

THE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY FROM PRAIRIE DU CHIEN TO LAKE PEPIN: A SURVEY OF UNPUBLISHED SOURCES¹

In somewhat the same way that a family's standing in a community may be judged by its heirlooms, which usually indicate a past of substantial and cultivated ancestors, so a state's or a region's history may be appraised in no slight degree by the number and the worth of the manuscripts which tell its story. Contemporary printed material has great value, but if we had to depend for our knowledge of the past on the printed data that it issued, we should miss nearly all those intimate touches that give flavor and uniqueness to its story. The fur-trader did not print his diary, written piecemeal by the light of campfires or under the shade of trees on the portage trail. The pioneer did not proclaim in print the figures — put down in queer little volumes — showing the number of feet of lumber he cut and the cost of his house, stock, and crops; nor did his relatives "back East" as a rule print those extremely interesting and intimate letters which he wrote to relieve their anxiety and to give them a picture of life in the new regions to which he had emigrated. If we were to eliminate these diaries, account books, and letters from the sources of a region's history, what would be left to inform us of the daily events which seemed so matter-of-course to our ancestors that no one of them would ever have dreamed of printing an account of them?

Judged by this standard of manuscripts, the region in which we now find ourselves — the valley of the Mississippi from Prairie du Chien to Lake Pepin — has no cause to be abashed, though some of its neighbors claim a more fruitful family tree. When all the manuscripts relating to this region shall have been discovered and made known, it will be seen that a very

¹ This paper was read on June 18, 1925, at the state historical convention at Winona. *Ed.*

picturesque and important history filled those centuries which in most American history textbooks are considered to belong almost exclusively to the thirteen original colonies and immediately adjacent regions.

The task of discovering and preserving these manuscripts happily was begun long ago. For seventy-six years the Minnesota Historical Society has been carrying on the work of gathering documents relating to the history of the upper Mississippi Valley, and the result is a vast collection of manuscript material. Last year at the summer convention of the Minnesota Historical Society at Detroit in Becker County I described some of the unpublished materials relating to Red River Valley history.² Today I wish to tell you of some of the manuscripts which contain data for the history of the Mississippi Valley from Prairie du Chien to Lake Pepin. To be sure, I can mention only a few in the time at my disposal, but I trust those few will give you some conception of the nature of these unpublished sources.

One of the most important documents is also one of the earliest. For many years the printed *Travels* of Jonathan Carver was generally accepted at its face value and prized as one of the earliest accounts of travel in the Mississippi Valley. Of late years, however, historians have pointed out inaccuracies and inconsistencies in this work, and especially the numerous plagiarisms from the books of other travelers to the region. As a result Carver's veracity has been questioned, and some have even believed that he never made a trip to the Falls of St. Anthony in the fall of 1766, nor wintered on the Minnesota River, nor returned the next spring via Grand Portage and the Great Lakes. Yet all this time a volume of Carver papers could have been consulted in England which prove conclusively that Carver made the trip to this region as he announced, that the printed volumes are not accurate and are not copies of Carver's original draft of his journals, and that the printed

² This account is published *ante*, 5: 561-572, under the title "New Light on Red River Valley History."

books are not to be compared in value with the manuscripts for a true description of the region and its inhabitants. Copies of these manuscript journals by Carver have been secured by the Minnesota Historical Society and will be printed in due time. A survey journal precedes the others and contains a brief résumé of each day's travels, giving the day of the week and the month, the direction of the course taken, the distance covered, and remarks. This journal is followed by an expanded diary of the same trip, which, in turn, is followed by a revised copy of the fuller account.

