

DR. JORDAN, who is professor of history in the University of Minnesota, has written widely on social and medical history and folklore. The example of American humor which he here presents appears at an opportune time, when attention is focused on Duluth as a result of the passage of the St. Lawrence Seaway Bill.

Proctor Knott's

SPEECH ON DULUTH

Edited by PHILIP D. JORDAN

ON JANUARY 27, 1871, the Honorable James Proctor Knott, Democratic congressman from Kentucky and formerly attorney general of Missouri, sought recognition from the speaker of the House of Representatives.¹ Until then, Knott was known only locally as a wit, but before the day was over his reputation as one of the nation's greatest humorous orators had been established. In addition, he drew national attention to Duluth, which then was a jerry-built, struggling community of a little more than three thousand inhabitants. Nothing that Knott said, however, was a factor, then or later, in Duluth's development as a great city. The city's growth was due primarily to the ore industry and lake shipping. It is true, of course, that what Knott said in jest about the Zenith City turned out to be fact decades later.

It was whispered in the cloakrooms of the House, on the day Knott was to talk,

¹ For biographies of Knott, see *Dictionary of American Biography*, 10:470 (New York, 1933); *Appletons' Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, 3:504 (New York, 1887); and Edwin W. Mills, "The Career of James Proctor Knott in Missouri," in *Missouri Historical Review*, 31:288-294 (April, 1937).

² Lewis H. Haney, *A Congressional History of Railways in the United States, 1850-1887*, 21 (Madison, 1910).

that the middle-aged congressman wished to oppose a bill providing additional land for the St. Croix and Lake Superior Railroad beginning near the St. Croix River at Hudson, Wisconsin, and terminating in Superior. For some reason, which never has been satisfactorily explained, Knott was under the impression—or pretended to be under the impression—that the terminus of the road was to be Duluth.

Sensitive to a growing public opinion against the federal policy of granting public lands to railroads, Knott actually was opposed in general to further consideration of any kind being given the St. Croix and Lake Superior Railroad.² After the Civil War, many politicians realized that the public was resentful of the growing influence of "soulless and heartless" railroad corporations, which were, it was charged, disinterested in the people's welfare. There is no doubt that Knott knew that during the 1850s Congress had made land grants to the state of Wisconsin for railroad purposes, since acts of June 3, 1856, and May 5, 1864, had each mentioned Bayfield and Superior as the termini of proposed roads. Certainly, Knott was aware that the Lake Superior and Mississippi Railroad, chartered on March 5, 1853, had begun operating be-

tween St. Paul and Duluth on August 1, 1870. This road had received generous land grants by 1871.³

Knott could scarcely plead ignorance of what was going on in the north country of Wisconsin and Minnesota. Probably most United States congressmen and senators knew that Jay Cooke, Eastern financier, had for some years interested himself in the Lake Superior and Mississippi Railroad.⁴ Furthermore, it has been said repeatedly that before making his speech Knott carefully studied a map of the Duluth area prepared by Cooke's agents.⁵ During his address, Knott again and again referred to a map which he took with him on the floor—a chart showing concentric circles ranging outward from Duluth and purporting to demonstrate that Duluth was indeed the very center of the world.⁶ Knott was aware that Cooke and the management of the Lake Superior and Mississippi Railroad would not look with equanimity upon the rival St. Croix and Lake Superior Railroad. Its competition with the Lake Superior and Mississippi was no secret.

A visitor to Duluth wrote graphically in 1870 that as early as 1855 a group of Southerners had planned a railroad along the east side of the St. Croix to Superior, where it was hoped to establish a stronghold of slave power in the enemy's country.⁷ Superior was to be a northern metropolis where slaveholders could take their servants in the summer and enjoy the cool breezes of the great lake. "But the war of Rebellion came and put a stop to schemes of that sort," the writer continues. "Minnesota was determined to have the railroad. By running it from St. Paul to the north shore . . . she could keep it entirely within her own borders. . . . Fortunately, when the project seemed on the point of failure, the attention of eminent capitalists of Pennsylvania was called to it, and its success insured. The bonds of the newly organized Lake Superior and Mississippi Railroad Company . . . were put on the market by Jay Cooke, and sold within a week's time."

WHEN KNOTT arose to speak on January 27, James G. Blaine was presiding. What actually occurred is difficult to determine. Legend has it that Knott had forgotten his prepared speech and planned to extemporize. Another story insists that Knott, as a result of an encounter with Blaine, took the temper of the House, discarded a prepared talk, and substituted an impromptu one. It has been charged, too, that the speech made by the congressman from Kentucky actually was written by Colonel Pat Donan, who later prepared colonization pamphlets for the Oregon Railroad and Navigation Company, and the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad and who furnished advertising material to "the great railroads that were carrying immigrants to the far Northwest."⁸

Probably Knott's only prepared speech was the one he actually delivered, though he may well have deliberately created the false impression that he was substituting a

³ Wisconsin Railroad Commissioners, *First Annual Report*, 1874, p. 227; Minnesota Railroad Commissioner, *Reports*, 1871, p. 41; William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 3:119 n. (St. Paul, 1926).

⁴ Ellis P. Oberholtzer, *Jay Cooke, Financier of the Civil War*, 2:130 (Philadelphia, 1907).

⁵ See, for example, S. A. Thompson, "The City of Duluth," in *New England Magazine*, 10:327-348 (May, 1894).

⁶ Although Knott indicated in his speech that he was using a map sent him by the Minnesota legislature, this chart has not been located. A map which the author says "inspired J. Proctor Knott's famous speech," however, is reproduced in Oberholtzer, *Jay Cooke*, 2:228. On page 308 of the same volume, the author writes: "Indeed, the people were so full of isothermal lines, comparative latitudes and glowing facts about climates, crops and distances from New York, Liverpool and Shanghai of new cities set in concentric circles upon the map of the American Northwest, that they were ready to enjoy the flowing satire of J. Proctor Knott."

