

NOBLES' party fording
the Sand Hill River



GATEWAY to the NORTHWEST

ST. PAUL and the NOBLES EXPEDITION of 1859

WILLOUGHBY M. BABCOCK

IN THE SPRING of 1859 the citizens of St. Paul were clearly excited over events in the Fraser River country of what is now British Columbia. Headlines in the *St. Paul Daily Pioneer and Democrat* during late May and early June reflected the town's interest in a region which, at first glance, appears to have been too remote to warrant such enthusiasm. "Ho for the Valley of the Saskatchewan!" trumpeted the paper, "Frazer River, Ho!"¹

Gold and commerce were the twin reasons for the capital city's intense interest. Reports of rich strikes on the Fraser River in 1858 had been confirmed, and St. Paulites reasoned that the gold fields there might well rival those of California in richness. St. Paul claimed to be the logical

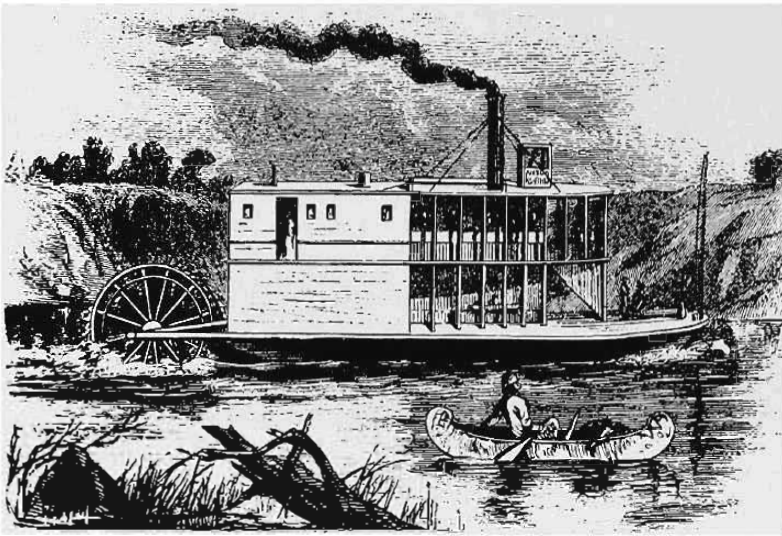
starting point for the trek to the new gold fields, and its residents could see exciting possibilities for expanded commerce with the remote region.²

Early in January, 1859, the St. Paul Chamber of Commerce was organized, and at a regular meeting on January 22, James Wickes Taylor, secretary of the Minnesota and Pacific Railroad, urged the group to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the Fraser River region. He presented before that body an extensive memorandum in which he described the river systems of the Northwest and stressed the navigability of the Red, the Assiniboine,

¹ See especially issues for May 15, 29, June 1, 9, 1859. All citations to the *Pioneer and Democrat* in this article are to the daily edition. Files of newspapers cited are in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

² For early reports of the gold strikes, see the *Pioneer and Democrat*, June 13, 30, July 4, 1858. General information on the Fraser River gold rush may be found in Ray A. Billington, *The Far Western Frontier, 1850-1860*, 243-249 (New York, 1956).

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THE steamer
"Anson Northup"

and the Saskatchewan as routes of commerce.³

To aid in funneling trade from these northern regions to St. Paul, a committee of the newly formed chamber of commerce took steps to encourage steamboat navigation on the Red River. This group reported that two bids had been received, and its recommendation that a bonus of a thousand dollars be offered to Anson Northup, one of the bidders, was adopted. Thus encouraged, Northup hauled the machinery and cabin of his boat, the "Anson Northup," overland from the mouth of Gull River on the Crow Wing to the mouth of the Sheyenne on the Red in the winter of 1858-59, built a hull, and on May 28, 1859, triumphantly inaugurated steamboating on the Red River. Northup's St. Paul backers hoped that the advent of the steamboat in the region would expand and facilitate trade with the northern areas, shorten the trip that had to be made by oxcart between St. Paul and Fort Garry on the present site of Winnipeg, increase the amount of freight that could be carried, and provide for passenger service to connect with a projected stagecoach line.⁴

COUPLED with plans for the establishment of steamboat navigation on the Red

River was an ambitious scheme for an overland expedition to the Rocky Mountains. The proposal grew out of a series of meetings held at St. Paul during the summer of 1858 to consider "the best measures for establishing an emigrant route" to the new mines via the Red and Saskatchewan river valleys and to explore the commercial possibilities and potential importance for St. Paul of the Red River-Saskatchewan trade.⁵

On April 19, 1859, the St. Paul Common Council took steps to make such an expedition a reality by adopting a resolution which stated that "The exploration of the immense and fertile districts Northwest of Minnesota is an object of paramount importance to this City and State, and a general interest prevails in the Northwest for the speedy organization of a party for that

³ On the organization of the chamber of commerce, see the *Daily Minnesotian* (St. Paul), January 20, 1859; and the *Pioneer and Democrat*, January 22, 1859. The text of Taylor's talk appears in issues of the latter paper for January 25, 26, 1859.

⁴ On the "Anson Northup," see the *Pioneer and Democrat*, February 15, March 25, May 20, 26, June 15, 17, 19, 29, July 15, 1859.

