



Frontier is still on the frontier.

RAINY RIVER HOMESTEADER

The Letters of Frank M. Geddes

Edited by JANE GEDDES GRIFFIN

ONE OF AMERICA'S last frontiers was the northern border country of Koochiching County. Explorers and fur traders who traveled on the Rainy River knew this wild land centuries ago, but not until the early twentieth century were certain parts of it tamed by settlers. Some of it still remains wilderness. With the Nelson Act of 1889 the Chippewa Indians ceded the area extending southward from the Rainy River to the Red Lake Indian Reservation. Fifteen years elapsed, however, before the Rainy's south bank was opened to homesteading. It took until 1904 to complete examination and classification of the ceded Chippewa lands after the Morris Act of 1902, which amended the Nelson Act, helped put an end to stealing of Minnesota timber and its marketing through Canada.¹

Enough settlers had arrived by 1906 for Koochiching County to be created in that year from its parent Itasca County. A first-hand picture of what life was like in the Koochiching wilderness in the next decade—specifically, in 1912 and 1913—is

Mrs. Griffin, a granddaughter of Frank M. Geddes, resides in Shaker Heights, Ohio.

provided by the following letters. They were written by a transplanted Hoosier, Frank Martindale Geddes, who went to northern Minnesota after fifty-four years on Indiana farms.

Geddes was born March 4, 1858, near Peru, Indiana. He grew up on a farm in Starke County and built his own farm home near North Judson after his marriage in 1880 to Emma Tucker. Mrs. Geddes died in 1901, leaving seven children to the care of her husband. Ten years later Geddes sold his farm and moved his grown family to Mishawaka, near South Bend. By then his oldest son, Harvey, had married and moved to St. Joseph, Michigan, but Alice, Esther, Cora, James, Ralph, and George were still at home. When nineteen-year-old George found he could not get work in town, he hired out that summer of 1911 as an itinerant farm hand who followed the season's harvest into the Dakotas.

By late autumn George drifted northeast

¹ William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 4:219-221, 249-253, 297-299 (St. Paul, 1930); Grace Lee Nute, *Rainy River Country: A Brief History of the Region Bordering Minnesota and Ontario*, 58, 85-87 (St. Paul, 1950).

ward to International Falls, Minnesota. There, he agreed to work for homesteader Price Carney, whose claim was near a settlement appropriately named Frontier, some fifty miles west of International Falls. Carney soon convinced George that he should file a claim nearby and helped him with the necessary papers. George in turn wrote letters during the winter of 1911-12 that persuaded his father to move from Indiana to northern Minnesota. Among other things, George told his father the soil looked rich for farming and that selling cut timber would provide necessary income until the ground was clear enough to sow.

Frank Geddes left Mishawaka early in April, 1912, and arrived in International Falls in time to file a 160-acre claim at the land office on April 19. There was no railroad to carry him to his destination on the Minnesota side of the Rainy River, so Geddes crossed the border to Fort Frances, Ontario, and took a Canadian Northern Railway train to Stratton, Ontario. From there he crossed the Rainy again to the remote western reaches of Koochiching County and walked eight miles to his land. His claim, adjacent to George's, was thirteen miles from Frontier and ten from Birchdale by crude trails through forest and muskeg.

Geddes thus joined the legion of American homesteaders who attempted to carve a farm from a forest. Like pioneers everywhere before him, he faced the challenge of lonely isolation, especially when George was away in the woods. He combated this in part by writing his family in detail about building log cabins, obtaining supplies, cooking, chopping trees, weather, problems of transportation, and living conditions in general in the "wilds." Geddes' daughter Alice proudly preserved the letters and thereby left his heirs a direct and literate memoir of a twentieth-century homesteader on the midwestern frontier.

The letters—forty-two in all—came into the possession of the editor, granddaughter of Frank Geddes and daughter of Ralph Geddes, in the spring of 1954 when

she was a graduate student at Western Reserve University. She had time then only to glance at them. A few years later, hoping to translate the courage and industry of American pioneers into the contemporary understanding of secondary school pupils, the editor realized that few firsthand accounts of frontier life existed. It was then that she rediscovered her grandfather's letters and saw in them far more than familial significance. In editing the letters, minor changes have been made in spelling, punctuation, and paragraphing, and a few insertions (indicated by brackets) have been included to help clarity and readability.*

On April 28, 1912, shortly after his arrival in the Frontier area, Frank Geddes wrote from there to "Dear ones at Home":

I GOT MY receipt from the land office last night. My file was accepted and now it is up to me to make good. My claim is one mile long and . . . $\frac{1}{4}$ mile wide. One 40 lays alongside of George's facing [the] sec[tion] line. We will build close together, about twice as wide as across the street, and live turnabout in the houses.²

We have George's house most up to the square now. We cut spruce poles or logs—not very big ones, as we are doing it all ourselves. We peel off the bark, and they are nice and clean, and get the cracks as close as we can. Then we take moss like they used to sell in Starke [County] and cork

* The editor is grateful to the following for assistance in preparing Frank M. Geddes' letters for publication: George and James Geddes, her uncles; Mrs. Mildred Savard, secretary of the Koochiching County Historical Society; Mrs. Margarete Bennett of Birchdale; Mrs. N. D. Woodworth of Little Falls; and Elroy Sanford of Cleveland, Ohio. This entire effort would not have been possible without the saving ways of the editor's aunt, Alice Geddes. Unfortunately, she was unable to see the letters published. She died in August, 1961, on the anniversary of her father's death.