⁷ F. T. Trowbridge, "A Week at Duluth," in *Atlantic Monthly*, 25:605-613 (May, 1870).

⁸ See the *Chicago Inter-Ocean*, quoted in *Duluth Daily Tribune*, April 3, 1885, for the statement that Knott's speech was prepared by Donan. For further information on Donan, see Edwin C. Torrey, *Early Days in Dakota*, 194-196 (Minneapolis, 1925); Marc M. Cleworth, "Twenty Years of Brown County Agricultural History: 1880-1889," in *South Dakota Historical Collections*, 17:24 (Pierre, 1934); and the *New York Times*, June 24, 1894.

spur-of-the-moment address for a carefully worked-out talk. Whatever the facts, it is known that debate developed as to the length of time Knott could use, and that he was so annoyed when he finally was recognized that he addressed Blaine thus: "I was just going to remark, Mr. Speaker, that I cannot pretend to do justice to this subject inside of ten minutes. It does seem to me, sir, that my facilities for getting time on this floor are so poor that if I was standing on the brink of perdition and the sands were crumbling under my feet I could not get time enough to repeat the Lord's prayer." After further discussion, the Speaker allotted Knott half an hour.⁹

It will be seen that Blaine himself, as has been frequently alleged, did not refuse Knott permission to speak, and that Knott was not only admonishing the Speaker when he mentioned his difficulty in securing time, but was also indirectly addressing those members of the House who in the past had tried to curtail him.

The humorous address which followed, marked by inaccuracies of fact and by misquotations, was not typical of Knott's style or delivery. Frequently interrupted by tremendous bursts of laughter, he made a speech unlike any he had ever given before or was ever to give again. Although in earlier years he had won for himself a reputation as a raconteur and was known as one of the best storytellers in Washington, his usual style when addressing the House was fairly humdrum.¹⁰ This talk not only

gave him a reputation which perhaps he did not deserve, but also killed the grant for the St. Croix and Lake Superior Railroad. The bill was returned to the committee on public lands on February 2, 1871, and there it died. The St. Croix and Lake Superior, from Hudson to Superior, never was built. In 1883, however, the North Wisconsin Railroad, beginning at Hudson, reached both Bayfield and Superior. This road was a part of the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Omaha Railway Company, which, in turn, was merged with the Chicago and North Western system.

Knott's speech, of course, was first published in the Congressional Globe for January 27, 1871. The day following, it was mentioned in the St. Paul Pioneer, and a few days later the same paper printed portions of it. On February 11, 1871, the Duluth Minnesotian carried excerpts. Thereafter, Minnesota newspapers spoke of it again and again.¹¹

Apparently it first was printed as a separate pamphlet by the federal government in 1871. The Northern Pacific Railroad Company issued a version that was given away in dining cars, and portions were reprinted over and over by private individuals. The Duluth Chamber of Commerce frequently published the speech to show that the statements made "in ridicule and derision" turned out to be facts "in reality." These Duluth reprintings began to appear shortly before 1890, when the city's population had jumped to more than thirty thousand and when economic prosperity and growth were assured. By the turn of the century, parts of Knott's Duluth speech were included in most of the nation's major anthologies of orations, and in 1944 sections were printed in a collection of folklore.¹²

But in these reprintings, most of which are incomplete, there has been no general fidelity to the master text as first published in the Congressional Globe. So many partial reprintings have resulted in inaccurate and corrupted texts. This confusion was compounded by all manner of legends growing

⁹ *Congressional Globe*, 41 Congress, 3 session, vol. 2, p. 791; Robert C. Evans, "John Proctor Knott," in *Centre College Magazine*, 1:3 (July, 1928); interview with John Proctor Knott's nephew, Joseph Proctor Knott, professor of French at Centre College, by Frank H. Heck, February 3, 1953, as reported in the latter's letter of the same date to the writer.

¹⁰ "The Funny Man in Congress," in *Harper's Weekly*, 34:563 (July 19, 1890).

¹¹ For a few examples, see *Duluth Evening Herald*, August 16, 1890; *Duluth Herald*, October 6, 1922; *Minneapolis Journal*, September 19, 1930; *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, January 29, 1950.

¹² A bibliography of the various versions follows on page 78.

out of the situation which occasioned the speech. For example, Knott has been credited with assigning to Duluth in his 1871 speech the nickname of "The Zenith City of the Unsalted Seas." Knott did not originate the phrase and it does not appear in the address. Dr. Thomas Foster, a Duluth newspaper editor, first used the phrase on July 4, 1868, in a speech before Duluth and Superior people at Minnesota Point.¹³

In order to make available an exact transcript, the text that follows has been taken from the first printing as recorded in the Congressional Globe for January 27, 1871. Original spelling and punctuation have been followed. From the time Knott began to speak until, after an interruption, he was permitted to finish, no portion of the original has been deleted.

THE HOUSE having under consideration the joint resolution (S.R. No. 11) extending the time to construct a railroad from the St. Croix river or lake to the west end of Lake Superior and to Bayfield —

Mr. KNOTT said:

Mr. SPEAKER: If I could be actuated by any conceivable inducement to betray the sacred trust reposed in me by those to whose generous confidence I am indebted for the honor of a seat on this floor; if I could be influenced by any possible consideration to become instrumental in giving away, in violation of their known wishes, any portion of their interest in the public domain for the mere promotion of any railroad enterprise whatever, I should certainly feel a strong inclination to give this measure my most earnest and hearty support; for I am assured that its success would materially enhance the pecuniary prosperity of some of the most valued friends I have on earth; friends for whose accommodation I would be willing to make almost any sacrifice not involving my personal honor or my fidelity as the trustee of an express trust. And that fact of itself would be sufficient to countervail almost any objection I might entertain to the passage of this bill not inspired by an imperative and inexorable sense of public duty.

