

# Documentary Panorama

*Bertha L. Heilbron*

FOR THE AMUSEMENT-HUNGRY pioneers of the past century, isolated on frontiers far from the nation's cultural centers, the need for recreation was occasionally satisfied by the arrival of a moving panorama performance. Even the most remote settlements sometimes received visits from the itinerant showmen who carried these colorful and often dramatic ancestors of the motion picture from town to town. With a minimum of equipment and personnel, the primitive entertainment feature could be staged in the simplest crossroads schoolhouse or hall.

The panorama itself was nothing more than a series of related pictures painted in oil on an enormous strip of canvas. It is known that one such production was 1,325 feet long and 12 feet wide. After being rolled, a panorama was mounted in an ingenious frame that made possible the viewing of one panel at a time. The spectator who saw such a production enjoyed at least an illusion of motion as the picture was unrolled on the stage or platform before him. The running comment of a narrator provided the necessary explanation for each view. Like modern movies, panoramas provided for the hordes who saw them vicarious experiences of travel and adventure.

This is the story of a Minnesota panorama. Truly a documentary panorama, it pictures the bloody Indian war of 1862—a tragedy that caught the popular imagination and long remained fresh in its popular appeal. Like the subject, the production was a Minnesota affair. The cast consisted of authentic Minnesota frontiersmen—men, women, and children who knew at first hand the horrors of the massacre. The producer, too, was a Minnesotan, John Stevens of Rochester, who painted the picture in an improvised home studio.

A native of Utica, New York, Stevens had moved westward

with the frontier, emigrating in turn to Illinois, Wisconsin, and, finally, Minnesota. In 1853, when he was in his middle thirties, he settled in the Zumbro Valley, choosing a spot where eleven years later Dr. William W. Mayo was to hang up his physician's shingle. On the site of the future county seat of the still unorganized Olmsted County, Stevens built a farmhouse. Then, in 1855, Rochester was platted, its Main Street passing before his very door. Within a year the one-time farmhouse became a hotel—the Stevens House. By that name it was known long after Stevens sold it in 1858 and devoted himself to house and sign painting.

Perhaps before arriving in Minnesota, perhaps in Rochester itself, which early became an amusement center for the neighboring area, attracting magicians, circuses, minstrel shows, and even the distinguished Ole Bull, Stevens saw some of the more pretentious moving panoramas that were popular throughout America and Europe in the 1850's. John Banvard, Henry Lewis, Leon Pomarede, and others pictured in panoramas the wonders of the Mississippi River and thus introduced the Father of Waters to audiences at home and abroad. Similar entertainments featured Niagara Falls, the California gold fields, the Holy Land, and other far-off places. Why not a panorama of the wild conflict with the Sioux that racked the Minnesota countryside in the summer of 1862?

That the Rochester sign painter should undertake such a production was in every sense natural. He already had a local reputation as an artist, and he had established a contact with the entertainment world by painting, and perhaps constructing, a band wagon used by members of the Rochester Brass Band when visiting neighboring towns on concert tours. From refugees who turned to Rochester for haven after losing homes and families at the hands of the Sioux, Stevens heard at first hand tales of torture, horror, and flight. He soon realized that by a "liberal use of red paint" he could picture with brutal realism the "blood-thirstiness of the savages." Here was an opportunity to produce a panorama unparalleled in sensational dramatic appeal and news value.

The hero of Stevens' picture was a youth named Merton Eastlick. His people had lived earlier in Rochester, whence they removed

to Lake Shetek in Murray County. With their five young sons, his parents were among some fifty people living in the hamlet on August 20, 1862, when it was attacked by a war party of marauding Sioux. All that remained on the lake shore when they departed were smoking cabins and blackened fields. Cattle and horses had been seized; most of the settlers had fled or had been carried into captivity by the red men; some fifteen were dead. Merton's father and three brothers were among those who died at the hands of the Indians. Although only eleven years old, this boy hero carried an infant brother almost sixty miles to safety. His mother, Mrs. Lavina Eastlick, was seriously wounded, but she managed to escape and eventually was reunited with her sons. The *St. Paul Daily Pioneer* of September 10, 1862, reported that the Eastlicks were among "seven persons from Lake Shetek supposed to have been murdered" who succeeded in reaching New Ulm.