⁵ On the events of 1858, see the *St. Paul Daily Times*, July 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, 18, 25, 1858. For accounts of an advance party of Minnesotans who went to the mines in 1858 and sent back information to Nobles, see the *Faribault Central Republican*, July 21, 28, 1858; and the *Pioneer and Democrat*, May 17, 1859.

purpose." The council therefore requested that "Col. William H. Nobles, of Saint Paul, and Gen. S. B. Olmstead of Fort Ripley . . . organize and lead a party of exploration from Minnesota to British Columbia, during the spring and summer of 1859." These gentlemen were asked "to communicate . . . to the next meeting of the Council, a particular statement of the routes which they may select, and of the requisite outfit for those desiring to join the expedition."⁶

Nobles, a blacksmith and wagonmaker who had settled at St. Paul in 1848, had been an active participant in the 1858 meetings to promote a northern route via St. Paul and the Red River to the new gold fields on the Fraser River. He was a veteran of the California gold rush, having traveled west with a party of gold seekers in 1850. In 1851 or early 1852 he discovered an easy pass, later to bear his name, through the Sierra Nevada Mountains near present-day Susanville, California. He returned to St. Paul in the summer of 1852, having guided a party over his new route. Thereafter he vigorously advocated the establishment of an emigrant route from

Minnesota to California by way of Nobles Pass. In 1856 and 1857 he served as superintendent for the surveying of a wagon road from Fort Ridgely to South Pass, near what is now Lander, Wyoming, a work terminated by financial troubles with the government. Having thus acquired a reputation as an experienced plainsman and guide, Nobles was a logical choice to lead an exploring party to the Fraser River gold fields.⁷

Although Olmstead was named by the council as one of the leaders of the expedition, he did not accompany it, and his connection with the proposal is not clear. He seems to have been a farmer who lived near Belle Prairie. He served as president of the territorial council in 1854, but little else is known of him.⁸

WITH A SPEED indicating that they had given the matter previous thought, Nobles and Olmstead accepted the council's proposal and outlined a route from St. Paul to the head of navigation on the Red River, "by steamboat to Pembina; thence northwesterly to the elbow (so called) of the South Saskatchewan, thence westwardly to the sources of that river in the Kootenais Pass of the Rocky Mountains."⁹

The two men proposed to explore the eastern base of the Rockies "carefully prospecting for gold in the mountain streams, and obtaining full particulars of soil, water, timber, and mineral resources as far north as Edmonton on the North Saskatchewan" River. From that settlement, following the Hudson's Bay Company's express route over Athabaska Portage, they would continue to the sources of the Thompson River, where "all accounts now represent the richest gold fields of British Columbia to have been discovered." There the party planned to divide. Olmstead was to go on to the Pacific coast, while Nobles proposed to explore the sources of the Columbia and return to Minnesota via "Lewis and Clark's Pass, the Falls of the Missouri, the Valley of Milk River to Fort Mandan,

⁶ Quoted material may be found in St. Paul Common Council, *Proceedings*, 1858-59, p. 217 (St. Paul, 1859).

⁷ A biographical sketch of Nobles may be found in W. H. C. Folsom, *Fifty Years in the Northwest*, 562 (St. Paul, 1888). On his departure for California and his activities there, see *Minnesota Chronicle and Register* (St. Paul), February 9, April 20, 27, 1850; *Weekly Minnesotian* (St. Paul), August 28, September 11, 1852. On the wagon road, see *Fort Ridgely and South Pass Wagon Road* (37 Congress, 2 session, *House Executive Documents*, no. 35—serial 1129). Nobles Pass is shown on map no. 4 for a "Route Near the Forty-first Parallel," in *Topographical Maps, Profiles, and Sketches accompanying Reports of Explorations and Surveys, to Ascertain the Most Practicable and Economical Route for a Railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean*, vol. 11 (33 Congress, 2 session, *House Executive Documents*, no. 91—serial 801).

⁸ See Warren Upham and Rose B. Dunlap, *Minnesota Biographies, 1655-1912*, 565 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 14).

⁹ Quoted material from Nobles' reply in this and succeeding paragraphs may be found in Common Council, *Proceedings*, 1858-59, p. 222-226.

and via Big Stone Lake and Fort Ridgely to St. Paul." Nobles stated that he hoped to be back in St. Paul by November 15.

The leaders informed the council "that the outfit of a party of ten men for six months must include . . . 15 mules or horses, 5 carts and harness, 10 saddles and bridles, 5 pack saddles, 1 coil of $\frac{3}{4}$ inch manilla rope, 10 bbls. flour in sacks of fifty lbs. each; 5 bbls. pork or 10 sacks of pemmican; 500 lbs. sugar (best quality) in duck sacks of 50 lbs. each; 100 lbs. coffee in thick sacks of 50 lbs. each; 25 lbs. tea in long round tin cans; 50 pounds mackaroni in duck sacks of 25 lbs. each; 25 lbs. salaratus; 10 pairs of best Mackanaw blankets, and \$30 per man in arms and ammunition." They estimated that these supplies would cost "about \$3,000 for ten men — \$300 per man." In addition, the two leaders recommended that each member of the party "provide himself with one coat, three pairs pants, 6 flannel shirts, four under shirts, three pairs drawers, six pairs socks, one pair of boots, all of coarse and strong material."

NOBLES and Olmstead agreed "to provide scientific instruments and a chest of medicines," and reported that Dr. J. D. Goodrich of St. Paul, "a physician of admitted skill," would accompany them. They hoped that "a Naturalist, to be appointed by the Smithsonian Institution," would be in the party, and said that "a literary gentleman of distinction as traveler and author has been invited to join the expedition." Doubtless this was Manton Marble, correspondent for the *New York Evening Post*, who arrived at St. Paul on May 27, 1859, after a comfortable journey of some eighty hours by rail and steamboat from New York.¹⁰ Nobles also informed the public that Norman W. Kittson, who was then mayor of St. Paul, had "consented to act as financial agent," and that Taylor would serve as the expedition's secretary.