But, independent of the seductive influences of private friendship, to which I admit I am, perhaps, as susceptible as any of the gentlemen I see around me, the intrinsic merits of the

measure itself are of such an extraordinary character as to commend it most strongly to the favorable consideration of every member of this House, myself not excepted, notwithstanding my constituents, in whose behalf alone I am acting here, would not be benefited by its passage one particle more than they would be by a project to cultivate an orange grove on the bleakest summit of Greenland's icy mountains. [Laughter.]

Now, sir, as to those great trunk lines of railway, spanning the continent from ocean to ocean, I confess my mind has never been fully made up. It is true they may afford some trifling advantages to local traffic, and they may even in time become the channels of a more extended commerce. Yet I have never been thoroughly satisfied either of the necessity or expediency of projects promising such meager results to the great body of our people. But with regard to the transcendent merits of the gigantic enterprise contemplated in this bill I never entertained the shadow of a doubt. [Laughter.]

Years ago, when I first heard that there was somewhere in the vast *terra incognita*, somewhere in the bleak regions of the great Northwest, a stream of water known to the nomadic inhabitants of the neighborhood as the river St. Croix, I became satisfied that the construction of a railroad from that raging torrent to some point in the civilized world was essential to the happiness and prosperity of the American people, if not absolutely indispensable to the perpetuity of republican institutions on this continent. [Great laughter.] I felt instinctively that the boundless resources of that prolific region of sand and pine shrubbery would never be fully developed without a railroad constructed and equipped at the expense of the Government, and perhaps not then. [Laughter.] I had an abiding presentiment that, some day or other, the people of this whole country, irrespective of party affiliations, regardless of sectional prejudices, and "without distinction of race, color, or previous condition of servitude," would rise in their majesty and demand

¹³ Warren Upham, *Minnesota Geographic Names*, 481 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 17 — St. Paul, 1920); Dwight Woodbridge, *History of Duluth and St. Louis County*, 1:347 (Chicago, 1911); Walter van Brunt, comp., *Duluth and St. Louis County*, 1:176 (Chicago, 1921).

an outlet for the enormous agricultural productions of those vast and fertile pine barrens, drained in the rainy season by the surging waters of the turbid St. Croix. [Great laughter.]

These impressions, derived simply and solely from the "eternal fitness of things," were not only strengthened by the interesting and eloquent debate on this bill, to which I listened with so much pleasure the other day, but intensified, if possible, as I read over this morning the lively colloquy which took place on that occasion, as I find it reported in last Friday's *Globe*.¹⁴ I will ask the indulgence of the House while I read a few short passages, which are sufficient, in my judgment, to place the merits of the great enterprise contemplated in the measure now under discussion beyond all possible controversy.

The honorable gentleman from Minnesota, [Mr. (Eugene M.) WILSON,] who I believe is managing this bill,¹⁵ in speaking of the character of the country through which this railroad is to pass, says this:

¹⁴ For the debate of January 19, 1871, from which Knott quotes in the passages that follow, see the *Congressional Globe*, 41 Congress, 3 session, vol. 2, p. 606, 607.

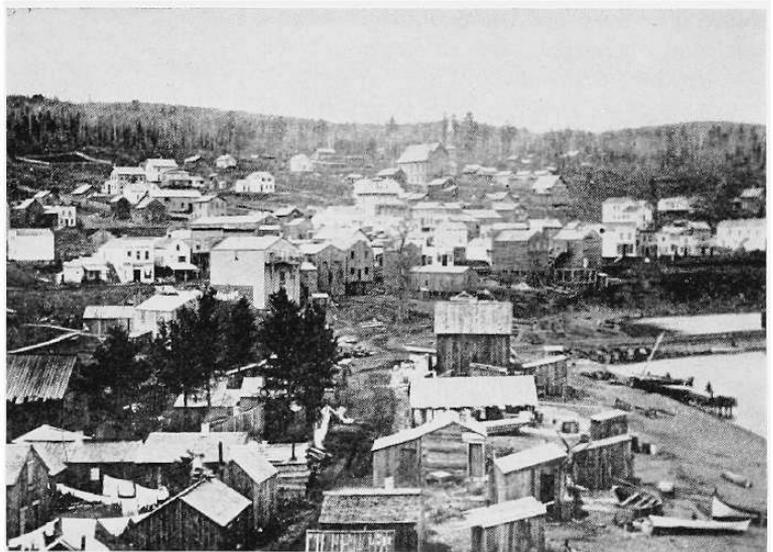
¹⁵ The first names and, when required, the states represented by congressmen have been inserted in the text in parentheses or brackets. For sketches of the individuals mentioned, see *Biographical Directory of the American Congress, 1774-1927* (Washington, 1928).

"We want to have the timber brought to us as cheaply as possible. Now, if you tie up the lands in this way, so that no title can be obtained to them—for no settler will go on these lands, for he cannot make a living—you deprive us of the benefit of that timber."

Now, sir, I would not have it by any means inferred from this that the gentleman from Minnesota would insinuate that the people out in his section desire this timber merely for the purpose of fencing up their farms so that their stock may not wander off and die of starvation among the bleak hills of the St. Croix. [Laughter.] I read it for no such purpose, sir, and make no such comment on it myself. In corroboration of this statement of the gentleman from Minnesota, I find this testimony given by the honorable gentleman from Wisconsin, [Mr. (Cadwallader C.) WASHBURN.] Speaking of these same lands he says:

"Under the bill, as amended by my friend from Minnesota, nine tenths of the land is open to actual settlers at \$2.50 per acre; the remaining one tenth is pine-timbered land, that is not fit for settlement, and never will be settled upon; but the timber will be cut off. I admit that it is the most valuable portion of the grant, for most of the grant is not valuable. It is quite valueless; and if you put in this amendment of the gentleman from Indiana you may as well just kill the bill, for no man and no company will take the grant and build the road."