It was from Mrs. Eastlick that Stevens heard most of the harrowing tales pictured in his panorama. When peace was restored, she found a new home in Mankato, but she doubtless paid visits to old friends in Rochester. She became Stevens' ace reporter, recalling the flaming cabins and scorched settlements; the ravaged farmsteads and murdered infants, the suffering, torture, and privation that were all too vividly impressed upon her memory. Remembered, too, were acts of heroism, and the hairbreadth escapes that saved the lives of many of the Lake Shetek settlers. In all Stevens' Sioux War panoramas—and there were to be at least four—the adventures of the Murray County settlers, particularly the Eastlicks, were featured.

In an untutored and primitive style of his own, Stevens painted his clumsy ancestors of the modern movies. According to one report, he produced his first panorama a short time after the massacre, but soon sold it. Then, in 1865, he began to work on a more elaborate version of Minnesota's frontier tragedy. To the pictures then painted, reported the *La Crosse Democrat* of February 1, 1868, the artist gave "a smack of truthfulness which the vivid reality calls for and which lends to it all the horribleness of atrocious murder." Some pictures that won a prize for Stevens at a county fair in

La Crosse in the autumn of 1865 doubtless were included later in a panorama. Advertised as "Stevens' Great Tableau Paintings Representing the Indian Massacre in Minnesota in 1862," the series was displayed in La Crosse early in February, 1868, and in St. Paul a month later. In both cities, Captain C. E. Sencerbox, identified as "one of the oldest and most popular steamboatmen of the upper river," served as narrator. It was said that he was "very good, at times growing really eloquent in behalf of Minnesota and her citizens." In advance of the St. Paul performance, which was staged in the Opera House, Munger Brothers Music Store sold tickets at fifty cents each. An extra charge of twenty-five cents was made for reserved seats.

The *St. Paul Press* gave Stevens' show good publicity, and announced that the picture would give new settlers an accurate idea of the events of the massacre. The citizens of the Minnesota capital, however, were accustomed to more sophisticated entertainment. Stevens could not compete with a performance of "Belshazzar" by the Minneapolis Musical Union or with the charming Marietta Ravel in "The Flying Dutchman." Thus, in St. Paul, he failed to receive much support. It was in rural areas, among the simple folk of the agricultural frontier, that the picture met with real success. Into schoolhouses, unplastered town halls, and lofts above country general stores crowded farmers fresh from the fields, newly arrived immigrants, housewives, children, to witness Stevens' sensational review of the Indian massacre. All had heard tales of the outbreak. Here was a chance to witness its horrors in full color and as "big as life." For the thousands who saw it unroll, the panorama must have had much the same appeal as does a mystery thriller movie for the modern Saturday night village throngs.

There can be little doubt that at twenty-five cents for adults and fifteen cents for children—the usual charge for the entertainment—the Sioux War panorama reaped substantial profits for Stevens. As time went on, he showed it not only in Minnesota and Wisconsin, but also in Iowa and even in Illinois. Frequent news items in local papers reflect its popularity as an entertainment feature. Perhaps, with numberless displays, the 1868 canvas actually

wore out; perhaps, like his earlier effort, the artist sold it. In any case, a visitor to Stevens' studio in October, 1870, found him hard at work "finishing another panorama, of a wholly new style." The colors used, the observer explained, "are all transparent and it is to be shown with lights placed behind the scenes, instead of before it." The pictures were described as "Diaphanous Paintings," defining a method newly invented by the Rochester artist. According to the *Rochester Post*, the entire series was "executed on one continuous sheet which is taken up on a roller, and by which means it is let down and adjusted to the scenery for exhibition." A local newspaper of October 29, 1870, announced the completion of the transparent paintings. The show opened on November 5 in the artist's home city before a "good audience," Stevens himself reading the "beautiful oratorical explanations" that went with it.

At intervals in 1871 and 1872, the Sioux War panorama was unrolled before Rochester audiences. It was featured in a stage show arranged to mark St. Patrick's Day in 1871, and in 1872 a holiday crowd intent on celebrating the Fourth of July filled a local hall and watched a performance with "breathless admiration." But by 1873, Rochester audiences must have been tired of the "Diaphanous," for the show, like the earlier "Tableau Paintings," took to the road. Stevens' ingenuity was equal to the occasion. When his picture left Rochester early in January, it was stored in a "traveling rig," which, according to the *Post*, was "like the panorama itself, something very unique." It was described as "a long, covered sleigh" with "sides of transparent canvass, on which are painted striking advertisements of the show." They were "covered up when on the road, but exhibited on entering the towns" where the panorama was to be displayed. To attract attention, in the evening the sleigh was "brilliantly lighted from the inside," and the exhibitors, kept snug and warm by a stove inside the vehicle, were able to "furnish the people with music" as they drove through the streets. It was considered certain that this "brilliant method of announcing" the show would "draw great crowds to the unrivaled exhibition."