On Sunday, October 19, 1766, the survey journal reports Carver near the mouth of the Wisconsin River. Having traveled ten miles he reached Prairie du Chien, which he mentions by name in the diary. He must have found the region attractive, for he stayed there Monday and Tuesday. In fact, in his diary he describes it as "one of the Delightsolest Settlements I saw During my travels I could scearsly keep from Envyng these Indians their pleasant Situation." On Wednesday he passed up the river for eleven miles. Thursday's trip took him thirty miles nearer Lake Pepin. Friday he covered twenty-five miles. Saturday he was nearing the site of the present city of Winona, but he encountered stormy weather and his survey journal records in its quaint language, "Lay by this day had Stormy weath[er]." Sunday he accomplished only eleven miles, but they must have brought him to Trempealeau River, for he records for that day, "here I Came to the Golden River not very Large; on East Side." The map which accompanies his journals shows the Golden River a number of miles north of the Noir, or Black River. Strangely enough, he does not mention Mount Trempealeau, though in his printed *Travels* he describes it at some length. Twenty-seven miles were covered on Monday and thirty on Tuesday. Large plains and high land are mentioned in his record for this week, and on the following Sunday he reached Lake Pepin.

Having wintered on the Minnesota River, Carver passed down the Mississippi again in the spring as far as Prairie du

Chien. There he joined Captain James Tute, James S. Goddard, and a party of men sent out by Robert Rogers, commandant at Mackinac, to discover the Oregon, or Columbia, River and a northwest passage to the Pacific Ocean. Because of insufficient supplies the exploring trip was never completed, but the party, consisting of about fourteen persons, traveled up the Mississippi and made its way to Grand Portage and thence returned to Mackinac. Four nights after leaving Prairie du Chien and three before reaching the mouth of the Chippewa River — about at the site of Winona, if my deductions are correct — the diary records that the party was surprised in camp by a hunting party of Fox Indians returning from Lake Pepin. Fortunately they proved to be friendly and no trouble ensued. Other items of interest might be culled from these manuscripts, but those I have mentioned are sufficient to indicate how full of value they are for the history of this portion of the Mississippi Valley.

After Carver's journey, which occurred shortly after the acquisition of the Northwest by the British, accounts become more numerous and more detailed. One of the most picturesque of the characters of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries who were identified with this region was Robert Dickson — "Redhead" he was called by the Indians, to whom red hair was a novelty. Materials relating to his fur-trading activities, which centered at Prairie du Chien but which covered a large territory to the west and north, have been brought to light recently. These are the letter books of John Blackwood and J. and A. McGill and Company, the originals of which are in Montreal. Besides Dickson, they relate to other well-known persons of this region — James Aird, Michel Renville, Joseph Rolette, and other men whose canoes, laden with furs or provisions, often passed the site of Winona with paddles keeping time to the boisterous songs of the *voyageurs*.

In 1816 the control of the fur trade about the upper stretches of the Mississippi passed from the British and Canadian mer-

chants to John Jacob Astor, and the foundation for a large part of his immense fortune was laid in this very region, to which Prairie du Chien was the gateway. He and his associates formed the American Fur Company with headquarters in New York City. Letter books kept by the company's agent at Mackinac constitute some of the best source material available for Minnesota and Wisconsin history for the period from 1816 to 1828. Photostatic copies of these volumes are owned by the Minnesota Historical Society and names familiar to many residents of Winona, La Crosse, Trempealeau, Prairie du Chien, and adjacent towns will be noted in them—for example, Grignon, La Bathe, Wabasha, Renville, Rolette, Alexis Bailly, and many others. For much the same period the personal papers of Alexis Bailly are useful in locating data on events and characters connected with the valley from Prairie du Chien to Lake Pepin.

In the summer of 1823 a government exploring expedition in charge of Major Stephen H. Long passed up the Mississippi Valley to Fort Snelling and thence by a devious route to Pembina. The published account of this trip was prepared by William H. Keating, and is used times without number by students of Minnesota history. Few know, however, that the leader of the expedition himself kept a very careful diary, profusely illustrated with pen maps and charts showing the route of each day's journey, topographical features of the country, camp sites, and the like. In the first of these three little brown books in the manuscript division of the Minnesota Historical Society, Long gives an account of his reception at Wabasha's village, the present site of Winona. His day's travel took him across Root River, near the present location of Rushford, up Rush Creek nearly to its source, and thence in a zigzag line to Wabasha's village on the Mississippi. His description of his travels on June 28, 1823, is of interest to Winona :