² Frank M. Geddes' receipt for his homestead application is among his papers owned by the editor. It specifies his claim as section 35, township 159 north, range 28 west, Koochiching County.



*Frank M. Geddes
in March, 1912,
just before
leaving Indiana
for Minnesota*

the cracks, and it is tight and warm, too. The roof we make in log cabin style, only we split poles and peel the bark off and lay them on the roof as close as we can and then lay moss or birch bark next. Then [we] put about three inches of dirt on top, with all the cracks corked with moss so you have a clean looking house inside. I don't know how we will roof ours yet. Maybe we will split some shingles, but we will have to double the roof some way.

This is a wild country yet. Some seven or eight shacks [are] in here in all, and a slew or muskeg with water now boot-top deep for two miles when we go out. But they have petitioned for a road out and they think they will have one next year—a corduroy—but you can then get out at any rate. There is no use for a wagon in here. You have no idea the roots are so thick and the road so rough. There is now only one horse in here and that will go out before the bog thaws out. We got the horse and hauled

some lumber from here that the man left where we stay about a mile from where we are building. We had seven hundred feet and we made four loads on a sled like we used to have to haul logs in the mill yard.

The ground is covered everywhere with moss, and the roads are just cut out of the timber by the homesteader without pay, but there is a good many trails open. Our land where we are building is somewhat higher than the most of it and is easier to clear around the house than most of it.

Oh yes, I must tell you how we got the trunk in. I hired a man [to] get it across the river and bring it three miles in to his house. [He had] the only team out at the river on [the] Stratton road. George took Mr. Carney's one horse and the sled and ax last Sunday morn and started five miles after it. I went in [the] afternoon and met him at the muskeg and we got home about five o'clock.

We are living fine. George had some

grocerys [sic] brought in before the snow went—150 [pounds] of flour, 50 of sugar and some other things. But we haven't got enough and it looks as if we were in for carrying the rest 8 mi. We have no windows for the house yet. George has some cooking utensils, enough to start with, I guess. The man we are staying with [*Johnnie Dahlstrom*] is a pretty good cook, and I wash dishes and learn how. We have canned milk, oatmeal, rice, peaches, and most everything we need at present.

We cut the logs close to where we built and got one horse and dragged them in. When I build I will have to get a[n] ox, I reckon, as that will be my only chance. It looks pretty tough to me here, but I am glad I come as George was bound to stay and prove up his claim and I might as well have one, too, if I stay. The land is good—surely the best—and the trees just set on top of the ground. They don't sprout when cut down and in three to five years you can take them out easy. But meantime when they cut it off and just burn the moss off you can sow timothy and it grows just like weeds. There are a few stone scattered around, but I don't think very many. The soil is gravelly clay and sand loam. There are some big rocks, though, high as my head and some of them cover $\frac{1}{4}$ of an acre.

Mr. Carney told me there had been about \$1,500.00 of timber cut on not more than six acres of his land and if he were to cut it clean it would make a thousand more. But ours is not quite that good, though I have some just as thick but [not] so valuable.

Over at Stratton a man told me that clover was a weed there. Their land is like ours, only they have got more cleared and they burn it off in dry weather and that helps to get it ready sooner. But we don't dare to set fire in a dry time on account of starting forest fires that would ruin all the timber.

There is strong talk of a R R in a year or so and if we get that it will be a great country soon. And then we can sell everything and get a better price as it is only the cedar poles and tamarack piling and ties pays to

haul to the river, and then you have to look out or they beat you.³

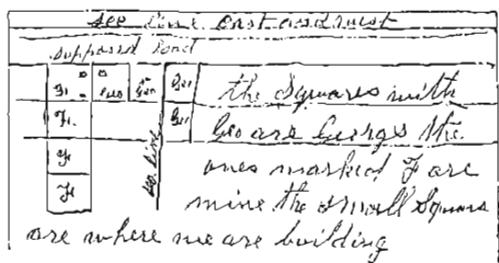
I do hope that Esther will get stout and that you all get along all right. I suppose Ralph is a carpenter by this time, but I hope he will never have to build a log house as I don't like the job myself. But we will have to build two houses and a stable before we get through. We want to clear two or three acres this summer so as to get some hay started. I guess this is enough for once. Love to all from your Pa Pa

Find some cedar leaves enclosed.