"We shall be accompanied by gentlemen of much experience in the mines of Cali-

fornia," Nobles wrote, "and are confident that we shall demonstrate the existence of gold — but this is the least of the motives which prompts us to undertake the expedition. We shall be better satisfied if we can verify the accuracy of the rumors that reach us of the beauty, fertility and salubrity of the mountain valleys from which flow the numerous tributaries of the Saskatchewan." The leaders felt certain that this region "will be found more desirable for the settlement of a populous and prosperous community, than even the . . . valley of the Red River of the North."

They asked all those who wished to accompany the party to "report themselves in St. Paul before the 25th of May," and expressed their willingness to accept up to one hundred volunteers at the rate of three hundred dollars a man. "But it must be understood," they said, that "we reserve the right, at all times, to name the amount of labor to be performed each day, to select the places for camps, the time to halt, the time to move, and the management of the train generally, including the routes to be traveled." They added that any rules adopted by the party would be enforced, and that no liquor would be allowed "except for medicinal purposes."

In so far as its twenty members can be identified, the expedition was composed largely of greenhorns from St. Paul, who were completely without experience in plains travel.¹¹ John P. Dignan, the wagon master, was the proprietor of a billiard saloon there, Nelson Harris was a barkeeper, W. W. Thompson and John Young were real-estate men, and George Reed and Thomas Lynch were clerks. Joseph A. Wheelock, associate editor of the *Pioneer and Democrat*, accompanied the group in the hope of improving his health. Dr.

¹⁰ See the *Evening Post*, June 2, 1859, for Marble's account of his trip.

¹¹ On the members of the party, see Howard S. Brode, ed., "Diary of Dr. A. J. Thibodo," in the *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 31:293 (July, 1940), and Wheelock's dispatch in the *Pioneer and Democrat*, June 24, 1859.

Charles L. Anderson of Minneapolis, representing the Smithsonian Institution, was the expedition's naturalist, and it had two physicians, Dr. Goodrich and Dr. Augustus J. Thibodo of Kingston, Ontario. Marble and John W. Hamilton of the *New York Daily Tribune* were also in the party.

Wheelock, Taylor, Marble, and Hamil-

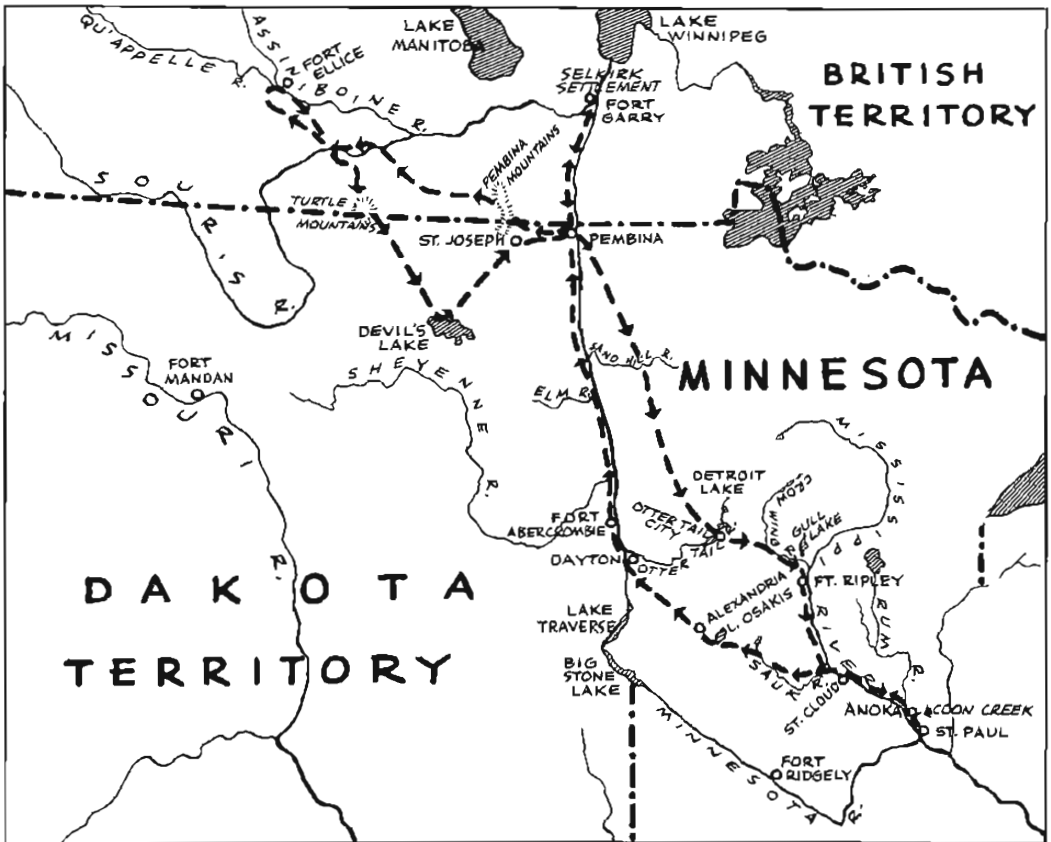
¹² Wheelock's reports on the expedition appear in the *Pioneer and Democrat*, June 23, 24, July 6, 7, 8, September 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 1859. A series of articles by Taylor may be found in issues of the same paper for June 25, 26, July 9, September 30, October 2, 4, 1859. For Marble's dispatches, see the *Evening Post*, June 2, 22, September 14, October 8, 1859. Only one report by Hamilton has been located in the *Daily Tribune* for July 19, 1859. Wheelock's manuscript diary covering the trip and a typescript of Nobles' log, entitled "Exploration in the N.W.: Itineraries of Col. W. H. Nobles & Parties in 1859," are owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

¹³ For reports on the gathering of the party, see the *Pioneer and Democrat*, June 1, 6, 7, 8, 1859.

