

MINNESOTA AS SEEN BY TRAVELERS

A WESTERN JAUNT IN 1850

How little the author of the following documents realized that a letter to his family in Pennsylvania describing a jaunt in the West would one day be cherished as a noteworthy historical piece! If he had foreseen the future value of the first of the two following letters, he doubtless would have strained for more formality and precision and so have missed the very characteristics that make it most valuable. As it is, its naturalness and its informal statement of fact give one confidence in its veracity. Moreover, the author, though writing merely a chatty letter to relatives, had an eye for significant detail. After reading the letter one can speak with some confidence of what steamboating on the upper Mississippi was in 1850, of the appearance and conditions of life in the important towns between Galena and St. Anthony Falls, and of some phases of life in Iowa, Illinois, and Wisconsin. Truly the double sheet of stationery that carried all this information from Wisconsin to Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, was freighted with vastly more than the ordinary letter bears.

The author, John Chamberlain Laird, had gone west early in 1850 with a half-sister, Catherine, who was joining her husband, Abner Goddard, at New Diggings in the lead district of southwestern Wisconsin. Laird was searching for a place to settle, and in the second letter printed below he continues the story of his migrations, which finally took him and his brothers, Matthew J. and William H., to Winona. There they founded the long famous lumber firm of Laird Brothers.¹

GRACE LEE NUTE

MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ST. PAUL

¹ Additional information about John C. Laird, whose life spanned the period from 1825 to 1902, appears in *Portraits and Biographical Record of*

JOHN C. LAIRD to MATTHEW J. LAIRD
[Minnesota Historical Society MSS. — A. L. S.]

NEW DIGGINGS, LAFAYETTE CO. WIS. NOV 12th 1850

DEAR BROTHER, AND ALL THE REST OF THE FAMILY.

I suppose U are all beginning b4 this [time to think] that I have forgotten you but it is not the case. I looked fo[r] a letter from some of you for a great while, in fact until I was tired and then started off on a tramp and thought probably by the time I got back I would hear from you, and so I did and read it with the greatest of pleasure. But I reckon U would like to no where Ive been and what I've seen. so I'll begin and give U a (sort or kind) of a History of my doings. After leaveing Stephenson I did not do much for a week or two. I tried to get a school for the winter, but the people of this place take so little interest in the matter of Education and the weather being very fine, the children so many of them were engaged in picking mineral that I got discouraged and gave it up, (indeed the people are so prejudiced against the Americans that it is hardly worth while for one to try to do anything) and told Mr. [B. F.] Hilton to try it.² he is a minister with a family that has been preaching for the Primitive or English Methodists and more because he was an America[n] than any thing else they read him out of the church although he had still a good many friends. He and his wife have now been teaching 6 or 8 days have 25 schollars.

Well I started on Monday 21st. Oct. with carpet sack in hand

Winona County, Minnesota, 300 (Chicago, 1895). Much information about the Goddards and the Lairds is to be found in a collection of family papers, including the second letter printed herewith, presented to the Minnesota Historical Society by Mr. Orrin F. Smith of Winona. His connection with these families is explained *post*, n. 3. A note announcing the recent acquisition by the society of the first of Laird's letters appears *post*, p. 190.

² Some information on Hilton may be found in *History of La Fayette County, Wisconsin*, 568 (Chicago, 1881). Abner S. Goddard, in a letter to his wife dated February 3, 1850, mentions the large percentage of foreigners in the population at New Diggings, "a mixture of Irish, French English Dutch." The letter is in the Orrin F. Smith and Family Papers, in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

for Galena not noing which way I would steer whether up or down the river, how far I should go or how long I should stay I new not There was but 1 boat at Galena and that was bound for Minesota, so I went aboard of her. (She is called the Nominee. Capt. Smith, master) he is I think a very fine man a stiff old Presbyterian will not run on Sunday and allows no card playing on board.³ Yesterday the mate commenced loading the barge while he was at church, so this morning he got his walking papers for it. We did not leave Galena till after dark. the boat is very heavily freighted with a heavy barge at the side. Got to Dubuque about 9 oclock got on a sand bar and did not get off until morning.

Oct 22nd. have another barge in tow this morning stopt at a number of places today to discharg[e] and recieve freight to night about 9 oclock run foul of a snag tore the last mentioned barge loose and sunk her. she was freighted with Oats, flour, Pork, Wiskey, dry-goods, and a large thrashing machine she had a hole nocked in the bottom at the stern. by the time they got the boat alongside of her the stern end was under water, and the hands then seemed afraid to board her, however some of them and a number of the passengers went to work and got off part of the freight myself among the rest I was on until she was almost under water clambering about on floating sacks of oats and barrels, trying to save something when I got off there was but one passenger and 3 deck hands on her she went down in a minute or two afterwards loss probably 2000 Dollars. got to Prairie Du Chaine about 12 oclock to night and lay on a sand bar 3 hours Pr. du. Chaine is an older town than St. Louis but is not much of a place, the people