F. M. Geddes

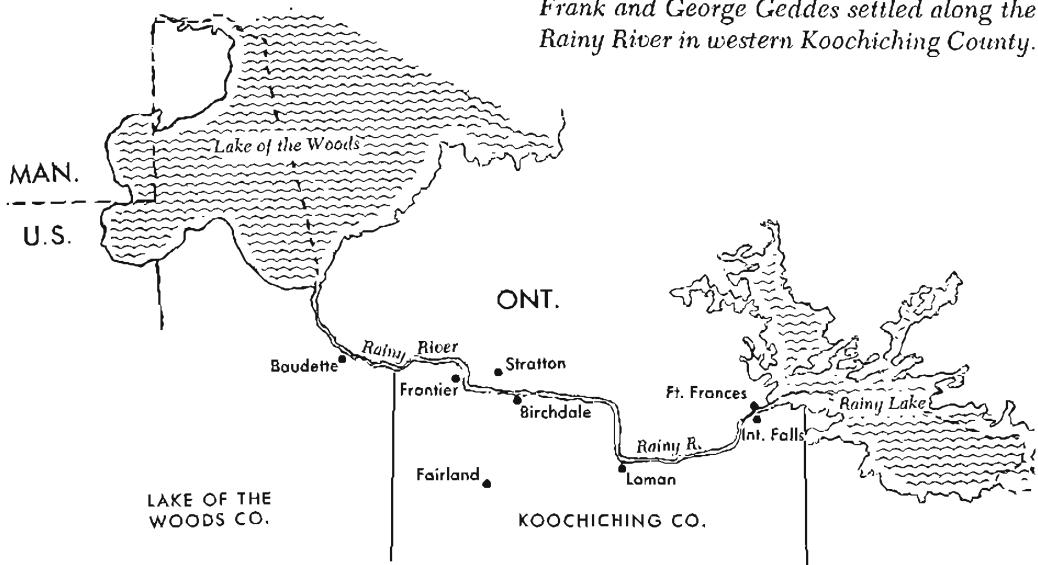
On May 5, 1912, Frank Geddes wrote his brother Scott of Delong, Indiana, and discussed some of the same things he did in his April 28 letter:

Well, I have viewed the promised land, but I am not going to give you my opinion just yet, only just a letter. I have filed on a claim. Part of it joins George's and we are building on his first as he has to have a building on his by May 20th. I will have till Nov. to get mine done. I will build just across the line about a hundred yards from him, and we can use the stables for both of us. I will show you the shape it lays in . . .



It is all level here. Only where we are building is high enough to be dry any time. Some of it is pretty wet now as we have been having our spring rains and the most

³A logging railroad called the Loman Line eventually stretched westward to Loman, but no railroad ever was built beyond Loman on the south bank of the Rainy. See map in Nute, *Rainy River Country*, 105.



Frank and George Geddes settled along the Rainy River in western Koochiching County.

of the frost is just now gone. We have our house just now up to the square, and we had to stop to make the shingles — split and shaved them of cedar. [We] built out of spruce poles, peeled them, and they look slick and clean. But I don't like to make log houses. That is the work part.

We have about 40 A. apiece where the house is that will be comparatively easy cleared. But oh my but some of it looks tough to think of making a farm. In places you can't walk on the ground for rods for roots, but it is not as bad as it looks, I guess. Everything dies as soon as cut, and the trees just set on top of the ground like quapenasp [sic]. The moss is from three to six in. thick on the roots, and soon as the fine roots rot they are soon gone. They burn the moss off and then just sow timothy seed, and it will get as high as your head. It surely is the best of land. I haven't seen much of it, though — only where a tree is turned up by the roots. Ours where the house is is gravelly, with some sand in the clay — just enough to make it good.

George has one lone pine tree on his not far from the house. Just back of the house there is a thicket of black ash and lots of big popple or quapenasp, and lots of white

birch poles — the kind the Indians get the bark for canoes. We have spruce, cedar, & tamarack. George has a nice grove of cedar, but I don't think I have very many. In fact, when I've been here about five years I think I will get all over my land and scare out the deer and moose, wolves and links [sic]. And we have all of them.

We are 8 mi. straight south of Stratton, Ontario, and 2 mi. west [of] 3 mi. of muskeg, or moss & tamarack swamp, from shoe-mouth to boot-top deep. We are back to nature all right, all right. There isn't a horse in here nor can one get in till it freezes up. Some neighbors south have some oxen. We have to carry everything we get in here now. If I had got here sooner we would [have] had the summer provisions in on the snow.

George is big and stout and he don't mind a whole lot. He is just wild over his land and says he is going to make a home out of it. He went to Frontier 8 mi. yesterday to get nails. He has an alpine pack sack (they all have them), and he brought back 32 lbs. of nails, 2 lb. of butter, and some other stuff. [He] started at 7 a.m., back at 7 p.m., wet to his knees. So it is not all pie here. But we hear loud talk of a R R coming and then everything will go quick. We have a wagon



During the winter of 1912-13, George Geddes stood in front of his father's cabin and played the accordion. It was twenty below and snow was two feet deep.

road granted out to Frontier, but it will be 2 yr. before we can use it as it will be worth about seven hundred dollars to cut it out. The trails now what are cut are on [section] lines and done by donation.

There are six or seven claims close to us and more scattered out around. Some are proved up. We have to [pay] \$1.25 per acre as this is Indian reserve land. Most of the homesteaders go out during the summer months and we may be in here all alone for two months. We want to stay all the time if we don't run short of funds.

Oh yes, you haven't got all the stone either, for about ten rods north of my place there is one you could build a big barn on and then have good room for a cow lot, and I know of some similar. But I doubt the land is much stony—only a niggerhead here and there. You can't go in the woods with[out] a pocket compass as you would get lost in 20 rods. Tamarack piling pays as well as anything here as you have to peel the cedar and that takes work. George sold \$75.00 [of] cedar. He could not get teams or he would [have] had twice as much out—only [it costs] 6 to 8 dollars for [a] team here.