ton sent back vivid newspaper reports of the journey, and Wheelock and Thibodo kept diaries that provide valuable records of the trip. From Pembina on, Nobles kept a log of the journey in which he recorded daily odometer readings, notes on the weather, and observations on the soil, water, and plant cover along the line of march.¹²

AS THE TIME for departure drew near, mass meetings were held to work out details in the organization of the expedition. Finally on June 4 Nobles put his party under canvas in a camp on the outskirts of St. Paul. Still further delays occurred to accommodate latecomers who wished to join the expedition, and not until Friday, June 10, did it actually begin its long journey.¹³

ROUTE of the Nobles expedition to Fort Ellice and back to St. Paul



According to Marble, "crowds of citizens from St. Paul and vicinity were present" when the expedition broke camp. Describing the confusion and bustle of the scene, the *New Yorker* wrote: "All about the camp-ground were scattered our provisions, sacks of flour and sugar and beans, barrels of pork and bags of dried beef, bags of dried apples and sacks of coffee, canisters of tea and kegs of powder, bags of shot and chunks of lead, rifles, shot-guns, and pistols, blankets — blue, red, white, and green; fishing-rods, pack-saddles, cart-harness, tents and tent-poles, tin kettles, iron saucepans, tin plates, carpet-bags, valises, soap-boxes, axes, and buffalo-ropes, butcher-knives and spy-glasses, and a hundred things besides."¹⁴

Finally at three o'clock in the afternoon all the tents were struck, kits packed, carts loaded, and horsemen mounted. With Colonel Nobles in the lead "driving a light sulky carrying the odometer, the scientific instruments," and a medicine chest, the carts "one after another wheeled into line" and the expedition started on its way to the accompaniment of vociferous farewells. The party traveled only about three miles that day. Its route along present-day St. Anthony and Snelling avenues is now well within the limits of St. Paul. Camp was pitched the first night in Roseville.¹⁵

The first day's march was short, Marble wrote, because "the fatigues of the journey had to be begun *adagio*, and then *crescendo*." Even so, he said, "riding in the sun and the labor and excitement of starting had given us the appetites of Brobdignagians. Visions of savory messes . . . floated through our minds as we pitched the tents and drove their stakes, stacked the guns and spread our blankets for the night, and then waited and listened for the call to supper. Presently it came, and in the one word 'Grub!' and grub it was. The tea, virgin as when gathered in the gardens of the celestials, had imparted none of its virtue to the ravishing hot water, and the decoction which we poured into our tin cups

from the new tin tea-pot deserved no better name than hot slops. We asked for bread and received a stone, or at least something so compact, solid, and yet springy, that if it could be produced in sufficient quantities, it might supersede the pavements of New York, with danger to horses, profit to the contractor, and addition to the general filth — the three essentials. Fried salt pork was the *pièce de resistance*."

Next day the party proceeded to St. Anthony, camping Sunday night near the falls, and Monday evening at Coon Creek. Anoka, Big Lake, and Clear Lake followed as the expedition traveled northward by moderate stages roughly along the route of present-day Highway No. 10 to St. Cloud.

Wheelock humorously reported an incident that occurred at the Coon Creek camp, where an "affectionate Civilization suddenly made its appearance in two carriages at midnight in the midst of a howling storm of wind and rain — in the persons of three young ladies — neither maids nor wives — escorted by three excellent young gentlemen with tolerably good sized bricks in their hats. . . . This unexpected condescension of Crinoline to Corduroy," he continued, "created a profound sensation in the camp, particularly among some of the boys who had the honor of being intimate acquaintances of our fair visitors. If the Crinoline Civilization hugged the Corduroy Nomad," Wheelock added, "as some eye-witnesses averred, you must not blame the Nomad too harshly if he returned the lingering caress."¹⁶

¹⁴ Unless otherwise noted, quoted material in this article is from Marble's "To Red River and Beyond," in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 21:289-311, 581-606; 22:306-322 (August, October, 1860, February, 1861). Marble and Wheelock apparently collaborated on the *Harper's* series, for Marble seems to rely heavily on information contained in Wheelock's diary and in his dispatches to the *Pioneer and Democrat*.

¹⁵ On the departure, see Marble, in *Harper's*, 21:290-292; Thibodo, in *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 31:292; and Wheelock, in *Pioneer and Democrat*, June 23, 1859.

¹⁶ *Pioneer and Democrat*, June 23, 1859.

Both Marble and Wheelock paid their respects to ferries and ferrymen encountered along the route. At Anoka, citizens of the community defrayed the expenses of ferrying the party across the Rum River, and at Lower St. Cloud a friendly party of lumbermen assisted in getting Nobles and his men across the swift current of the Mississippi. In other cases, the party had to fend for itself, improvising rope ferries when bridges had been swept away by spring freshets.¹⁷

THE EXPEDITION reached St. Cloud on Friday, June 17, a week after leaving St. Paul. Marble remarked that the town had "a capital hotel, the Stearns House, two or three churches, a hospital . . . houses for a thousand people," and a newspaper.

Marble and Wheelock called on Jane Grey Swisshelm, editor of the *St. Cloud Democrat*, and found her to be "a large-eyed, lively little woman with a masculine and unhandsome breadth and height of forehead, wearing a plain brown Quakerish dress, and occupied in sewing together a carpet for the principal room in her new house. . . . She was very busy," wrote Marble, "and therefore kept her position on the floor and went on with her work, telling us, however, that she was glad we came, begging us to go on and talk, but launching her bark in the current of conversation before we had knocked away the shores of our own."

Wheelock, in the *Pioneer and Democrat* of June 23, 1859, describes Mrs. Swisshelm more flatteringly as "a piquant, spicy little body, done up, for the nonce, in an affectation of Quaker hideousness of costume, just such a little woman, for all the world, as it refreshes one's soul to quarrel with."

Mrs. Swisshelm showed the two newspapermen her "printing-office and sanctum."