³ Orrin Smith was long a famous steamboat captain on the upper Mississippi. He was president of the Minnesota Packet Company for many years. It is interesting to note that Laird's sister, Catherine Fruit Goddard, married as her second husband Alexander B. Smith, and that their son was named for their friend, the river captain. The namesake, Mr. Orrin Fruit Smith, still lives in Winona. The "Nominee" was one of the best known of upper Mississippi River vessels. It made its first trip in the spring of 1850. See Russell Blakeley, "History of the Discovery of the Mississippi River and the Advent of Commerce in Minnesota," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 8: 382, 388.

are nearly all French and 1/2 breed indians and have no enter-
prise about them

Oct. 23rd. The weather is as it has been remarkably fine. Scenery good and travelling faster than before. at 10 oclock A.M. passed where the battle of Badaxe was fought in the Black hawk War, and passed the lovers leap it is a very high rock where a white man jumped off with his lady love (a squaw []) in his arms they were pursued by the indians.⁴

Oct. 24th. Last night about 8. o'clock took aboard 40 indians old and yound [*sic*] of the Winnebago tribe they are a miserable dirty lousy set of beings and such another noise yelling squeaking jabbering you never heard had also six chiefs of the S[i]oux tribe they are better dressed than the others but their costumes make them look hideous. they are going up to St. Pauls to treat or sell their lands which is called the St. Peters Country. the others the Government is removeing from Wis. away to the cold region of the North.⁵ passed through Lake Pepin this 4 noon. it is 40 miles long and at the wides[t] place 5 miles. Left the Mis. river this after noon and went up Lake St. Croix to Stillwater, which is 30 miles from its mouth. got there about 8.0. to night it was Laid out 18 months since contains 10 or 12 stores, and as

⁴ The battle of Bad Axe was the culmination of the tragic Black Hawk War. At Bad Axe River, about fifty miles above Prairie du Chien, on August 2, 1832, the great Sauk chieftain, Black Hawk, was overpowered by the whites and the members of his band were killed or taken prisoners. An account of the battle is given in Reuben G. Thwaites, "The Story of the Black Hawk War," in *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 12: 237-261 (Madison, 1892). The generally accepted tradition concerning Lover's Leap, or Maiden Rock, a famous headland on the Mississippi near Stockholm, Wisconsin, differs slightly from Laird's. In the standard version the Indian maiden's lover was of her own race and only she leaped from the crag. W. A. Titus, "Historic Spots in Wisconsin," in *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 10: 288, 289 (March, 1927).

⁵ The story of the protracted removal of the Winnebago Indians from Iowa to Minnesota is given in William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1: 310-317 (St. Paul, 1921). Many straggled into Wisconsin from their reservation at Long Prairie and were returned from time to time in the manner described by Laird. Information on the purposes of the Sioux chiefs whom the author describes is also given by Folwell, in his *Minnesota*, 1: 275.

many taverns and gambling houses, 3 Large ware houses, and about 1000 inhabitanc: °

25th. Got to St. Pauls this morning The great Depot of Minnesota it contains 6 churches, about 25 stores 6 taverns, groceries and gambling houses too numerous to mention, about 50 Lawyers, and Land agents, 250 gamblers and about 15 or 1800 inhabitancc. The houses are principally frame painted white. there are some large commodious brick dwellings speculation runs mighty high. lots sell very high. Mechanicks wages from \$1.50 to 3.00 per. day boarding from 3 to 6\$ per week. produce and provisions are very high as it must all be brought from down the river. there is but little land cultivated yet, but those that have farmes opened now will make money. the soil is very productive, is of a black sandy nature, it has this season produced 300 bu. of potatoes to the acre, and of very good quality, 50 bu. Oats 75 bu. corn and winter wheat does very well. potatoes are now worth 50 cts. Oats, 50 corn 75 Last spring potatoes were worth \$2.00, Oats 1.00 corn 1.50, flour 10.00 per bbl. There has been a great quantity of produce taken up this fall but it is thought they will be on short allowenc b4 spring Gov. Ramsey owns a great quantity of Land and has opened 3 or 400 acres this summer and intends bringing on a number of families from Penn. next spring to settle it. The soil between the Mis. and St. Croix rivers is of all kinds it is very full of Lakes and marshes. The Lakes abound with the finest kind of fish and produce Wild rice of which the indians make great use but is a short crop this season. the marshes produce cranburys. they commence getting ripe in Sept. and can be gathered till spring provided they are not covered with snow they are very scarce this year oweing to the high water which killed them very much The Geography you have of this country is not very correct. I think according to your maps the Mis. river has almost a direct north and south course, but where the St. Crox empties into it it bears off

° Laird's statement is misleading. Stillwater was founded in 1843. See Warren Upham, *Minnesota Geographic Names, Their Origin and Historic Significance*, 571 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 17 — St. Paul, 1912). Its population in 1850, including that of Stillwater precinct, according to the manuscript census schedule in the custody of the Minnesota Historical Society, was 624 persons.