VIEW of Duluth
in the
early 1870s



I simply pause here to ask some gentleman better versed in the science of mathematics than I am to tell me if the timbered lands are in fact the most valuable portion of that section of country, and they would be entirely valueless without the timber that is on them, what the remainder of the land is worth which has no timber on it at all. [Laughter.]

But further on I find a most entertaining and instructive interchange of views between the gentleman from Arkansas, [Mr. (Anthony A. C.) ROGERS,] the gentleman from Wisconsin, [Mr. WASHBURN,] and the gentleman from Maine, [Mr. (John A.) PETERS,] upon the subject of pine lands generally, which I will tax the patience of the House to read:

"Mr. ROGERS. Will the gentleman allow me to ask him a question?"

"Mr. WASHBURN, of Wisconsin. Certainly.

"Mr. ROGERS. Are these pine lands entirely worthless except for timber?"

"Mr. WASHBURN, of Wisconsin. They are generally worthless for any other purpose. I am perfectly familiar with that subject. These lands are not valuable for purposes of settlement.

"Mr. [John F.] FARNSWORTH [of Illinois]. They will be after the timber is taken off.

"Mr. WASHBURN, of Wisconsin. No, sir.

"Mr. ROGERS. I want to know the character of these pine lands.

"Mr. WASHBURN, of Wisconsin. They are generally sandy, barren lands. My friend from the Green Bay district [Mr. (Philetus) SAWYER] is himself perfectly familiar with this question, and he will bear me out in what I say, that these pine timber lands are not adapted to settlement.

"Mr. ROGERS. The pine lands to which I am accustomed are generally very good. What I want to know is what is the difference between our pine lands and your pine lands.

"Mr. WASHBURN, of Wisconsin. The pine timber of Wisconsin generally grows upon barren, sandy land. The gentleman from Maine, [Mr. PETERS,] who is familiar with pine lands, will I have no doubt say that pine timber grows generally upon the most barren lands.

"Mr. PETERS. As a general thing pine lands are not worth much for cultivation."

And further on I find this pregnant question, the joint production of the two gentlemen from Wisconsin:

"Mr. [Halbert E.] PAINE. Does my friend from Indiana suppose that in any event settlers will occupy and cultivate these pine lands?"

"Mr. WASHBURN, of Wisconsin. Particularly without a railroad?"

Yes, sir, "particularly without a railroad." It will be asked after awhile, I am afraid, if settlers will go anywhere unless the Government builds a railroad for them to go on. [Laughter.]

I desire to call attention to only one more statement, which I think sufficient to settle the question. It is one made by the gentleman from Wisconsin [Mr. PAINE], who says:

"These lands will be abandoned for the present. It may be that at some remote period there will spring up in that region a new kind of agriculture which will cause a demand for these particular lands; and they may then come into use and be valuable for agricultural purposes. But I know, and I cannot help thinking that my friend from Indiana understands, that for the present, and for many years to come, these pine lands can have no possible value other than that arising from the pine timber which stands on them."

Now, sir, who, after listening to this emphatic and unequivocal testimony of these intelligent, competent, and able-bodied witnesses, [laughter,] who that is not as incredulous as St. Thomas himself, will doubt for a moment that the Goshen of America is to be found in the sandy valleys and upon the pine-clad hills of the St. Croix? [Laughter.] Who will have the hardihood to rise in his seat on this floor and assert that, excepting the pine bushes, the entire region would not produce vegetation enough in ten years to fatten a grasshopper? [Great laughter.] Where is the patriot who is willing that his country shall incur the peril of remaining another day without the amplest railroad connection with such an inexhaustible mine of agricultural wealth? [Laughter.] Who will answer for the consequences of abandoning a great and warlike people, in possession of a country like that, to brood over the indifference and neglect of their Government? [Laughter]. How long would it be before they would take to studying the Declaration of Independence and hatching out the damnable heresy of secession? How long before the grim demon of civil discord would rear again his horrid head in our midst, "gnash loud his iron

fangs and shake his crest of bristling bayonets?" [Laughter.]

Then, sir, think of the long and painful process of reconstruction that must follow with its concomitant amendments to the Constitution; the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth articles. The sixteenth, it is of course understood, is to be appropriated to those blushing damsels who are, day after day, beseeching us to let them vote, hold office, drink cock-tails, ride astraddle, and do everything else the men do. [Roars of laughter.] But above all, sir, let me implore you to reflect for a single moment on the deplorable condition of our country in case of a foreign war, with all our ports blockaded, all our cities in a state of siege, the gaunt specter of famine brooding like a hungry vulture over our starving land; our commissary stores all exhausted, and our famishing armies withering away in the field, a helpless prey to the insatiate demon of hunger; our Navy rotting in the docks for want of provisions for our gallant seamen, and we without any railroad communication whatever with the prolific pine thickets of the St. Croix [Great laughter.]