Resumed our march again after a short delay, and travelled down a beautiful valley bounded on both sides by high bluffs and precipices. It terminated in the broad valley of the Mississippi, where

we ent[e]red on an extensive plain limited by that majestic river on one hand and by stupendous bluffs, on the other. In front appeared Wabasha's village, towards which we were directing our course. On arriving at the village, the enchantment of the scene vanished. We were assailed by a host of yelping dogs, that were attended by their masters, and a throng of children,—which occasioned so great an annoyance, that we were glad to take our leave with as little delay as possible. . . . After delaying half an hour we proceeded up the Mississippi about 2 miles and encamped on its margin.

Thereafter Long describes the mounds in the vicinity, the Embarras (the present Zumbro) River, and his arrival on June 30 at Lake Pepin. Three maps accompany the entries for these days and are highly interesting to anyone acquainted with the region.

Another traveler through these regions while Minnesota was still the haunt of the savage and the fur-trader was Joseph N. Nicollet, a Frenchman who explored the upper Mississippi Valley during the years from 1836 to 1838. Like Long's expedition, his travels have been described in print. Only recently, however, have his manuscript notes, diaries, and maps come to light. They are now in the Library of Congress, and in the near future the Minnesota Historical Society hopes to secure copies of much of this material, which contains valuable papers and maps describing this portion of the valley.³

Another large mass of unpublished material containing data of interest to this region is the collection in the Congregational House, Boston, of letters to the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions written by the men and women who were sent by that organization to convert the Sioux, Chipewewa, Winnebago, and other Indians.⁴ In other places letters, diaries, and papers of the same missionaries — notably of Sherman Hall, William T. Boutwell, Frederick Ayer, and E. Franklin Ely — have been discovered; and papers of others not connected with the American Board, such as James Peet and Bishop Whipple, have been located. Taken as a whole this

³ For an account of these papers see *ante*, 4: 282.

⁴ These papers are described *ante*, 6: 202.

missionary collection holds much information regarding persons and events connected with the early history of this region.

For details of settlement in the southeastern corner of Minnesota, as in other portions of the state, the federal census schedules for each decade from 1840 to 1880 and the state schedules from 1865 to 1905 are available. These are manuscripts and give much more detail than the printed reports based upon them. They contain the names of nearly all persons resident in the state, their nativity and sometimes that of their parents, the amount of their land and number of their cattle and other stock, data about their industrial plants, and many other facts of value to anyone interested in the development of a particular locality.

The federal land office papers recently acquired by the Minnesota Historical Society through the closing of two of the last three land offices in the state are replete with names of settlers, with accounts of contests over certain pieces of land, with dates of first and final proofs for homesteaders, with figures showing the value of specified lands, and with other facts too numerous to mention. Another paper read at this convention has based many of its statements regarding the settlement of Winona County on these land office papers.⁵ An item picked at random from the records of the Winona land office for 1855 reveals some of the unexpected information one may glean from these papers. An affidavit on file records the following story. A certain man had taken a claim in townships 106 and 107, range 18 west, built a house, and placed a man there during his absence. The latter relates the story thus:

A morning or two after that I was at work on the house and 3 men came on and said they were a committee appointed by the "Dodge Centre Claim Society" for the purpose of Warning Mr Yerby or myself to leave in the course of 2 or 3 days. And if He Mr Yerby or myself was not off within that time a little gentle force would be used. . . . I continued to work on the house until the day that this society was raising a house on another mans Claim. . . . I then started down to the house . . . and while on

⁵ See *ante*, 6: 258, 291.

my way . . . I he[a]rd logs rol[l]ing or tumbling down I then went right to the house and see some 25 men standing Around the ruins of the house. . . . they then took up the cooking Utensils and other furniture belonging to the house and carried them off to parts unknown.

Whether the claim society or Mr. Yerby triumphed in the end, I am not prepared to say, but this paper and others make one wish that someone would investigate the claim societies that operated in Minnesota in pioneer days and write an account of them.