¹⁷ See Marble, in *Harper's*, 21:293; *Pioneer and Democrat*, June 23, 1859.

¹⁸ A trip made by Andrews and Charles Hallock was described by Hallock under this title in *Harper's*, 18:602-620, 19:37-54 (April, June, 1859).



FERRY over the Rum River near Anoka

It was, Marble said, "a small apartment partitioned off from the main room, long and narrow. In one corner stood the editorial desk, with a pile of exchanges surmounted by the professional scissors and paste-pot. She had been compelled to use the sanctum as a living room also," and confusion reigned supreme, "for it was not large enough to swing a cat comfortably in."

On Saturday night, June 18, Nobles and some of his associates were entertained at what Marble called "a particular and public supper" held in the Willis House at St. Cloud. "For my part," he commented, "I remember nothing of it except that the presiding officer was C. C. Andrews, immortalized in 'The Red River Trail,'¹⁸ a lawyer who is making his mark in the northwest, and that, after his sensible brief speech, somebody got up and told who built the first wagon in Minnesota, and somebody else expressed the opinion that the head of navigation on the Mississippi was not St. Paul, nor S'n'anthony, nor St. Cloud, but Fort Edmonton on the Saskatchewan." The man who claimed to have built the

first wagon and who extolled the virtues of the Saskatchewan country was Nobles himself. Marble, too, contributed a few well-chosen remarks upon this occasion. Judging from the lists of arrivals at the leading St. Cloud hotels, most of the members of the expedition made good use of this last stop within the limits of civilization.¹⁹

ON MONDAY, June 20, the expedition started off up the Sauk Valley, encountering the usual vicissitudes of travel over a Red River trail. Horses and mules ran away, numerous streams had to be crossed, and pathways through countless sloughs must be found by experimentation. "So far we had been treading the warp and woof of civilization," Marble remarked, "now we began to slip off the fringes of its outermost skirts. Our direction was northwest," he continued, "by the valley of Sauk River, through the lake district of Middle Minnesota to the head of navigation on Red River. Such articles as were needed had been added to our outfit, including a boat to cross streams in, which served for a wagon box on dry land."²⁰

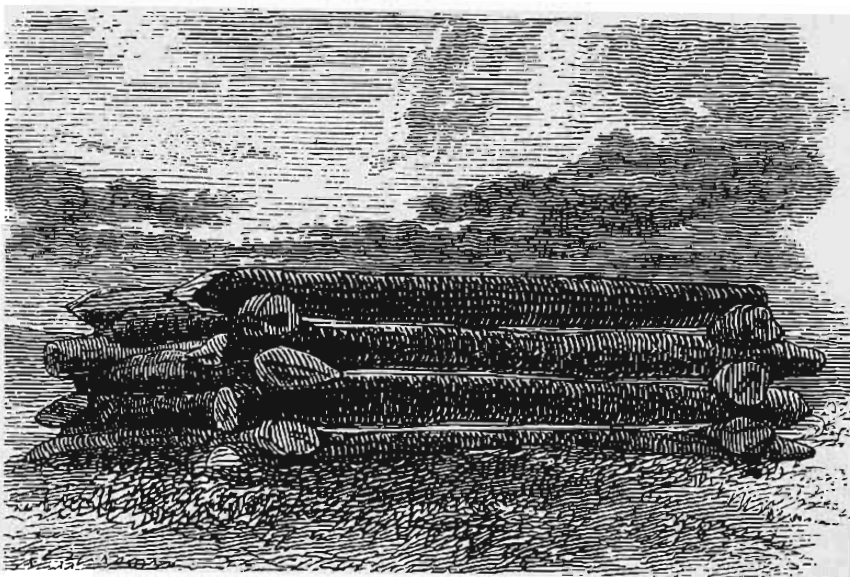
As for the road, Marble remarked that the "sloughs were innumerable, and indeed innumerable they continued to be for weeks

and weeks, only approaching the limits of mathematical calculation as we neared Pembina. . . . The only external indication of some kinds of sloughs is a ranker growth of grass, perhaps of a different color, in the low ground between two hills of a rolling prairie. Again, on a level prairie, where the road seems the same as that you have been traveling dry shod, your horse's hoofs splash in wet grass. This goes on, worse and worse, till you get nervous and begin to draw up your heels out of the water; and so, perhaps, for a mile, whether in water or out of it you can not tell, horses up to their bellies trudging through water and grass, carts sinking deeper than the hubs, you travel at the rate of one mile in 2 [hours,] 40 [minutes]."

Marble and Wheelock were riding Indian ponies, but the sloughs presented even greater problems for the carts. "It is the wagon-master's business," wrote Marble,

¹⁹ For a full account of the banquet and lists of arrivals at the leading hotels, see the *St. Cloud Democrat*, June 23, 1859.

²⁰ For day-by-day accounts of the expedition's passage through the Sauk Valley, see Marble, in *Harpers's*, 21:297-299; Thibodo, in *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 31:293-296; *Pioneer and Democrat*, September 7, 1859; and Wheelock diary, June 20 to July 3, 1859.



CLAIM shanty
in the
Sauk Valley

GETTING out
of a slough



“to ride ahead of the train a few hundred yards, and, on coming to a slough, to force his horse carefully back and forth through it till he finds the best place for crossing. I have fished for trout in Berkshire streams so small that, to an observer a hundred yards distant, I must have seemed to be bobbing for grasshoppers in a green meadow,” the correspondent commented, “but the appearance is not more novel than to see a strong horse plunging and pitching in a sea of green grass that seems to have as solid a foundation as that your own horse’s hoofs are printing.”