Ah, sir, I could very well understand why my amiable friends from Pennsylvania [Mr. (Leonard) MYERS, Mr. (William D.) KELLEY, and Mr. (Charles) O'NEILL] should be so earnest in their support of this bill the other day, and if their honorable colleague, my friend, Mr. [Samuel J.] RANDALL, will pardon the remark, I will say I considered his criticism of their action on that occasion as not only unjust but ungenerous. I knew they were looking forward with the far reaching ken of enlightened statesmanship to the pitiable condition in which Philadelphia will be left unless speedily supplied with railroad connection in some way or other with this garden spot of the universe. [Laughter.] And besides, sir, this discussion has relieved my mind of a mystery that has weighed upon it like an incubus for years. I could never understand before why there was so much excitement during the last

Congress over the acquisition of Alta Vela.¹⁶ I could never understand why it was that some of our ablest statesmen and most disinterested patriots should entertain such dark forebodings of the untold calamities that were to befall our beloved country unless we should take immediate possession of that desirable island. But I see now that they were laboring under the mistaken impression that the Government would need the guano to manure the public lands on the St. Croix. [Great laughter.]

Now, sir, I repeat I have been satisfied for years that if there was any portion of the inhabited globe absolutely in a suffering condition for want of a railroad it was these teeming pine barrens of the St. Croix. [Laughter.] At what particular point on that noble stream such a road should be commenced I knew was immaterial, and so it seems to have been considered by the draughtsman of this bill. It might be up at the spring or down at the foot-log, or the water-gate, or the fish-dam, or anywhere along the bank, no matter where. [Laughter.] But in what direction should it run, or where it should terminate, were always to my mind questions of the most painful perplexity. I could conceive of no place on "God's green earth" in such straitened circumstances for railroad facilities as to be likely to desire or willing to accept such a connection. [Laughter.] I knew that neither Bayfield nor Superior City would have it, for they both indignantly spurned the munificence of the Government when coupled with such ignominious conditions, and let this very same land grant die on their hands years and years ago rather than submit to the degradation of a direct communication by railroad with the piny woods of the St. Croix; and I knew that what the enterprising inhabitants of those giant young cities would refuse to take would have few charms for others, whatever their necessities or cupidity might be. [Laughter.]

Hence, as I have said, sir, I was utterly at a loss to determine where the terminus of this great and indispensable road should be, until I accidentally overheard some gentleman the other day mention the name of "Duluth." [Great laughter.] Duluth! The word fell upon my ear with peculiar and indescribable charm, like the gentle murmur of a low fountain stealing forth in the midst of roses, or the soft, sweet accents of an angel's whisper in the

¹⁶ Alta Vela is a small guano island in the Caribbean Sea off the south coast of the Dominican Republic. In 1868 President Andrew Johnson refused to order the secretary of state to approve a claim for possession of the island made by certain American adventurers against the Dominican government. *Dictionary of American History*, 1:52 (New York, 1940).

bright, joyous dream of sleeping innocence. Duluth! 'Twas the name for which my soul had panted for years, as the hart panteth for the water-brooks. [Renewed laughter.] But where was Duluth? Never, in all my limited reading, had my vision been gladdened by seeing the celestial word in print. [Laughter.] And I felt a profounder humiliation in my ignorance that its dulcet syllables had never before ravished my delighted ear. [Roars of laughter.] I was certain the draughtsman of this bill had never heard of it, or it would have been designated as one of the termini of this road. I asked my friends about it, but they knew nothing of it. I rushed to the Library and examined all the maps I could find. [Laughter.] I discovered in one of them a delicate, hairlike line, diverging from the Mississippi near a place marked Prescott, which I supposed was intended to represent the river St. Croix, but I could nowhere find Duluth.¹⁷

Nevertheless, I was confident it existed somewhere, and that its discovery would constitute the crowning glory of the present century, if not of all modern times. [Laughter.] I knew it was bound to exist in the very nature of things; that the symmetry and perfection of our planetary system would be incomplete without it, [renewed laughter;] that the elements of material nature would long since have resolved themselves back into original chaos if there had been such a hiatus in creation as would have resulted from leaving out Duluth. [Roars of laughter.] In fact, sir, I was overwhelmed with the conviction that Duluth not only existed somewhere, but that wherever it was it was a great and glorious place. I was convinced that the greatest calamity that ever befell the benighted nations of the ancient world was in their having passed away without a knowledge of the actual existence of Duluth; that their fabled Atlantis, never seen save by the hallowed vision of inspired poesy, was, in fact, but another name for Duluth; that the golden orchard of the Hesperides was but a poetical synonym for the beer-gardens in the vicinity of Duluth. [Great laughter.] I was certain that Herodotus had died a miserable death because in all his travels and with all his geographical research he had never heard of Duluth. [Laughter.] I knew that if the immortal spirit of Homer could look down from

another heaven than that created by his own celestial genius upon the long lines of pilgrims from every nation of the earth to the gushing fountain of poesy opened by the touch of his magic wand, if he could be permitted to behold the vast assemblage of grand and glorious productions of the lyric art called into being by his own inspired strains, he would weep tears of bitter anguish that instead of lavishing all the stores of his mighty genius upon the fall of Ilium it had not been his more blessed lot to crystallize in deathless song the rising glories of Duluth. [Great and continued laughter.] Yet, sir, had it not been for this map, kindly furnished me by the Legislature of Minnesota, I might have gone down to my obscure and humble grave in an agony of despair, because I could nowhere find Duluth. [Renewed laughter.] Had such been my melancholy fate, I have no doubt that with the last feeble pulsation of my breaking heart, with the last faint exhalation of my fleeting breath, I should have whispered, "Where is Duluth?" [Roars of laughter.]

But, thanks to the beneficence of that band of ministering angels who have their bright abodes in the far-off capital of Minnesota, just as the agony of my anxiety was about to culminate in the frenzy of despair, this blessed map was placed in my hands; and as I unfolded it a resplendent scene of ineffable glory opened before me, such as I imagine burst upon the enraptured vision of the wandering peri through the opening gates of paradise. [Renewed laughter.] There, there for the first time, my enchanted eye rested upon the ravishing word "Duluth."