We will be busy all summer when we get my house done and a stable and enough clearing to protect them from fire. We cork the cracks with moss, and nearly all the cabins have poles on the roof and then birch bark and then three inches of dirt. They are warm all right.

You did not know perhaps you had a brother that was a smuggler, but that is all the way we can get goods from Canada without paying duty, and we have to have some all the same. The river has no bridge nor is likely to have one soon. On that account I rowed across once myself. It is close to a quarter of a mi. wide and is just beautiful, [with] high banks. I saw some Indians going down the river in their birch-bark canoe, squaws with them. The Canada land is just like ours, only it is more cleared on their side. One man told me clover was a weed there. Another man told me up on Lake Superior the woods was waist high in clover in places on the burns and deer were fat as hogs in the fall. . . .

I don't see how we can lose out on our land here as the timber will help out all the time if we get a R R so we can sell pulpwood. I could live the rest of my life without

working for that matter. Some old women have proven up claims here and they give half to get the timber out. I like it better every day, but I am not as enthusiastic as George yet.

We are staying with a Swede by the name of Johnnie Dahlstrom.⁴ We do our own cooking—[bake] bread, too. And I wash dishes three times a day and help to cook some, too. Tell the girls I used to think cooking was work, but it is just play. I walk one mi. to work and back at noon—4 mi. in all—and work till seven or eight at night. [I go] to bed at ten or eleven. The walking [and] stepping [is] from one moss bog to another. A wagon is no more use than [a] handcar would be, the road is so rough and [full of] stumps. They take a sled, or go devil as they call it, [and] one horse, if you can get it. . . .

F.M.G.

On May 10, 1912, five days after writing a long letter to his brother, Geddes addressed a shorter one to his daughter Esther in Mishawaka:

. . . George is going out to the river tomorrow to crib his poles. They hold back ten cts. apiece till you tie them together in the river. Well, we are still working on the house. It took so much longer when we put on shingles, but we have it all ready to shingle and the most of them on one side. We have the lower joice [sic] in but not the floor, but that won't take long as we have wide boards and we won't nail them till they dry and shrink. We have a nice place. Four or five evergreen trees [are] right back of the house, in two feet some of them, and two in front. They are most as big as your oak tree in your yard. We will get it most done, if not quite, next week.

⁴ Dahlstrom continued to homestead in northern Minnesota for two more decades after Frank Geddes died. In November, 1933, Dahlstrom and A. J. Carew received George Geddes' quitclaim deed for George's land. The editor owns a photocopy of this document.

I don't know what we will do for a stove yet and it is almost impossible to get one in now. Carry it in pieces is the only way unless we can buy one [from] the boys that won't be here all summer, as they have proved up. And the mosquitoes are bad, they say.

Well, I quit for supper and it is now 9 o'clock and I just got my dishes washed. While I was writing, Johnnie baked a big pan of light bread and some doughnuts, too. Oh yes, you just keep on getting stout and you can come next winter and cook if I get my house so we can live in it. I want to build bigger than George's if nothing hinders so we will have plenty of room. And we will clear some this summer so we will have a big pile of dry poles to burn. Tell James that I think there will be some homestead land still joining us when he gets ready to come—that is, if he wants it when he sees it. There is some talk of some girls coming in here to get land.

The timothy in the yard is getting nice and green. Everything else looks much the same as when I come. We have some tomato plants up in a box. We did not get the cabbage seed planted yet. We will make some garden as soon as we get the house done.

I will be alone if the boys go to the river over Sunday and till Monday night, I suppose. It rained most every night this week—just a gentle sizelsazle, but we only missed part of one forenoon. Now write again and the rest of you, too. And Ralph, why not him, too? Goodbye to all.

Your Pa Pa

Cooking, clearing land, finishing and furnishing a house, digging a well—these were among the subjects on Geddes' mind when he addressed a long, detailed letter on June 21, 1912, to his "Dear children" and sent it to his daughter Alice in Mishawaka:

I sent Ralph some bark but I am going to send you a letter. George has not been out for two weeks and then he did not get the Saturday mail as the boat from Baudette was late. . . .

Well, we have been very busy since we got here. George has been chopping all he possibly could as we want to sow some timothy. He soon will have two acres cut, but we will have to saw the wood in four feet lengths so we can carry it off the ground.

I have been doing the cooking and finishing up the house. I made a nice screen door and frames for window screens, and today I just got my cupboard doors hung. It has four doors and spring catches just like yours, and I put papers in the shelves and the mice can't get in now. It has lots of room and, oh yes, we have two chairs now with backs to them and the handiest kitchen you ever saw.

But we could not get a pump in, and George started to dig a well. It was about twenty inches of dirt and gravel and then clay under just as dry as a bone. He went eight feet and no difference. All the water we got come in from the top gravel and that did not fill the hole up to the gravel. But it has four or five barrels of water in it and it is not bad water. Only the mice fall in and drowned, and we don't want to cover it till we can dip it out and go deeper through the clay, if possible. And we will have to make the hole bigger so we can work and put in some curbing.

While I was writing I just saw a man [Ed Murphy] go along (half past three) that is about two miles south of us. He was going

This abandoned store in Birchdale may date back to Geddes' time.



out to Birchdale 13 mi. so he did not stop only to say hello at George.⁵ It has been cool all along for the time of year, but today is hot like summer . . . intended to stay. We have slept under comfort and wool blanket every night so far with house shut up, but the days were warmer.

