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THOREAU *and* MANN

on the Minnesota River, June, 1861

Edited by WALTER HARDING

IN THE SPRING of 1861 Henry David Thoreau, naturalist and author of *Walden*, set out from his native Concord on the last and longest journey of his life—a two-month, three-thousand-mile trip to frontier Minnesota—in a vain attempt to restore his rapidly deteriorating health. He was accompanied by Horace Mann, Junior, the son of the famed educator, who, though only seventeen years old at the time, was already an accomplished naturalist.

Their sojourn in Minnesota has been described, and Thoreau's letters and journals written while in the state have been published. The letters of his young companion, directed to the latter's mother in Concord, have also been published in part, though

some excerpts describing the frontier locale, have never appeared in print.¹

Included in this unpublished material is Mann's account of their journey up the Minnesota River to the Redwood or Lower Sioux Agency, near the present-day Redwood Falls, where the two New Englanders witnessed the 1861 annuity payment to the Sioux Indians. This annual event was marked by a gala excursion, in which the government officials bearing the gold for the Indians were often accompanied by a crowd of ladies and gentlemen from St. Paul, sometimes a brass band, and any chance travelers eager for a glimpse of the savages in their native habitat. Mann and Thoreau, having spent three weeks in St. Anthony and its vicinity, went to St. Paul on June 16, 1861, intending to accompany the excursion if they could "get good accommodations." Embarking the following day on the "Frank Steele," they were among those present at the last annuity payment before the Sioux Outbreak, little more than a year later.²

Here is Mann's description of their journey, written to his mother, a hundred years ago. The following letter was begun "On board the Frank Steele" near Henderson, Minnesota, at 9 A.M., June 18, 1861.³

¹ See John T. Flanagan, "Thoreau in Minnesota," in *Minnesota History*, 16:35-46 (March, 1935); Franklin B. Sanborn, ed., *Familiar Letters of Henry David Thoreau* (Boston and New York, 1894); Franklin B. Sanborn, ed., *The First and Last Journeys of Thoreau* (Boston, 1905). Portions of Mann's letters were published in Robert L. Straker, "Thoreau's Journey to Minnesota," in *New England Quarterly*, 14:549-555 (September, 1941).

² Flanagan in *Minnesota History*, 16:39; Straker in *New England Quarterly*, 14:553.

³ The manuscripts of Mann's letters were included in the estate of the late Robert L. Straker of Yonkers, New York; they are here reproduced with his permission and that of the present Horace Mann of Southwest Harbor, Maine.



A view of New Ulm and the Minnesota River as they appeared in 1860

We are this moment stopping at Henderson on the Minnesota River. You can see where it is by looking on the map. It is a little town of one principal street, about 12 feet above the water *today*, though, I heard someone say that two years ago this spring the street was under water and they were sailing down it in skiffs. We can see the water marks of this spring on the houses up above the first floor. There may be a hundred houses in the town, but they are much scattered and I cannot see more than half that number.

We left St. Paul last night about 5 o'clock with Governor [Alexander] Ramsey, the Governor of Minnesota, on board and about 25 volunteers on board going up to Fort Ridgely.⁴

Coming up this morning we say [*sic*] a field, or rather a meadow on the banks of the river, which was pink with wild roses.

The Minnesota River is a very crooked one, and I suppose we have gone ten miles by water which would have been two or three in a straight line to go from one end of this town to where we are now stopping. We have to double on ourselves several times perhaps like this [*a wavy line*] and sometimes so sharp a bend that they have to reverse one wheel of the steamer while the other goes ahead and so turn round right where they are. The river is very narrow being in some places that we have come past not more than 7 or 8 rods wide

and usually not more than 10 or 15, and it is full of snags.

They have a band on board which is now playing a tune [;] I do not know what one. There are I should think over a hundred passengers on board, and it is a small boat, so that a great many of them have to sleep wherever they can around on chairs, or on the floor, or on trunks, etc.

It is a beautiful day, rather hot in the sun and as the river is so narrow we can see everything on the banks very easily.