This map, sir, is intended, as it appears from its title, to illustrate the position of Duluth in the United States; but if gentlemen will examine it, I think they will concur with me in the opinion that it is far too modest in its pretensions. It not only illustrates the position of Duluth in the United States, but exhibits its relations with all created things. It even goes further than this. It lifts the shadowy veil of futurity and affords us a view of the golden prospects of Duluth far along the dim vista of ages yet to come.

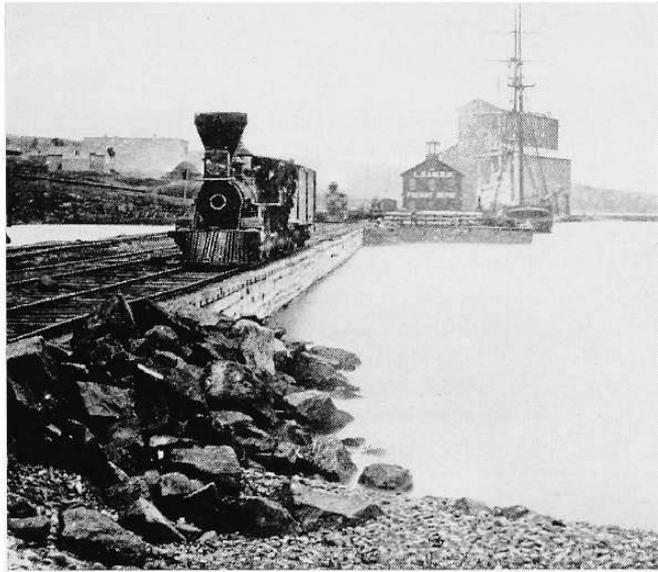
If gentlemen will examine it they will find Duluth not only in the center of the map,

¹⁷ Prescott, Wisconsin, is at the mouth of the St. Croix River.

but represented in the center of a series of concentric circles one hundred miles apart, and some of them as much as four thousand miles in diameter, embracing alike in their tremendous sweep the fragrant savannas of the sunlit South and the eternal solitudes of snow that mantle the ice-bound North. [Laughter.] How these circles were produced is perhaps one of those primordial mysteries that the most skillful paleologist will never be able to explain. [Renewed laughter.] But the fact is, sir, Duluth is preëminently a central place, for I am told by gentlemen who have been so reckless of their own personal safety as to venture away into those awful regions where Duluth is supposed to be that it is so exactly in the center of the visible universe that the sky comes down at precisely the same distance all around it. [Roars of laughter.]

I find by reference to this map that Duluth is situated somewhere near the western end of Lake Superior, but as there is no dot or other mark indicating its exact location I am unable to say whether it is actually confined to any particular spot, or whether "it is just lying around there loose." [Renewed laughter.] I really cannot tell whether it is one of those ethereal creations of intellectual frostwork, more intangible than the rose-tinted clouds of a summer sunset; one of those airy exhalations of the speculator's brain, which I am told are ever flitting in the form of towns and cities along those lines of railroad, built with Government subsidies, luring the unwary settler as the mirage of the desert lures the famishing traveler on, and ever on, until it fades away in the darkening horizon, or whether it is a real, *bona fide*, substantial city, all "staked off," with the lots marked with their owners' names, like that proud commercial metropolis recently discovered on the desirable shores of San Do-

¹⁸ This reference to a "proud commercial metropolis" on the shores of Santo Domingo is a satirical comment on the colonization scheme of William L. Cazneau and others. Just prior to the Civil War, they formed the American West Indies Company to promote settlement on the south coast. In an effort to safeguard their interests, Cazneau and his associates so influenced President Grant that he hoped to annex the Dominican Republic. For a full discussion of Dominican annexation as touched upon here and in footnote 25, see Charles C. Tansill, *The United States and Santo Domingo, 1798-1873* (Baltimore, 1938).



EARLY rail line on the Duluth water front

mingo.¹⁸ [Laughter.] But, however that may be, I am satisfied Duluth is there, or thereabout, for I see it stated here on this map that it is exactly thirty-nine hundred and ninety miles from Liverpool, [laughter;] though I have no doubt, for the sake of convenience, it will be moved back ten miles, so as to make the distance an even four thousand. [Renewed laughter.]

Then, sir, there is the climate of Duluth, unquestionably the most salubrious and delightful to be found anywhere on the Lord's earth. Now, I have always been under the impression, as I presume other gentlemen have, that in the region around Lake Superior it was cold enough for at least nine months in the year to freeze the smoke-stack off a locomotive. [Great laughter.] But I see it represented on this map that Duluth is situated exactly half way between the latitudes of Paris and Venice, so that gentlemen who have inhaled the exhilarating airs of the one or basked in the golden sunlight of the other may see at a glance that Duluth must be a place of untold delights, [laughter,] a terrestrial paradise, fanned by the balmy zephyrs of an eternal spring, clothed in the gorgeous sheen of ever-blooming flowers, and vocal with the silvery melody of nature's choicest songsters. [Laughter.] In fact, sir, since I have seen this map I have no doubt that Byron was vainly endeavoring to convey some faint conception of the delicious charms of Duluth when his poetic soul gushed forth in the rippling strains of that beautiful rhapsody —

“Know ye the land of the cedar and vine,
 Where the flowers ever blossom, the beams
 ever shine;
 Where the light wings of Zephyr, oppressed
 with perfume,
 Wax faint o’er the gardens of Gul in her bloom;
 Where the citron and olive are fairest of fruit,
 And the voice of the nightingale never is mute;
 Where the tints of the earth and the hues of the
 sky,
 In color though varied, in beauty may vie?”¹⁹

[Laughter.]