Well, we are not done moving yet. We have been carrying from Johnnie's place every time we could for a month and some of the time we went on purpose. And still we have 150 lbs. of flour to carry over yet and some other things. And also next winter when he comes in we will have to carry quite a lot back as we have most of his dishes and some other things. I have Mrs. Carney's wash boiler and ponnie [bread] board. I wash in a big dishpan, so there you have it. It is nice around the house and I am enjoying it. I don't mind the cooking only when it comes to washing the dishrag.

I had to throw my first mess of biscuit on the brush heap because George forgot to tell me to put in any shortening and the oven was too hot and they burnt black. But I can make them and cakes, too, and gravy. George so far has baked the light bread, but I am going to try it next week.

We will begin to cut some on mine now soon. We have some of the logs cut now on the clearing. We want to cut them all while the sap is up so they will peel easy. I will build mine out of quakenasp, or popple, as they call it here, but you can get them as big and as long as you want them.

I want to go out to the Canada side some time this summer and take a look, for I think I will want a claim over there when I get proved up here as you can get good roads there and land that is easier to clear. One man told me he could clear an acre a day on his and you don't have to pay anything for the land, only the filing. If I was a little younger or a little stronger I would buy

⁵ Ed Murphy was one of four brothers (the others were James, Lou, and John) who homesteaded claims in sections neighboring those of Frank and George Geddes. Ed helped Frank and George haul logs during the winter of 1912–13.

Johnnie's claim (he has proved up) this winter. He wants to sell and he has got the best one in here for timber. [He has] at least ten or twelve thousand dollars on it, and [the sale of timber from] any one forty [-acre section] would pay for it and two winters would get it out.

We won't have time to cut any timber before September, and they won't take the cedar cut when the sap is up. But George has about a week's peeling of cedar he cut before I come [which] he did not get out. We took a little walk last Sunday of about four mi. [We] also picked up a lot of nails where a cabin had burnt down. I have not been over my claim much yet to see what is on it. Maybe I will go Sunday if George feels like it. Ours is not so good for timber as some of the others, as first come first served in that case. . . .

Now I will have to quit as I have to cut George's hair before it gets dark. And yes, it don't get dark till about half past nine. At nine I can tell the time of day easily out of doors if the mosquitoes are not too thick.

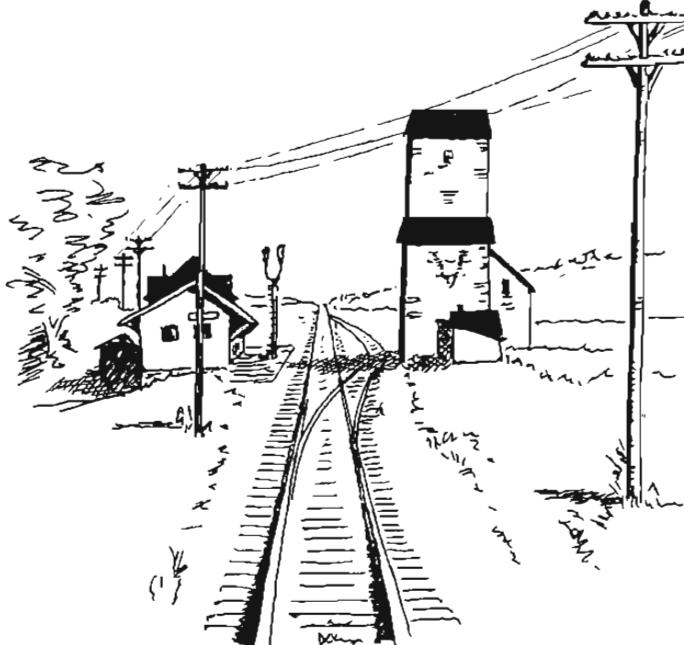
The big black horseflies have just come yesterday. They call them bulldogs here and they say they are worse than the mosquitoes to bite. We keep a good smoke every night but the house has to be tight or the mosquitoes get in.

Pa Pa

On June 25, 1912, Geddes wrote about his progress with baking, mosquito troubles, wood cutting, and other matters in a letter to his daughter Esther:

Well, I made my first baking of light bread yesterday. It was good, only it was so slow raising I had to set up till eleven o'clock to bake. Today I sawed poles up into four foot wood so we can carry them off the ground. George is peeling cedar poles that he cut last spring and did not get out. He comes in at night and tells me he has made \$12.00 to \$15.00 — that is, when he gets them to the river.

They can haul about \$25.00 worth at a



Depot and elevator at Stratton, Ontario

load of dry poles. He has about \$100.00 worth cut, but we can't cut any more till the sap goes down as they are not so good. But there is about 300 posts in the tops we will get out. But we have so much to do and it takes me about half the time to cook. I can't chop long at it anyhow.

I like the cooking, only my stove is so small. The oven is 14 in. square and we can only get one pan in at a time, and we have one pan long as the stove. We bake three loaves and then we bake two round ones — lasts four to six days according to what else we cook.

I cut a few logs for my house today as I come to them on the clearing. [I] haven't cut brush on mine yet but will as soon as we get the cedar peeled. They use a big chisel 4 in. wide on a fork handle and push it in front of them, and they peel a log quick. But it is not easy work if you [don't] keep right at it.