Some sloughs, Marble continued, were nothing but “mud from one side to the other—mud bottomless and infinite. . . . The foremost cart approaches, and, at the first step, the mule sinks to his knees. Some mules lie down at this point; but most of ours were sufficiently well broken to make one more spasmodic leap, and, though the water or mud went no higher than their fetlocks, then and there they laid them down. This is the moment for human intervention, and, on the part of profane mule-drivers, for an imprecation of divine

intervention. The men get off their horses and carts, and hurry to the shafts and wheels, tugging and straining, while one or two yell at and belabor the discouraged and mulish mule.” Marble concluded “that people on railroad cars don’t realize what they have to be thankful for.”

In spite of the difficult terrain, the New Yorker thought the Sauk Valley “one of the garden spots of Minnesota.” He noted that settlers and land speculators had been moving into the region. “Claim-stakes and claim-shanties speck the road from one end of the river to the other,” he said, observing that some of them had been “built in good faith, had been lived in, and land was tilled around them. Not a few, however, were of the other sort, built to keep the letter of the law; four walls merely, no windows, door, or roof.²¹ We often found it convenient,” he added, “to camp near these edifices, and saved ourselves the trouble of going half a mile for wood when we found it cut so near at hand.”

While traversing this portion of the route, the party was thoroughly drenched by a prairie thunderstorm. Marble was impressed by the thunder, which “was so near, prolonged, and hurtling, that it was enough to make a brave man shiver to remember that his trowsers had a steel buckle. All day and all night the tempest con-

²¹ The terms of the pre-emption law then in force provided that qualified persons could claim a hundred and sixty acres of unoccupied public lands if they would “inhabit and improve the same” and “erect a dwelling thereon.” See United States, *Statutes at Large*, 5: 453–458.

tinued," he said, "rain pouring, lightning flashing round the whole circuit of the heavens, and the thunder unintermitted."

BY SUNDAY, June 26, the expedition was comfortably encamped on the shores of Lake Osakis near Alexandria. The weather, according to Marble, was perfect. "The wind came fresh and clear over the lake," which was "surrounded by forests on every side, with only here and there vistas of open prairie." The party spent the day in camp "reading, writing, sewing, fishing, washing, cooking, and mending wagons."

Nobles had been proceeding somewhat slowly in order to take advantage of the road-building activities of the Minnesota Stage Company, which planned to institute triweekly stage service between St. Cloud and Fort Abercrombie on the Red River, where steamboat connections could be made. The first two stages over this route left St. Cloud on June 21 loaded with passengers.²²

Marble was not, however, much impressed with the twelve miles of new road between Lake Osakis and Alexandria. It was, he said, "the very worst road yet." Tired of the slow progress of the carts in Nobles' train, Wheelock and Marble rode on ahead of the party, and on the afternoon of the next day, June 27, emerged from the mosquito-filled woods onto the prairie at "a place, which, when it gets to be a place, is to be called Alexandria." There they found the stagecoach passengers in camp, awaiting the completion of certain bridges, and there, too, they encountered Taylor, actually a member of the Nobles party, who was making the trip to Fort Abercrombie as a guest of the stage company.

"Is it possible," asked Marble, "that I have forgotten to tell the romance of that stage load? Two Scotch girls [*Ellenora and Christina Sterling*], sisters, journeying without any protection save their good looks and good sense, from Scotland to Lake Athabasca, where one of them [*Elle-*

nora] was to redeem her plighted faith and marry a Hudson Bay Company's officer. Ocean voyage alone, two or three thousand miles' travel through a strange country to St. Paul alone, then this journey by stage to Fort Abercrombie, camping out and cooking their own food, and voyaging down Red River in a batteau, near a thousand miles more and fired at by Red Lake Indians on the way, then journeying with a Company's brigade to Athabasca, going north all the while and winter coming on too, and the mercury traveling down to the bulb; but her courage sinking never a bit." In the *Pioneer and Democrat* of July 7, Wheelock reported that, besides the "two blooming Scotch lassies," the stage also contained three "monimaical Nimrods from England," whom he identified as "Sir Francis Sykes, and Messrs. [Jack] Sheffield and Peters, on their way to Red River to hunt buffalo."²³

ON OVER THE PRAIRIE, from Alexandria to the Otter Tail River, the Nobles party plodded its way, and the two newspapermen rhapsodized over the hills and lakes of the region. "It was our habit to ride ahead of the train a mile or two, or behind it, if we staid to hunt or sketch or for sight-seeing," wrote Marble. Thus, the two men were the first to see the waters of the Red River. The expedition celebrated the Fourth of July by reaching the river at Dayton, where, said Marble, "the present population numbers one. They live alone by himself," he continued facetiously, "in a breezy log-house, with a little off-shoot containing bunks and a cooking-stove, and whose walls are hung with dried sturgeons and catfishes, caught in the river."²⁴

That night, as the party was making

²² On the stage route, see Russell Blakeley, "Opening of the Red River to Commerce and Civilization," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 8:51, 63, 66 (1898); and the *St. Cloud Democrat*, June 23, 1859.

²³ See also Marble's dispatch in the *Evening Post*, July 2, 1859; Wheelock's in the *Pioneer and Democrat*, September 9, 1859; and Thibodo, in *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 31:300.



PARTIALLY completed cantonments at Fort Abercrombie in 1859

camp, a train of Red River carts came along "one cart after another wheeling by in long procession—scores upon scores, each wheel in every cart having its own individual creek or shriek, and each cart drawn by an ox harnessed in rawhide, one driver to three carts. The drivers were all half-breeds, dressed in every variety of costume, but nearly all showing some flash of gaudy color in the invariable belt or sash, or in the moccasins, and politely touching the cap with a 'Bon jour!' to such of us as stood near enough to return the salutation." The men of Nobles' party "exchanged the news and friendly questionings" with the leader of the train.²⁵

²⁵ In the *Pioneer and Democrat* of September 8, Wheelock identifies the lone resident of Dayton as a "Mr. Wright," probably Mathiel Wright, who is listed for that place in the population schedules of the manuscript census of 1860 for Otter Tail County, in the custody of the Minnesota Historical Society.