As to the commercial resources of Duluth, sir, they are simply illimitable and inexhaustible, as is shown by this map. I see it stated here that there is a vast scope of territory, embracing an area of over two million square miles, rich in every element of material wealth and commercial prosperity, all tributary to Duluth. Look at it, sir, [pointing to map.] Here are inexhaustible mines of gold, immeasurable veins of silver, impenetrable depths of boundless forest, vast coal-measures, wide, extended plains of richest pasturage, all, all embraced in this vast territory, which must, in the very nature of things, empty the untold treasures of its commerce into the lap of Duluth. [Laughter.]

Look at it sir, [pointing to map,] do not you see from these broad, brown lines drawn around this immense territory that the enterprising inhabitants of Duluth intend some day to inclose it all in one vast corral, so that its commerce will be bound to go there whether it would or not? [Great laughter.] And here, sir, [still pointing to the map,] I find within a convenient distance the Piegan Indians, which, of all the many accessories to the glory of Duluth, I consider by far the most inestimable. For, sir, I have been told that when the smallpox breaks out among the women and children of that famous tribe, as it sometimes does, they afford the finest subjects in the world for the strategical experiments of any enterprising military hero who desires to improve himself in the noble art of war, [laughter;]²⁰ especially for any valiant lieutenant general whose

“Trenchant blade, Toledo trusty,
 For want of fighting has grown rusty,
 And eats into itself for lack
 Of somebody to hew and hack.”²¹

[Great laughter.]

Sir, the great conflict now raging in the Old

World has presented a phenomenon in military science unprecedented in the annals of mankind, a phenomenon that has reversed all the traditions of the past as it has disappointed all the expectations of the present.²² A great and warlike people, renowned alike for their skill and valor, have been swept away before the triumphant advance of an inferior foe, like autumn stubble before a hurricane of fire. For aught I know the next flash of electric fire that shimmers along the ocean cable may tell us that Paris, with every fiber quivering with the agony of impotent despair, writhes beneath the conquering heel of her loathed invader. Ere another moon shall wax and wane the brightest star in the galaxy of nations may fall from the zenith of her glory never to rise again. Ere the modest violets of early spring shall ope their beauteous eyes the genius of civilization may chaunt the wailing requiem of the proudest nationality the world has ever seen, as she scatters her withered and tear-moistened lilies o’er the bloody tomb of butchered France. But, sir, I wish to ask if you honestly and candidly believe that the Dutch [*Germans*] would have ever overrun the French in that kind of style if General Sheridan had not gone over there and told King William and Von Moltke how he had managed to whip the Piegan Indians.²³ [Great laughter.]

And here, sir, recurring to this map, I find in the immediate vicinity of the Piegans “vast herds of buffalo” and “immense fields of rich wheat lands.”

[Here the hammer fell.]

¹⁹ This is not a direct quotation from Byron. It may be a paraphrase on Byron’s poem, *The Bride of Abydos*, canto 1, stanza 1, or on Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, book 3, chapter 1. It may, of course, be directly quoted from another writer, but diligent search has failed to locate such a poet.

²⁰ On January 23, 1870, while the Indians were suffering from smallpox, Major Eugene M. Baker struck at a Piegan camp on the Marias River in Montana and killed 173, including many women and children. The incident drew censure from many members of Congress. The Piegan, of course, never resided in Minnesota.

²¹ From Samuel Butler, *Hudibras*, part 1, canto 1, line 359.

²² Here Knott refers to the Franco-German War of 1870–71.

²³ General Philip Sheridan accompanied the German army in the field in the war against France in 1870–71. Count Helmuth von Moltke was in command of the German forces.

[Many cries: "Go on!" "Go on!"]

The SPEAKER. Is there objection to the gentleman from Kentucky continuing his remarks? The Chair hears none. The gentleman will proceed.

Mr. KNOTT. I was remarking, sir, upon these vast "wheat fields" represented on this map in the immediate neighborhood of the buffaloes and the Piegans, and was about to say that the idea of there being these immense wheat fields in the very heart of a wilderness, hundreds and hundreds of miles beyond the utmost verge of civilization, may appear to some gentlemen as rather incongruous, as rather too great a strain on the "blankets" of veracity. But to my mind there is no difficulty in the matter whatever. The phenomenon is very easily accounted for. It is evident, sir, that the Piegans sowed that wheat there and plowed it in with buffalo bulls. [Great laughter.] Now, sir, this fortunate combination of buffaloes and Piegans, considering their relative positions to each other and to Duluth, as they are arranged on this map, satisfies me that Duluth is destined to be the beef market of the world.

Here, you will observe, [pointing to the map] are the buffaloes, directly between the Piegans and Duluth, and here, right on the road to Duluth, are the Creeks.²⁴ Now, sir, when the buffaloes are sufficiently fat from grazing on those immense wheat fields you see it will be the easiest thing in the world for the Piegans to drive them on down, stay all night with their friends, the Creeks, and go into Duluth in the morning. [Great laughter.] I think I see them now, sir, a vast herd of buffaloes, with their heads down, their eyes glaring, their nostrils dilated, their tongues out, and their tails curled

²⁴ Knott doubtless intended to refer to the Cree, some of whom resided in Manitoba just north of the Minnesota boundary. On the map reproduced in Oberholtzer, *Jay Cooke*, 2:228, the Cree are located northwest of Duluth, about halfway between that city and the land of the Piegan. Knott's reference to the Creeks, who lived in the southeastern United States, indicates that his knowledge of Indian tribes must have been slight indeed.

²⁵ In 1868, the dictator of Santo Domingo requested the United States to take steps preliminary to the annexation of this republic. The matter dragged along until President Grant induced Congress to send a commission to the island to investigate. The Senate, in April, 1871, tabled the commission's report, and the annexation project was dead.

over their backs, tearing along toward Duluth, with about a thousand Piegans on their grass-bellied ponies, yelling at their heels! [Great laughter.] On they come! And as they sweep past the Creeks they join in the chase, and away they all go, yelling, bellowing, ripping, and tearing along, amid clouds of dust, until the last buffalo is safely penned in the stockyards of Duluth! [Shouts of laughter.]