Now I was so glad to hear you say you thought you was going to get stout and hearty now. Just keep right at it till about Christmas and then I think I can have money enough for you to come if you are able. I would like to have James come, too, if you could get along without him till the first of

March, as there is not much doing till close to Christmas here and he could earn about three dollars a day here. He would not be out much, and you could go back with him unless you wanted to stay and take a home- stead. You could get one right across the road and build about as close to George as I am. Then you would have to stay all summer and fight mosquitoes, and they are pretty bad just now. We can't keep them out of the house some way — those little ones that just go zip and then bite.

I guess since Sunday summer has come, for we leave out the windows nights now. [It's] not uncomfortable, though, when the mosquitoes are not too bad. We keep a smoke on the ground outside every evening and bring one in the house and drive them on the screen and kill them. Our screen is finer than netting and I can't just make out how so many get in. You don't want to stay in bed long after daylight as they are the worst in the morning. I have been going of morning to look for deer. They go every day or so along the road west of us, not more than a quarter of [a] mile away. We put out some salt, hoping to entice them, but they haven't been back since.

We want to cut enough timber before winter and hire it hauled the first snow so we can buy a team by Christmas. And then we will give Jim a snap when he comes. But it costs six dollars a day to get a team and they don't try to haul but one load a day, so we are anxious to get a stable and everything so we can have our own team. . . .

It is dark and I will have to quit. Love to all.

Pa Pa

On July 5, 1912, Geddes wrote his brother-in-law, Ed Wemple of Rhinelander, Wisconsin. Wemple was married to Geddes' sister Alice. The letter was addressed to "Dear Brother and Sister":

We have about two acres cut now and yesterday we commenced on my place to

clean off for the house. We have some logs cut, but we don't have to have it built till in September, so we will get everything ready before we commence. We are the only ones in the woods this summer. The flies and mosquitoes are pretty bad now, and we have had it hot for a couple of weeks. But we chop some every day.

There is only one chance that I know of to get a team to pull my logs together, and that is an ox team some five miles west. And we haven't been to see him yet. Otherwise we will have to wait till it freezes up to build. We have to build a stable and we want to build a cellar.

We have a small garden and we planted our two bu. of potatoes. We have a nice place, and I will build about 50 steps from George's house. We started to dig a well — got about 8 feet deep in the clay and no water, only what run in out of the surface. There is about 1 foot of black dirt or rotten logs and leaves, and then about two feet of clay gravel.

There is quite a few stone in places — some of it as thick as where you plowed last year on yours, but I don't think it is near all of it so bad. The land is level, only some places lower, and the trees are so thick and the roots branch out till you can't hardly get your feet on the ground. But they seem to just grow under the moss and top loose dirt, as you can tramp the roots half bare.

A man could hardly keep a family in here yet, but once we get a R R it will go fast then. You can't sell only the piling and big cedar now — that is, for enough to pay to haul so far. We have to pay \$1.25 per acre as this is Indian reserve lands, but almost any acre has enough timber to pay for work and land. There is some free land 2 mi. east of us, but it has no salable timber to amount to anything. I don't know how good mine is yet as I have not had time to look over all of it. It is one mile by $\frac{1}{4}$ wide. The boys that have been on it say there is some of it low and some tamarack and cedar and lots of small cedar for posts.

There is 100 full townships in this county



The kind of wooded wilderness in which Geddes homesteaded can be seen in this 1916 photograph of George (right) and helper Bill La Due on George's place.

and four or five half townships along the river. This township is not organized yet, and not more than half the county, as there is a good deal of muskeg in it and they are so slow about making roads. So many don't stay on their lands before nor after they prove up, and that makes the country go slow.

From what I can learn, across the river in Canada it is better than here, if a man only has a little money. They don't have much timber and some of it is easy cleared. The land is free, 75 cts. to start with, and then enough to pay costs when you prove up. They are spending millions on roads whether it is homesteaded or not. And the land as a rule is higher on that side, I think.⁶

I wish you could see this country. I think you would sell there and homestead here some place, as you could do it easy with what money you would have. Some of the

first ones in here where we are have splendid timber. The man we stayed with while we built has something like ten or twelve thousand dollars of timber, not counting the pulpwood. He hauled 7 or 8 hundred dollars off on less than two acres last winter, and there is 2 or 3 hundred laying on the ground now ready to haul next winter. You can't hardly get through it where it is that way. If I only have five or six acres of that kind I will be satisfied.

Now let the girls write if you don't get the notion, but let us hear from you. I haven't been out of here but twice so far. . . .
(Unsigned)

Several months later, on November 26, 1912, Geddes reported on his progress with house building, the weather, wildlife, and other matters (even a touch of politics) in a letter to his brother Scott:

⁶ An Indian treaty of 1873 opened up the Canadian side of the Rainy River to farming a generation before farms developed on the Minnesota side. See Nute, *Rainy River Country*, 61.

We have [had] a splendid fall and late winter, but I guess now we will have winter in earnest. Yesterday we had about three

inches of snow and some colder. It is only froze enough to hold a man now on the swamp. We have had no team in here yet, but it won't be long now. They say winter is uncommon late.