9:45 P.M.

Since I wrote the above we have passed Le Sueur, Traverse des Sioux, St. Peter's [*St. Peter*] and Mankato, & we are now stopping at South Bend and I do not know but what we may stay here all night as the water is pretty low and the river is full of sand bars and snags. Le Sueur is a small place of which I have nothing particular to say. Traverse des Sioux, as you will see by the name indicates a portage made by

⁴Fort Ridgely, built in 1853, stood near the southeastern end of the Sioux reservation established by treaty in 1851. It was the scene of two major encounters during the early days of the Sioux Outbreak in August, 1862. See William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 2:127-133 (St. Paul, 1961). The volunteers mentioned by Mann were recruits for the Second Minnesota Regiment, going to the frontier fort to relieve members of the First Minnesota, which just two days earlier (June 14) had received orders to proceed to Washington. See Annual Report of the Adjutant General, in Minnesota, *Executive Documents*, 1861, p. 85.

the Indians who went over to St. Peters to take the water again. The reason of this was because St. Peters was only about one mile distant in a straight line while by water it is five miles on account of such a bend as this [*drawing of a flattened U*].⁵ St. Peters is situated on a wide prairie on the bank of the river back of which rises a low bluff and then there is prairie for an indefinite distance.

Mankato is the largest town on the river situated on a rather narrower prairie than St. Peters but with higher bluffs behind it.

South Bend is a little town I guess though it is so dark that I can not see much of it.⁶ I am writing in my bed in my stateroom.

The "Frank Steele," continuing upstream, reached Fort Ridgely on the evening of June 19, and its destination, the Lower Sioux Agency, at 9 A.M. on the following day. Having had no opportunity to mail his letter, Mann appended a note on June 20, dating it 1860 by mistake.

I did not write anything yesterday because I was looking most of the time. We passed a place called 'Redstone' from the color of the stone which is of a brick red color as I could see in some quarries opened on the banks of the river.⁷ The next place we passed was 'New Ulm,' a German town, and we were told everybody

⁵ Mann's explanation of the name Traverse des Sioux is not quite accurate. It was a ford, rather than a portage, being the point at which an ancient Sioux trail crossed the Minnesota River. See Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1:107 n.

⁶ The village of South Bend, about two miles above Mankato, was platted in 1854. See Warren Upham, *Minnesota Geographic Names*, 63 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 17, 1920).

⁷ Redstone was a village platted in 1856 and named for "adjacent outcrops of red quartzite beside the Minnesota River." Most of its settlers later moved to New Ulm. See Upham, *Minnesota Geographic Names*, 373.

⁸ The original manuscript of this letter is in the Abernethy Library, Middlebury College, Middlebury, Vermont.

there was [German], except three, two women & one man, [who were] American. Just after we passed New Ulm there was a great bend and the river came round so as to be about two rods from itself; it was something like this: [*drawing of a flattened U, almost a circle*]. It took us seventeen minutes to go round at the rate of about 8 miles an hour. At about 7 o'clock in the evening we arrived at Fort Ridgely, having been within 8 miles of it by land a little after noon but on account of the crooks it took us a good while to get there. I went up to the Fort which on the two sides towards the prairie is made of granite garrison houses, two stories high and . . .

Unfortunately the last part of Mann's letter is missing, and it apparently covered one of the most interesting portions of the journey—the annual council at the Indian agency. Luckily, however, we can fill in the gap with an excerpt from one of the few extant letters that Thoreau himself wrote on the trip.⁸ It was directed to his friend and Concord neighbor, Franklin B. Sanborn, from Red Wing on June 25, 1861.

GRAND PLEASURE EXCURSION To the Sioux Agency.

THE TWO STEAMERS,

FRANK STEELE, Capt. HATCHER,
FAVORITE, Capt. BELL,

Of Davidson's Line, will make an excursion trip to the

LOWER SIOUX AGENCY,

ON MONDAY, THE 17TH DAY OF JUNE,

LEAVING ST. PAUL AT 4 P. M.