Despite the fact that more than a decade had passed since the Sioux Massacre made newspaper headlines, Stevens' pictorial report

of its lurid horrors remained popular. In October, 1873, the artist launched it on another tour. After opening in Spring Valley, he took it to many of the remote towns and villages of Iowa and Wisconsin. His decorated rig doubtless reached many an isolated hamlet that never knew a road show. The tour of 1873-74 probably was the most successful of Stevens' entire career. In March he returned to Rochester "well satisfied with his winter's campaign." He made another "very successful trip" in Wisconsin the following November. Its purpose, however, was somewhat different, for it resulted in the sale of the panorama to George Downey of Delavan. A Rochester paper announced proudly that Stevens received "the handsome sum of two thousand dollars" for his picture. The sale did not, however, mark the end of his career as a painting showman. Although he bought a farm near Dodge Center and went there to live, he was again displaying in Rochester "his celebrated panorama" of the Sioux Massacre with some "stirring and interesting scenes in the Black Hills," in January, 1878, little more than a year before he died.

Stevens' success in the show business is not hard to explain. He understood and used with skill many tricks of advertising. He maintained interest in his panorama by adding panels picturing current events, like the Chicago fire and a balloon ascension in Brooklyn, and new discoveries, like the Yellowstone country. He appreciated the value, from the showman's point of view, of what in more sophisticated entertainment is known as comic relief. The Rochester artist made a practice of inserting between his most distressing views "others of a more pleasing character." In one version of the panorama, a full-length portrait of General Henry H. Sibley flanked by two friendly Indians follows a "scene of horror beyond all description," in which half-naked red men are depicted in the acts of killing and torturing helpless women and children. A favorite subject, used in at least two of Stevens' pictures, shows Washington welcoming Lafayette and his family. Most surprising of all products of the artist's imagination is a frame dubbed "Minnesota fruit." It shows a tree "fairly groaning under its load of infantile human specimens," with women below, their aprons extended to catch

the falling infants. When first displayed in Rochester in the autumn of 1873, this startling picture "attracted much attention and drew forth loud applause."

From time to time, Stevens added still other features to his show. On one occasion the Rochester String Band furnished music. "Prof. Earl, the Great Violinist & Songster," appeared with the exhibition for a time. But the biggest attraction of all was none other than the boy hero of the picture, Merton Eastlick himself, who was employed by Stevens to travel with the panorama as lecturer and manager. When the sleigh with its decorated transparent sides left Rochester in January, 1873, young Eastlick and a companion named Henry Horton were in the driver's seat. The air of reality that Merton's presence must have added to the performance is reflected in a poster printed to advertise the event. In conspicuous boldface type, it features "this young hero" and recounts his lurid adventures in one of the "greatest battles during the Massacre." Then comes the triumphant announcement that this Steve Canyon of the frontier would appear in person to "give the delineation" of the bloody massacre scenes as they moved before the audience. It is gratifying to learn that Merton shared in the profits of the tour. Doubtless in payment for his services, half of the "exhibition was presented to Merton Eastlick to help support his mother, little brother and himself."

In view of the fact that only a very few original panoramas have escaped the ravages of time, it seems strange that two of Stevens' moving pictures, with all the machinery used in showing them, should still exist. Some ten years ago, in the late 1930's, one of his mammoth canvases was found in Binghamton, New York, where it was owned by some of his descendants. From them a New York dealer — Howard F. Porter of the Old Print Exchange — purchased the picture and all the trappings that went with it. Supposedly the price was a thousand dollars. In 1939 the panorama was offered to the Minnesota Historical Society for fifteen hundred dollars. Eventually it was acquired by Mr. Thomas Gilcrease of San Antonio, Texas, who placed it with his private art collection in the Gilcrease Museum near Tulsa, Oklahoma. This version consists of thirty-six panels,

many of which are signed by Stevens and dated Rochester, 1870. Like the one the artist sold in 1874, this is a diaphanous painting. The opening frame pictures Minnehaha Falls. It is followed by Stevens' favorite picture of Washington and Lafayette. Then comes the feature—more than twenty Sioux War pictures, succeeding one another without interruption and reaching a climax with a view of the hanging of the guilty Sioux at Mankato. At the end is what may be described as a newsreel recording ten events of the day.