²⁶ For information on the Red River trade, see J. Fletcher Williams, *A History of the City of Saint Paul*, 304–308 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 4).

²⁷ Simpson's 1850 trip is described in "Journeys of Sir George Simpson, 1820–1860," in *The Beaver*, 33 (June, 1936). See also Thibodo, in *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 31:297.

Next morning during breakfast, the Nobles expedition had more visitors—"Sir George Simpson, the Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company in America, and his attendants. He was just returning from his annual visit to Norway House," explained Marble, "and was only seven days from Fort Garry. He was accompanied by relays of horses, and himself rode in an old buggy at a spanking gait." In the correspondent's opinion, Simpson's voice, "which is said to make chief factors and chief traders and chief clerks tremble, and which makes and mars fortunes in Rupert's Land, was to us strangers very pleasant in its tones. Our eyes followed the white round-topped hat and white capote, as long as they were visible, with great interest."²⁶

The expedition continued its journey to Fort Abercrombie, where it stopped briefly. The fort had not yet been completed, but Marble described "the one building erected for the commanders' quarters, and the canvas store-houses, which are built upon the prairie near the river bank. The log-houses, which officers and privates at present occupy," he went on, "are all built in a quadrangle upon a pear-shaped promontory,



THE fort at
Pembina

surrounded by water, and a trifle lower than the level of the prairie." Near the fort, tied up to the bank after its trial runs was the "Anson Northup," and Wheelock and Marble crossed the river aboard the boat, swimming their horses over.²⁷

The train did not cross the Red River at the fort, but "continued on for about fifty miles down the east side" to a spot near the mouth of the Sheyenne. Marble complained of the mosquitoes that "abounded, biting our hands, and necks, and faces, as we cooked our suppers, and flying into our eyes and mouths whenever we dared to open either. At this season of the year," he lamented, "mosquitoes are the intolerable curse of travelers, the little black fly the tolerable curse, and wood-ticks the curse."

AFTER CROSSING the river into Dakota Territory, the party took precautions to protect itself against Indian attacks, for it was traveling in hostile Sioux country. Near the Elm River, which flows into the Red about twenty-five miles north of the present city of Fargo, North Dakota, two black spots sighted on the horizon turned out to be buffalo, and a wild cross-country chase ensued. Marble managed to get close enough to wound one of the animals with a bullet from a light rifle, and eventually both were killed. A banquet of buffalo steaks followed.

As the party moved northward, blueberries and strawberries furnished agreeable

variations in the daily menu. One berry-picking expedition almost had a tragic ending, for as the train moved on no one noticed that Taylor, who had joined the party at Fort Abercrombie, had been left behind. After some miles he was missed, and as it was known that he "had lost his spectacles . . . it began to be feared that he had lost himself in the bewildering mazes of his strawberry search." After some discussion, several members of the party were sent back, and the missing man was located on the summit of a distant ridge, utterly lost.²⁸

July 18 found the expedition at Pembina, where its members received welcome mail from home and made the acquaintance of Joseph Rolette, whom Marble called the "King of the Border." The newspaperman described Rolette as short and muscular, with "a bullety head, the neck and chest of a young buffalo bull, small hands and feet . . . full bearded, cap, shirt, natty neckerchief, belt, trowsers, and dandy little moccasins."²⁹

²⁷ Fort Abercrombie, on the west bank of the Red River about thirty-five miles south of the present city of Fargo, North Dakota, was established in 1858 and abandoned in 1877. See *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 1861-65*, 1:744-746 (St. Paul, 1891).

²⁸ For Wheelock's version of this affair, see the *Pioneer and Democrat*, September 10, 1859.

²⁹ A sketch of Rolette may be found in Williams, *Saint Paul*, 160. Taylor contributed a romanticized description of "The Seigniorship of Rolette," to the *Pioneer and Democrat*, October 4, 1859.

Marble continued: "Inside of all this there is a man of character, educated in New York; but with a score of wild, adventurous years on the frontier behind him — a man of character who asserts himself always, whatever the right or wrong of the assertion. Of unfailing good spirits, brimful of humor . . . sticking to his belief in a breezy, healthy way, and believing first and always in Joe Rolette; hospitable and generous beyond reckoning, and reckoning on equal unselfishness in return." Rolette entertained the party royally and assisted Nobles in reorganizing his outfit.

IN PEMBINA, friction which had been developing among members of the expedition brought them to actual blows. Dr. Thibodo wrote in his diary on July 20 that, as a result of this and earlier quarrels, "I am afraid the expedition will go to pieces here." His prediction became a reality two days later when seven men, "a tent full of scape-graces," as Marble called them, separated from the main party and "took their own way to Fraser River."³⁰

After a week of rest, the remaining members of the expedition moved on toward St. Joseph, a settlement about thirty miles west of Pembina. When the party arrived there, "galloping down one of its grassy streets as the sun was sinking behind Pembina Mountain, which fills the western horizon," it found, Marble reported, that the "city was deserted; its one hundred houses were nearly all shut and barred, their accustomed inmates gone to the summer buffalo-hunt." Only a few half-breeds, "very young, or very old, or lame" remained in the settlement.