An old hotel register often contains some history between its battered covers. The Carimona House, at Carimona in Fillmore County, was an inn on the main traveled stage coach line from Dubuque to St. Paul. Its register from 1855 to 1859 is preserved by the Minnesota Historical Society, and it tells some historic facts worthy of preservation besides the names of the guests, their residences, and their destinations. "Pike's Peak" is the avowed destination to be noted frequently in 1858 and 1859 — in fact, if all who announced it as their goal actually journeyed thither, the Minnesota element in early Colorado history must have been large. The election of 1856 elicited many expressions and slogans in vogue at the time that give a clue to the topics on which travelers in Minnesota talked as they waited for a change of horses or gathered in the lobby in the evening. In July, 1856, someone wrote after his name, "Fremont & Dayton." Below this another inscribed, "Any man that votes for Freemont & Dayton is a 'tough cuss.'" The next entry expresses the writer's feelings more freely, and the next remarks, "Any man that votes for 'Ten Cent Jimmy' is a Border Ruffian." Not deterred by these statements, the next guest to register boldly announced his political affiliations by inscribing after his name, "Will vote for Fremont." "Border ruffian" was a term whose meaning was comprehended in the days of this old register, as one may judge from the fact that references are found to "Bleeding Kansas" and that one guest announced himself as bound for Kansas with a Sharp's rifle.

For the early sixties there is a series of pencil sketches and letters by Augustus C. Moore, who came West for his health about 1862, settled for a year or so at Frontenac, and amused himself and endeavored to recover his health by sailing a pretty little boat up and down the Mississippi and making pencil sketches here and there. Most of his letters and sketches have been preserved by his daughter, Mrs. Francis B. Tiffany of St. Paul, and copies of a few of them have been made by the Minnesota Historical Society. They tell of the everyday life of the valley, of ships that passed, of the weather, of the scenery, and of a thousand little phases of the region that other writers have deemed of no importance and so have not mentioned in their accounts.

Steamboat records, data on the lumbering business, minutes and records of old settlers' associations, church and home missionary material, public school and high school records, biographical sketches, and many other manuscripts that contain valuable information on the settlement and development of this region may be found in the manuscript division of the Minnesota Historical Society. To mention them all is impossible. A large collection like the many boxes of papers of Winona's famous son, James A. Tawney, should be mentioned. Scattering letters of another famous son, William Windom, ought not to be passed by in silence; neither should the three letters of David Olmsted, for whom Olmsted County is named, be neglected. A very attractive volume of letters and reminiscences of the oldest settlers of Mantorville was received last year by the society. A letter by Henry H. Sibley of August 20, 1852, should be of interest to residents of this city, for it tells how he secured the renaming of a Minnesota post office from Montezuma to the much more appropriate name of Winona. The diaries and letters of Matthew Marvin of Winona, one of those who represented this region in the Civil War, certainly deserve a place in this list of manuscripts relating to the valley. The papers of John F. Aiton, a missionary at Red Wing; of Alexis Bailly, a fur-trader at several places

between Prairie du Chien and Fort Snelling; and of Edward B. Drew, a pioneer of Winona, all deserve more than the passing reference that I am according them. Many others that should be listed repose in your attics and desks, waiting for the day when their worth shall be realized. They are so much waste paper until the historian finds them. Then they regain life and by his assistance tell how large quantities of furs were sent from Prairie du Chien to Leipsic in Germany and Canton in China; how the lumberman followed in the wake of the fur-trader and made the valley resound with the axe and the log drives; how Yankees, Germans, Swedes, Irishmen, Norwegians, and representatives of many other nationalities pressed on the heels of the lumberman and made the words Minnesota and Wisconsin synonymous with a region of prosperous, agricultural people. When next you climb to your attic or overhaul your desk, remember that some of the papers you find contain history; and, remembering, send them to the Minnesota Historical Society.

GRACE LEE NUTE

MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ST. PAUL



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