The Minnesota Historical Society made no effort to buy this panorama, chiefly because it already had one of Stevens' moving pictures. Complete with all the crude mechanism used in displaying it, the wooden boxes in which it was transported from town to town, a handwritten copy of the explanatory lecture, and even one of the broadsides used for advertising, it was presented to the society in December, 1919, by Burt W. Eaton of Rochester. Like the version found in New York state, this consists of thirty-six panels. Each is six feet high and seven feet wide. The overall length of the canvas is almost two hundred and twenty feet. In content the panorama is in some respects different from that in the Gilcrease Museum. The opening panel exhibits portraits of Lincoln and his cabinet. Several "relief" items break into the record of the Indian war. And in the society's version, the final frames picture scenes and events in the Black Hills, Yellowstone National Park, and other places in the Far West. It is evident that this is one of Stevens' later panoramas, perhaps the last that he produced.

How Eaton found the panorama is a story in itself. His interest in the gigantic picture stemmed from his own boyhood memories of performances he had attended in his home community of Rochester. "I saw it as a boy and I still retain a very vivid impression which it gave me as a child, of Indian frightfulness," he wrote on December 5, 1919. "But of course it was soon after the massacre which was fresh in the minds of the people," he explained. On another occasion, Eaton described Stevens' production as "the forerunner, perhaps, of the moving pictures of the present," adding that "in fact it was the only thing of the kind we had." It must



have been sometime in 1914 that Eaton began a systematic search for the panorama. Four years of correspondence followed. Eventually the trail led to Winona. The huge picture, according to a Rochester newspaper of 1918, "had been in the possession of a Negro family there for twenty years." Eaton recorded only that, after finding the panorama, he "secured it." How he discovered its whereabouts and how he obtained it, he failed to reveal. One slight clue might be traced to some names appearing in the descriptive text for the picture. There are the crudely written signatures of "W. H. Horton, Minnesota, Olmstead County, Rochester," and "Mr. William Horton, Winona, Minn." Did Henry Horton, who traveled with the road show of 1873, eventually become the owner of one of Stevens' paintings and take it with him to Winona? The answer can only be guessed.

When Eaton shipped the panorama to St. Paul, he described it in some detail. It was in two boxes, each eight feet long by a foot square, one containing the "panorama proper," the other, the collapsible "frames to be erected for the purpose of exhibiting it." In order to simplify the process of setting up the mechanism, the donor sent a rough sketch, showing the "location of the panorama" roll near the base of the frame. Eaton explained that "the painted part of the panorama goes on the outside and when it is all run off then the crank is changed from the roller upon which it is used to operate the panorama to the other roller so that it can be re-rolled in its original position." In the old days, said Eaton, "there were two pedestals placed between the frames and sides of the panorama upon which two kerosene lamps were used for lighting purposes." The original pedestals were included in Eaton's gift and are still with the equipment. He suggested, however, that electric lights be used in place of lamps.

Before he gave the panorama to the historical society, Eaton arranged several showings in Rochester. On one occasion in February, 1918, Joe Alexander, who four decades earlier had performed the same service for Stevens, "turned the crank for the panorama." When Eaton sent it to St. Paul he did so with the understanding that the St. Paul chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution

would be the first to display it. That organization seems to have raised some fairly substantial sums of money by charging an admission fee of fifty cents. Under its auspices, the panorama was displayed in 1919 and 1920 at the Historical Building and the Church Club in St. Paul, and at the Women's Club and the Westminster Church of Minneapolis. From the proceeds, the DAR donated more than two hundred dollars to various causes. To add interest and color to the DAR programs "some very beautiful Indian music" was performed "by ladies in costume," and Mrs. Mary Schwandt Schmidt, who as a young girl had been held captive by the Sioux during the 1862 outbreak, recalled some of her experiences. Mrs. Mary S. Squires, state regent of the DAR, read the explanatory narrative for the panorama.

In March, 1923, the Informal Club of St. Paul featured the panorama in one of its programs. Thereafter, the heavy roll of painted canvas and the crude framework in which it operated were returned to their storage boxes. After reposing for a quarter of a century in the subbasement of the Historical Building, this reminder of the naive entertainment world of a day long past once more has been brought to light to become part of a Centennial art exhibit. Contrasting sharply with the simple schoolhouses and rough halls that housed the show in the 1860's and 1870's, the impressive Minneapolis Institute of Arts is the scene of the first 1949 display. Later in the Centennial year, others will be arranged in the Historical Building. Those who see Stevens' primitive paintings will be given an opportunity to relive a chapter in the social history of the Minnesota frontier while enjoying a form of entertainment that was popular among its pioneer folk.



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