And arriving at the Agency in time to



Witness the Payments,

WHICH WILL COME OFF ON THE 19TH AND 20TH.

This will afford a good opportunity to persons wishing to visit this

SPLENDID REGION OF COUNTRY,

And of witnessing the ceremonies of the payment of nearly FIVE THOUSAND INDIANS.

Staterooms can be secured of TEMPLE & BEAUPRE,
Agents, on the Levee. je9-dtd

The Governor of Minnesota, (Ramsey) — the superintendent of Ind. Affairs in this quarter, — & the newly appointed Ind. agent were on board; also a German band from St. Paul, a small cannon for salutes, & the money for the Indians (aye and the gamblers, it was said, who were to bring it back in another boat).⁹ There were about 100 passengers chiefly from St. Paul, and more or less recently from the N. Eastern states; also half a dozen young educated Englishmen. Chancing to speak with one who sat next to me, when the voyage was nearly half over, I found that he was a son of the Rev. Samuel May, & a classmate of yours, & had been looking for us at St. Anthony.¹⁰

The last of the little settlements on the river was New Ulm, about 100 miles this side of Redwood.¹¹ It consists wholly of Germans. We left them 100 barrels of salt, which will be worth something more when the water is lowest, than at present.

Redwood is a mere locality, scarcely an Indian village — where there is a store & some houses have been built for them [*the Sioux*]. We were now fairly on the great plains, and looking south, and after walking that way 3 miles, could see no tree in that horizon. The buffalo was said to be feeding within 25 or 30 miles —

A regular council was held with the Indians, who had come in on their ponies, and speeches were made on both sides thro' an interpreter, quite in the described mode; the Indians, as usual, having the advantage in point of truth and earnestness, and therefore of eloquence. The most prominent chief was named Little Crow. They were quite dissatisfied with the white man's treatment of them & probably have reason to be so. This council was to be continued for 2 or 3 days — the payment to be made the 2d day — and another payment to other bands a little higher up on the Yellow Medicine (a tributary of the Minnesota) a few days thereafter.

In the afternoon the half naked Indians performed a dance, at the request of the

Governor, for our amusement & their own benefit & then we took leave of them & of the officials who had come to treat with them.

Mann disposed of the return trip in a brief paragraph included in a letter written from Red Wing on June 23.

I did not write anything yesterday on the boat, but as I told you we got started about 9 o'clock Friday night [June 21], and we passed Mankato in the night but at length we had to lie by on account of a fog. When I got up in the morning about 6:30, we were stuck fast about two miles above St. Peters, but we got off in about half an hour, and made the rest of the voyage during the day, arriving in St. Paul about 9 P.M. last (Saturday) night.

The two travelers left Minnesota on June 26, returning to Concord by way of Prairie du Chien, Milwaukee, and Mackinac. Thoreau's health was little improved by the trip, and he died the following May. Mann entered Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard in the autumn of 1861 and showed promise of becoming an eminent botanist, when in 1868 his life was cut short by tuberculosis.

⁹ Thoreau was apparently confused about the details of the annuity payment, both here and below. According to the report of Clark W. Thompson, superintendent of Indian affairs for the northern superintendency, he witnessed the payment to the Upper Sioux at the Yellow Medicine Agency about June 16. He then proceeded down the river and was present when the Lower Sioux received payment at the Redwood Agency on June 26. Whether he was accompanied by the Sioux agent, Thomas J. Galbraith, is not clear. However, contemporary newspaper reports mention the participation of both officials in the council at the Redwood Agency. See Commissioner of Indian Affairs, *Reports*, 1861, p. 69; *State Atlas* (Minneapolis), July 3, 1861.

¹⁰ Sanborn's classmate was Joseph May.

¹¹ Thoreau overestimated this distance. By river it was approximately sixty-eight miles.

THE PICTURE on page 226 is owned by the Minnesota Historical Society. The advertisement on page 227 is from the *Pioneer and Democrat* of St. Paul for June 15, 1861.



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