I have my house up and the roof on but can't finish till I get some lumber in. [I] won't get to move in before Christmas time, I don't think. And I have to have fourteen months actual permanent residence before I can prove up — also about \$250.00. So you can count when I will be back if I can get the money — and I think we can get it in the two winters if nothing happens [to] us.

But the building has taken so much time, and last week and this we have helped to build three houses and two stables. (We haven't got our stable up yet.) We can't carry the logs so can't build till we get them pulled in. No horse [is] in yet, but they had one ox today to haul the logs for a house. The others we carried.

We have cut over half a mile of road and have more to cut. They have to be wide enough to haul a load of hay and straight as possible to haul those long poles and piling. They use bunks eight feet wide and the butts of load spread much wider.

There has seven new shacks went up with ours this summer, so we are not all the ones to think this is all right. I don't know if we will get a team this winter or not. They are a little shy on buying now, these Democratic times, but will take cedar poles, ties, and some piling. We won't buy a team till we see what they do and how they do it.

We have a couple of young men staying with us while they are building and getting their stuff in.⁷ Two of them built in one week — 12 x 14 ft., covered with paper and dirt on top. Cost less than \$5.00. So come along. We will help you build, and you can't spend your money in here.

I think there will be a shingle mill in here this winter and a sawmill next year. And then we can build worthwhile. I have my house good enough to side up and plaster, and build more to it. But no more log house for me if I can help it. . . .

I did not go out to vote and am very well satisfied. Let 'em [*the Republicans*] go once, It may be that it will be the turning point and make the people for the future.⁸

Well, we have tried & tried but no deer yet, although they eat off our carrots we had not more than 100 feet from the house. But a neighbor has given us about a half a venison off and on this fall, so we know what it eats like. The lean is all right, but the ribs and fat tastes too much like mutton to suit me. We have had lots of rabbits and pheasants. They don't use a shotgun here as they are not afraid. You can get plenty close to shoot them with a twenty-two rifle. I shot a pheasant with a 32-50 rifle and there was nothing left but holes. We have a tight heater. George carried it five miles, but it works nice and when I cook the house is so hot I have the door open half the time.

There is some mighty cheap proved up homesteads here — and good ones, too. You can get them cheap as you could to file and build on them. One [is] out by Birchdale on the river — [a] two-story frame house, log barn, and no timber, only small stuff. A man could clear it in 3 or 4 years. [There is] a road to town and you could go right to farming for \$600.00.

The man that keeps the post office at Frontier had 2700 bu. of potatoes off of ten acres.⁹ And some of this spruce swamp is just like the land on your old place in Starke,

⁷ The "young men" were Clarence Blake and Abner Billyeu, both of whom moved their families onto their claims in January, 1913. A schoolhouse was built on Blake's land. Both assisted George Geddes at the time of his father's death.

⁸ Geddes was an independent in politics. In a letter of November 23, 1912, among the Geddes Papers owned by the editor, Geddes wrote his children that he received a copy of the Starke County *Democrat* which reported Woodrow Wilson's victory in the 1912 election over Progressive Theodore Roosevelt, Republican William H. Taft, and Socialist Eugene V. Debs. "They surely had a victory in Starke, all right," Geddes commented. "I did not go out to vote for I did not much care — would have voted the Socialist ticket, if I had voted."

⁹ John Murphy, not related to Ed, kept the Frontier post office. He and his wife Ann died two days apart in January, 1913.

only better. The clay is closer, and the land is made of rotten wood and moss. I saw some of those little round early reddishes [sic] that were most as big as your fist.

I am trying to get Cora to come and take a piece of land just as soon as we get loose, so we can stay with her. The land that is worthwhile before draining will soon go, especially if we should get a R R road. We got a wagon road granted out of here, and \$200.00 allowed to cut it out, so that is a start anyhow.

The boys are all going out tomorrow. I have not been out yet. Love to all. Good night.

F.M.G.

On January 29, 1913, Geddes wrote his "Dear Children" and sent the letter to his daughter Esther. He took a little over a page to explain that he was sending a "supplemental" letter along with one he had written two weeks earlier to his daughter Cora but had not mailed because both George and he had forgotten it on trips to Frontier. He went on to tell that they purchased a team of horses at last:

Well, George got home on Tuesday night and brought the team and a load of hay. [He] got in about ten at night — most froze, too, as it was about 30 below and he had to ride and drive. We paid \$100.00 cash and have to [pay] \$100.00 more next month and so on till we pay \$325.00 in all for team and harness. And [we owe] \$50.00 to another man for sleds and chains to be paid

¹⁰ George Geddes bought the team from a Mr. Johnston, an Englishman who lived near the Rainy River. The first driver for George and Frank was Dan Wheelock, followed by his brother Ben. They were sons of John Wheelock who had land near Fairland, south of Frank's claim.

¹¹ In a letter of August 2, 1912, in the Geddes Papers owned by the editor, Frank Geddes told his children he had been injured while digging the well. "I got one of my short ribs caved in," he wrote. He also admitted that "I got careless and got my feet wet and caught cold and had to cough so much." He apparently had not fully recovered, especially since he lacked medical attention.

the first of May. So you see we will have to go some now.

We have enough snow now to make very fair roads — about one foot at least — but only us and Carney are hauling on our road this winter and that is not enough teams to keep it broke down so as to make the rest road. So we can not haul quite as big loads as we would like.