Sir, I might stand here for hours and hours, and expatiate with rapture upon the gorgeous prospects of Duluth, as depicted upon this map. But human life is too short and the time of this House far too valuable to allow me to linger longer upon the delightful theme. [Laughter.] I think every gentleman on this floor is as well satisfied as I am that Duluth is destined to become the commercial metropolis of the universe, and that this road should be built at once. I am fully persuaded that no patriotic Representative of the American people, who has a proper appreciation of the associated glories of Duluth and the St. Croix, will hesitate a moment to say that every able-bodied female in the land between the ages of eighteen and forty-five who is in favor of "women's rights" should be drafted and set to work upon this great work without delay. [Roars of laughter.] Nevertheless, sir, it grieves my very soul to be compelled to say that I cannot vote for the grant of lands provided for in this bill.

Ah! sir, you can have no conception of the poignancy of my anguish that I am deprived of that blessed privilege! [Laughter.] There are two insuperable obstacles in the way. In the first place my constituents, for whom I am acting here, have no more interest in this road than they have in the great question of culinary taste now perhaps agitating the public mind of Dominica, as to whether the illustrious commissioners who recently left this capital for that free and enlightened republic would be better fricasseed, boiled, or roasted,²⁵ [great laughter;] and in the second place these lands, which I am asked to give away, alas, are not mine to bestow! My relation to them is simply that of trustee to an express trust. And shall I ever betray that trust? Never, sir! Rather perish Duluth! [Shouts of laughter.] Perish the paragon of cities! Rather let the freezing cyclones of the bleak Northwest bury it forever beneath the eddying sands of the raging St. Croix! [Great laughter.]

Proctor Knott's Speech: A Chronological Bibliography

- Congressional Globe*, 41 Congress, 3 session, vol. 3, Appendix, p. 66-68.
- Duluth! Speech of Honorable J. Proctor Knott of Kentucky, Delivered in the House of Representatives on the St. Croix and Superior Land Grant, January 27, 1871* (Washington, 1871).
- Morris C. Russell, *Uncle Dudley's Odd Hours . . . Being the Vagaries of a Country Editor*, 283-296 (Duluth, 1882).
- Henry Watterson, *Oddities in Southern Life and Character*, 266-284 (Boston, 1883).
- C. F. Johnson, ed., *Proctor Knott's Speech on Duluth* (Duluth, 1887).
- Speech of Honorable J. Proctor Knott, Delivered in the House of Representatives, February 1871* (Chicago, Northern Pacific Railroad Company, Dining Car Service, 1887).
- Speech of Proctor Knott, with Statistical Comment Up-to-Date* (Duluth Chamber of Commerce, [1893?]).
- D. J. Brewer, ed., *World's Best Orations*, 7:203-211 (St. Louis, 1901).
- T. B. Reed, ed., *Modern Eloquence*, 8:753-756 (Philadelphia, 1901).
- Chauncey DePew, ed., *Library of Oratory*, 11:425-441 (New York, 1902).
- J. Proctor Knott's Speech on Duluth: The Funniest Speech Ever Delivered in Congress* ([Duluth?], 1904).
- Duluth, the Zenith City of the Unsalted Seas: Speech by J. Proctor Knott, with the Correspondence of William E. Curtis in the Chicago Record-Herald concerning Duluth in 1907, thus Showing What the Years Have Brought Forth* (Duluth Commercial Club, Public Affairs Committee, 1907).
- Proctor Knott on Duluth, the Summer City of the Continent* (Duluth Commercial Club, Public Affairs Committee, 1912).
- Proctor Knott's Speech on Duluth* (Duluth Commercial Club, [1915?]).
- A. H. Thorndike, ed., *Modern Eloquence*, 7:204-216 (New York, 1923).
- D. S. Barry, *Forty Years in Washington*, 328-337 (Boston, 1924).
- Merle Potter, *101 Best Stories of Minnesota*, 32-35 (Minneapolis, 1931).
- Nat Patton, *Remarks in the House of Representatives . . . Including Proctor Knott's Speech on Duluth, Minn., Delivered January 27, 1871* (Washington, 1940).
- B. A. Botkin, ed., *A Treasury of American Folklore*, 342-346 (New York, 1944).

Memorials and Bequests

THE MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY has established a Memorial Fund to which contributions can be made upon the loss of a relative or friend. Such gifts not only serve as appropriate expressions of sympathy and condolence, but they help to support work that is a fitting memorial to any Minnesotan.

Whenever a contribution is made to the Memorial Fund, a suitable card is mailed to the bereaved family, and the names of those whose memories are honored, as well as of contributors, are recorded in a Memorial Book.

Minnesotans are urged to remember the society when making their wills. Bequests, as well as contributions to the Memorial Fund, will be used in forwarding the society's program of collecting, preserving, and disseminating material on Minnesota and its history.

USE the blank that follows in contributing to the Memorial Fund:

ENCLOSED is my contribution of \$_____ to the Minnesota Historical Society's Memorial Fund.

PRESENTED in the name of _____

Please send card to _____

Address _____

Signed _____

Address _____

THE following form is suggested for a clause in the will of anyone who plans to leave a bequest to the society:

I BEQUEATH to the Minnesota Historical Society, incorporated under the laws of Minnesota, the sum of \$_____.

IF YOU prefer that a memorial or bequest be used for a specific purpose, check below:

Purchase of books , manuscripts , pictures , museum objects ; publication work .



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](#).