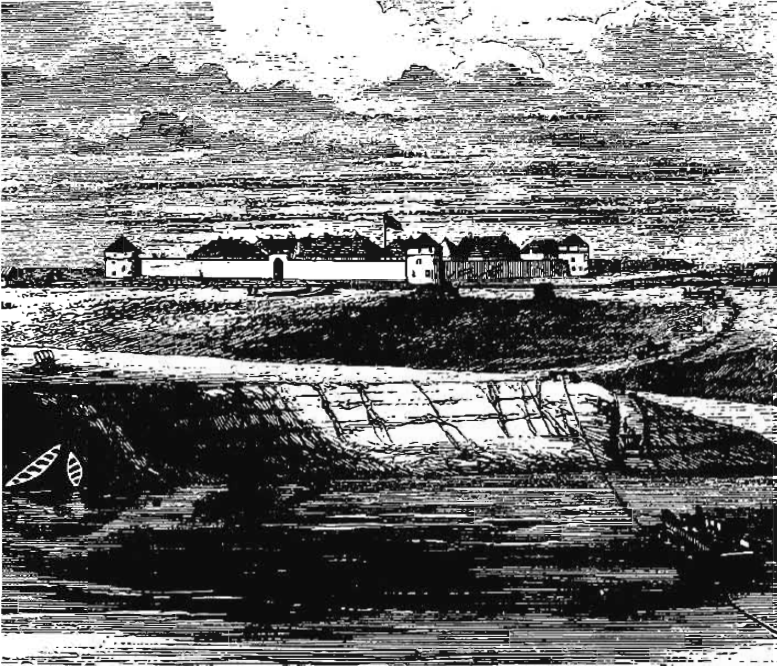
³⁰ For the names of these men and an account of their subsequent fate, see Thibodo, in *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 31:300, 301, 334-347. Wheelock gives a full account of the quarrel in his diary for July 19, 22, 24, 1859, and in the *Pioneer and Democrat*, September 11, 1859.

³¹ On the stay at Fort Ellice, see Wheelock diary, August 11, 1859. For a biographical sketch of McKay, see W. Bleasdel Cameron, "Clan McKay in the West," in *The Beaver*, 3. 4 (September, 1944).

At St. Joseph the Nobles expedition lost two more members. "It became clear," wrote Marble, "that the leader of the expedition could never justify the 'lofty and high sounding phrases of his manifesto,' and that it was even doubtful if we should be able to get through the mountains before snow fall, to say nothing of returning overland. One of the scientific gentlemen [Dr. Goodrich] returned to St. Paul from St. Jo by private conveyance. Another [Taylor] left the expedition at the same place, preferring to go to the Selkirk Settlement. There remained only our one geologist and botanist [Dr. Anderson] to represent science, the through passengers for Fraser River, the leader, and Joseph [Wheelock] and I."

After obtaining fresh horses and a half-breed guide, the party resumed its march. Nobles, Marble, and Wheelock planned to "go as far as possible with the expedition," but to turn back in time to be at Pembina about the first of September. On July 28 the group crossed the boundary into British territory, and on August 9 reached Fort Ellice near the junction of the Assiniboine and Qu'Appelle rivers, where the members were hospitably entertained by William McKay, the Hudson's Bay Company trader in charge of the post. A few days were spent in sight-seeing around the fort, repairing equipment, and securing provisions; then on August 13 the expedition broke up.³¹

IN SPITE OF the lateness of the season and the danger of snow in the mountains, eight members of the group, including Dr. Thibodo and Hamilton of the *Daily Tribune*, determined to continue westward. Nobles appointed Hamilton leader of the group and charged him to carry out the lofty purposes of the expedition. Dr. Anderson, the party's geologist and botanist, started back down the Assiniboine River to Fort Garry in a birch-bark canoe with only an Indian guide for company. Nobles, Wheelock, and Marble, with two guides,



FORT Garry in 1859,
as seen from the river

began the homeward journey together, taking a slightly more southerly route than that by which they had gone to Fort Ellice. Their return trip was enlivened by the antics of a young buffalo cow, which Nobles had obtained from McKay, and by frequent buffalo hunts. They visited the Turtle Mountains and Devil's Lake and were back at St. Joseph by the last day of August.³²

Nobles with Dr. Anderson and Taylor, who rejoined him at Pembina, returned to St. Paul over the Red River trail via Detroit Lake, Otter Tail City, and Crow Wing. Marble and Wheelock followed a week later after visiting Fort Garry and the Selkirk Settlement. As for those members of the group who struggled on westward over the mountains, they reached Fort Walla Walla in Washington Territory early in December after considerable hardship and suffering and great good luck.³³

So ended the Nobles expedition of 1859, which was to have penetrated the Canadian Rockies, explored the headwaters of the Columbia River, and retraced the route of Lewis and Clark through the Missouri River country. At least two reasons may be offered for its failure: Nobles was apparently unable to hold his party together

in the face of developing friction and personal differences among the men, and he delayed too long at St. Paul before beginning the overland journey in mid-June. By the time the group reached Pembina, Nobles feared that the party could not get safely across the mountains before winter set in. Although it would seem that the expedition achieved little in the way of lasting results, it did succeed in focusing the attention of Minnesotans on the geographic features and economic potentialities of the Red River country and the Canadian Northwest.

³² The final breakup of the expedition is described by Thibodo, in *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 31:305; Wheelock diary, August 13, 1859; and Marble, in *Harper's*, 21:598. The return trip to St. Joseph is covered by the latter on p. 599-606, and by Wheelock in his diary for August 14 to 31, 1859.

³³ Interview with Nobles in the *Pioneer and Democrat*, September 29, 1859; Dr. Anderson's return is mentioned in the same paper on October 2. Marble tells of his trip to Fort Garry and back to St. Paul in *Harper's*, 22:306-322. The journey westward to Fort Walla Walla is described by Thibodo, in *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 31:305-347.

THE ILLUSTRATIONS in these pages are among those accompanying Marble's articles in issues of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* for August and October, 1860, and February, 1861. They are doubtless based on original sketches executed by Marble on the journey.



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