We have out nine loads of telephone poles that will come to \$150.00 or \$160.00. We have not got them scaled yet, and we got a man to drive team.¹⁰ He started this morning to haul piling, and we want to haul 25 or 30 loads of piling. They will bring about \$10.00 to \$12.00 a load. And I expect to cook, etc. I had been helping to load and I was most played out, too.

We have been having pretty steady cold weather for two weeks — from 25 to 36 below — and that is enough, though you don't mind it like you would there. It takes about two or three hours to load. And if you get started to the river from half past eleven to one o'clock you can, if you have no trouble with the load getting there, . . . get back all the way from seven to half past nine. . . .

George is cutting piling and we want to get somebody to make a thousand ties as soon as we can. George contracted his stuff and drawed \$150.00 on it, but we have more than enough to make it out now. We paid \$14.00 for a ton of hay and we have to pay 50 cts. for potatoes, but we are bound to come out on top if possible, so there. . . .

I don't get any better here than I was there, only I am not so fleshy and not quite so short of breath as I was last spring. Some days I feel pretty good and others I can't do much.¹¹

We have another bed fitted out now. I got a comfort for one forty this time and Mrs. Carney sewed up a tick for us and made a pillow tick out of remains and filled it with feathers for us and would not have anything for it. Good enough. . . .

Our two new families are in here now. I guess one of them moved in last week — had a house on a sled made of carpet and a stove.



Frank Geddes with a team and a load of poles during winter of 1912-1913

They were two days on the road — got here about seven o'clock at night. How'd you like it?

I have not done anything more at my house nor can't till we get money and time to haul some lumber. And I will be that much longer in getting proved up, too, but I can get off by next fall a year anyhow. And next summer we will get a lot of stuff ready and I hope we will have a team paid for and snow in time. And then it will count up pretty fast. . . .

I will probably get to mail this some time this week as George has to have some oats for the horses — 50 cts. a bu., too. Oh yes, we took a snapshot of the team and a load of poles with me holding the lines ready to go to the river. Only George went instead of me. And soon as we get the reel filled out I am going to have Ole Boe to finish some of them and send you some. . . .¹²

Goodbye, as I have to go to get in my wood and do my night work. I was up till twelve last night getting my bread baked.

(Unsigned)

Frank M. Geddes did not survive his venture in homesteading. He died August 18, 1913.

On August 23 his sons and daughters in Mishawaka received the following telegram from "the agent" at Stratton: "Frank Geddes had stroke paralysis Sunday, died Monday afternoon, buried Tuesday."¹³ James Geddes had set out for northern Minnesota earlier after his brother George's neighbor, Clarence Blake, hurried to Stratton to wire the family in Indiana about Geddes' illness. Meanwhile, another neighbor, Abner Billieu, sought a doctor in Baudette. The doctor would not come, so Billieu brought back a coffin to Birchdale instead. He met George and Blake with Geddes' body encased in a

¹² Ole Boe was a homesteader who settled near the Geddes' claims.

¹³ Ralph S. Geddes quoted the telegram in a letter to Mr. and Mrs. Ed Wemple on August 26, 1913, but said "buried Thursday" because he had been misinformed. The letter is in the Geddes Papers the editor owns. Photocopies of letters published here are in the Minnesota Historical Society.

crude coffin made of floor boards from the deceased's cabin. Geddes was buried in Birchdale early Tuesday, August 19. As George later recalled: "It was August, we didn't have an embalmer, and it was hot."

George left the cemetery to wire final word to the rest of the family when he met his brother James on the road between the Stratton railroad depot and the river. They both went to Stratton and sent a telegram that somehow got delayed for several days. This, coupled with the fact that the young men went haying for three weeks to make money they badly needed, left the Indiana kin in suspense. The Stratton telegrapher was their only source of information. On August 26, when Ralph Geddes wrote relatives, he still had not received accurate details of his father's death and burial.

THE CONTEMPORARY photographs of Frank Geddes on pages 63 and 74 and of George Geddes on page 66 were collected by the editor from members of the family. The photographs on pages 71 and 75 are from the collection of the Koochiching County Historical Society. The modern sketches of places near the Geddes homesteads were made by Rhoda R. Gilman after she traveled in the area last spring en route home from a trip to Winnipeg, Manitoba. Mary D. Nagle drew the map.

George Geddes stayed on the land until he proved up both claims—with James's help. Both have returned to Indiana and are living near South Bend. Most of the people they knew in Minnesota have moved on. The land they tried to develop for farming is now owned by a paper company. The railroad that might have made homesteading economically feasible for the western part of Koochiching County never materialized.

The town of Birchdale looks much as it did in 1912 except for the addition of modern conveniences. Frontier has practically disappeared. International Falls developed largely with the Minnesota and Ontario Paper Company (now Boise Cascade) and, more recently, with a growing tourist trade. Today one can fly to International Falls, rent a car, and drive a black-top highway to Birchdale and beyond. A graveled county road terminates, however, three miles from what was Frank Geddes' claim. The remains of his cabin are on the same trail he knew—through the same muskeg.

But more than fifty years later the soil is just as rich. Some land is still available for homesteading. And the woods are always beautiful.

*Fort Frances (background) and International Falls in 1912,
the year Geddes passed through*





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](#).