I viewed those lovely house-wives with their domestic wealth,
They're the darlings of Minnesota, the Lily of the West.

Our lands they yield spontaneously, Potatoes, Corn, and Grain,
The climate is also healthy, with cooling showers of rain;
There is plenty of fish in every stream, and game in the forest,
We have pleasures in Minnesota, the Lily of the West.

Our pleasant burgs and villages they decorate the soil,
The architect Mechanic most manfully doth toil;
We have churches here of every sect, and schooling of the best,
We've industry in Minnesota, the Lily of the West.

We have a flowing commerce upon our inland seas,
Where lofty Ships and Steamboats do sail continually;
We have Mariners here both stout and bold, and masters
of the best,
We have all things in Minnesota, the Lily of the West.

Here is a health unto the Sailors, the Farmers likewise,
Also unto the Merchants, for them we highly prize;
The foolish Quack and Lawyer, they are our only pest
We have here in Minnesota, the Lily of the West.

Come all my brother wild cats that's heard me sing my song,
I pray you will excuse me if I have said any wrong,
I hope you will correct it, for I have done my best,
We are all Brothers in Minnesota, the Lily of the West.

A large collection of poems, songs, and ballads about Minnesota, assembled over a period of years by Mr. Frank Morris of Madelia, yielded another version of "The Beauty of the West." It bears the title "Minnesota, Lily of the West," and with it is a note suggesting that it be sung to the "air — 'Fanny Moore.'" This melody, Mr. Morris says, is the tune Mrs. McDowell sang.⁷ In his version of the text, which appears herewith, the singer's starting point is Michigan instead of Ohio.

When first I left old Michigan, location for to find,
I heard of a distant country, a land most divine,
A land of milk and honey, and temperature of the best,
They called it Minnesota, the Lily of the West.

I jumped on board the steamer, as you may understand
And started for Minnesota, that late new founded land,
And when I arrived in Acavern I did not stop to rest,
But rushed for Minnesota, the Lily of the West.

And when I got in Galena, I didn't like the town;
The streets, they were so narrow, and muddy was the ground;
I went straight to the tavern, and wrote upon my chest,
I'm bound for Minnesota, the Lily of the West.

I jumped on board the steamer, the Northern Bell by name;
She soon let loose her cables, and we were off again,
She rang her bell at Winona, and landed me and my chest,
In dear old Minnesota, the Lily of the West.

The boys, they were so clever, the girls, they were so kind,
I scarcely thought of Lena, that girl I left behind.
These girls of rank and beauty, and tempers of the best,
In dear old Minnesota, the Lily of the West.

And now they call us Gophers, as you may understand,
We're good as any badgers, or any in the land;
We are the cunning Gophers, the gardens to infest,
In dear old Minnesota, the Lily of the West.

The Gopher girls are cunning, the Gopher girls are shy;
I'll marry me a Gopher girl, or a bachelor I'll die,

⁷ This version is to be found in the "F. Morris Collection" in the Minneapolis Public Library. It consists of several hundred typewritten "Songs-Poems of Minnesota and Northwest," alphabetically arranged by titles in a loose-leaf notebook, and bearing the date 1932. The writer interviewed Mr. Morris at his home on August 20, 1946.

I'll wear a standing collar, support a handsome wife,
And live in Minnesota, the balance of my life.

A fourth variant was discovered by Professor Lynwood G. Downs of the University of Minnesota department of German in the *Minnesota Republican* of St. Anthony and Minneapolis. The ballad appears under the title "The Minne Sota Song" in the issue for February 26, 1858. Except for a few slight differences, chief of which is the grotesque spelling, the version given herewith is much like that recalled by Mrs. McDowell. Worth noting is the addition of a verse singing the praises of the communities in which the *Republican* was published.

When first i left old buckeye a location for to finde
i heard of Distant Countrey inn Languish moast Divine
A Land of Milk & Hony with watter of the Best
and They Call itt Minne Sotta the Bewty of the west

i gump'd on bord A Steemer as yew shal understand
and Startid four this Countrey the Latest promissed Land
and When I kame too Shicagy i Did nott stopp too wrest
but push'd four Minne Sotta thee Bewty of the west

and wen i kame too Galleny i Did not Lik the Touwn
thee Streats they wer sow narrow and muddy was the ground
i went up to thee taveren and marked it on my chist
I am bound four Minne Sota the Bewty off the west

i gump'd on bord A Steemer the Nominee bye name
She Sune Let loose her Cables and we were off A gain
She wrung her belle at Catelow & left me and my chist
in this ere Minne Sota the bewty of the west

its now my trip is ended & every thing is wright
i went in To A Cabin & put up for the night
i much Admired thee Peeple in manner & in Dress
in this here Minne Sota the Bewty of the west

& wen i got recrutet A rambling i Did Go
i rambled this countrey Over i Travelled it Threw and threw
& Wen i Stopped too A Cabin i was A welcum gest
in this hear Minne Sota thee Bewty off the west

at Last i hev diskover-ed the Plais of Phuture blis
 the sitty of Saintanthonee-anMinnyapolis
 it is a Famus sitty — the splendidest and Best
 thats grow'd in Minne Soty the Bewty of the west

the men they are so clever the Gyrls thay are so kinde
 i Skarsely thawt off Clarra the Gyrl i left bhinde
 there is Gyrls off wrankist bewty with tempers off the best
 in this here Minne Sota the bewty of the west

Cum all who would be farmers come now it is your time
 to come to Minne Sota and make yourselve a Farme
 our Soil as black as char-kole with timber off the best
 in this hear Minne Sota the Bewty off the west

but now thay Cal us gofirs i will have you understand
 we ar as Good as any badgers that tells off the land
 we ar Not the Little gofers thee gardners ar in Jest
 bu[t] thee Minne Sota gofers thee bewty of the west

the gofers they are cuning the gofers they are shy
 i will mary me a gofer Gyrl or A batcheler i will die
 among these Braud pararies ile squot an make my Nest
 in this Hear Minne Sotty the Bewty off the west

“The Beauty of the West” doubtless was taken to the United States by Europeans who knew it in their homelands and carried it wherever they went, changing the words to suit various situations, and in most instances wandering far from the very beautiful Irish and English tunes. It is possible that the song reached Minnesota from Nova Scotia via Maine, or it may have come with settlers migrating westward from points farther south. Versions have been found in many sections of the United States. In Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, Missouri, Ohio, and Utah one or more versions have been recorded, and Nova Scotia also yielded one. Two from Virginia and two from Missouri are available on phonograph records in the Archive of American Folk Song of the Library of Congress.⁸ They were sung by folk singers in an authentic folk

⁸ The Virginia variants are listed in Library of Congress, Music Division, *Check-list of Recorded Songs in the English Language in the Archive of American Folk Song to July 1940*, 226 (Washington, 1942). Records of the Missouri songs may be obtained from the Library of Congress upon request.

style. With several other American variants, these versions retain the old ballad style, which commonly deals with a suitor and his rival, as well as the type of modal tunes used in the original form of the song. The Minnesota versions have gone the farthest in changing the emphasis of the original song; the tale of a love triangle in these variants becomes a eulogy of the state and its maidens.

Although I have located eighteen versions of "The Beauty of the West," I have not by any means exhausted the sources for variants of the ballad.⁹ Since I began this study many avenues for further research have been opened. It is my real desire to show the fertile field that exists in Minnesota for folk song collectors. There is in the state an abundance of old song material that needs to be recorded and made available. Folk music is even now developing in Minnesota among groups whose songs have a definite relation to the history and economics of the modern state.¹⁰ Folk song collecting is more than gathering past history for preservation in archives; it is a means of studying trends in the lives of the people that found sincere expression in music. The number, diversity, and location of the variants of "The Lily of the West" make it evident that the tracing of one song to the far corners of the earth can take years. This occupation, however, is replete with satisfaction that makes the effort worth while. "The Beauty of the West," the song which started a long search on my part, illustrates how the Minnesota pioneers gave vent to their feelings in song and left a rich expression for posterity to enjoy. It surely bears out the wisdom expressed in the following lyric:

Free beauty is not bound
To one unmoved clime;
She visits every ground
And favors every time.¹¹

⁹ All the variants found are given in a longer study that has been made by the writer.

¹⁰ Examples are to be found in Irene Paull's recent collection, *We're the People; also Ballads by the Workers* (Duluth, 1941).

¹¹ Quoted from Thomas Campion, *Two Books of Aires*, in Arthur H. Bullen, *Lyrics from Song Books of the Elizabethan Age*, 19 (London, 1897).



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](#).