to the west considerably and the Croix runs north and south and is the line between Min[n]esota and Wisconsin and that part west of the Mis. belongs to the indians St. Pauls is about 40 miles from the mouth of the St. Croix and 14 miles across the country from Stillwater by stage. St. Pauls is laid out on quite a high bluff and has 2 or 3 ravines running through it, and its my opinion that it will not always remain the seat of government as it is too much to one side of the territory but it is a great place now every boat that lands spills out from 40 to 75 passengers There are two young men in company with me, from fox river Illinois who seem to be very fine young fellows. they came to prairie La Cross [*La Crosse, Wisconsin,*] at the mouth of the river of the same name in a light two horse waggon just fixed for travelling and could go no further with well, and got on the boat. we had seen as much of St. Pauls by noon as we wanted. We three and another man hired a hack this afternoon to go to the falls of St. Anthony pay 75 cts apiece or as we call it sixbits (6 1/2) distance 9 miles, by the river it is 15 horse hire comes very high up here \$3 per day for horse and buggy. a 2 horse team gets \$4 per day, and \$4 per acre to get breaking done Horses and cattle are very scarce here yet, horses are worth from 100 to 150\$ sheep and hogs I have seen none there is considerable water power here but not so much as the people of the place report ther[e] are one or two mills in the course of erection. I thought I would send you a paper from here as well as some more of my friends but some how I did not get them. there is two published here I believe.⁷

Falls of St. Anthony Oct 26th arrived here last evening it is a very good situation for a town there is a bank of 20 or 25 feet from the water then there is room for a street with houses on each side then another bank about the same height, then a beautiful prairie back 2 or 3 miles the town is laid out near 2 miles long and 1/2 mile wide. I have almost made up my mind to remain here this winter but think it rather cold and if a feller gets friz up

⁷ Probably Laird's reference is to the *Minnesota Pioneer* and the *Minnesotian*.

here they have to stay. they generally expect cold weather to commence about the middle of Nov. and continue till May. they do not feel it so much as farther south it is more frosty and not so much wind. the frost such as you sometimes have of a very frosty morning, will remain on the trees for six weeks at a time although the sun may shine every day they have no cloudy or rainy weather in the winter, generally have from 1 to 2 1/2 feet snow which lays from it first falls until spring. for three months of the winter it scarcely ever thaws a particle. the people that work out door wear 3 and 4 flannel shirts at a time 2 pair drawers 2 and 3 pair Socks. there is but little work done here through the winter except in the pinery which is still from 50 to 100 miles still further up the river all the tributarys of the mis. from the wisconsin up have immense quantities of pine toward their sources of which, Uncle Sam, is loseing great quantities every year Men go up in the summer and make their hay and claim. it takes a company of 8 to 10 men to every team. they are hired by men that make a business [*sic*] of it. they draw the tree the full length to the river b4 cutting it up which takes 3 and 4 yoke of cattle. they can not raft it where they cut it on account of the many falls in the river but drive the logs down in the spring to the different saw mills below the falls of St. Anthony is a romantic sight the highest perpendicular fal[1] of the water is 18 feet but there is a goodeal of fall in the river for 1/2 mile above and below the river is about 1/2 mile wide with an Island a little to the east side of the middle the water power here is immense There is one large saw mill. the dam or boom is made from shore to the island is made high enough to let no water over so as to keep their logs from running away but holes left for the water to pass through. they can build their mill the whole length of the boom which would be sufficient to run 20 saws. they have but 4 saws now which cut 25000 ft. every 24 hours and they could hardly suply the town of St. Anthony this summer with building lumber so you may think it is improveing some. last 4th. July a year there was but 3 houses in the place now ther[e] is 4 or 5 churches 1/2 doz stores and near 1000 inhabitance. More than 3/4 of the popu-

lation is from maine.⁸ The saw mill is the best I eve[r] saw they draw up their logs out of the water slab them off, throw the slabs throug[h] a trap door down to the basement wher[e] they have 1/2 dozen circular saws and cut them in to laths and shingles then below the mill on a level with the lower floor it is planked the length of the mill and 50 feet wide where they run out their lumber from above they lost about 20,000 logs this summer by high water oweing to the great water power here it will always be a place of importance. Although steamboats can come no further than fourt Snelling or St. Peters as it is called there was however a boat running above the falls this summer.⁹

Oct. 27th. Crossed the river this afternoon to the indian territory it is the finest part of minesota. The Government has a lease from the ind[i]ans of 1000 acres about the fort fo[r] the use of the soldiers. the fort is 8 miles from St. Anthony. got here at sun set and am pretty tired. Viewed the fort some and put up at Mr. Prescotts an old frenchman married to a squaw seems to be a fine old man, has been here 20 odd years.¹⁰ I intended to stay all night here, but after supper here comes the steam boat Dr. Franklin¹¹ I want to move aboard of her and put down the river She onloads some 2700 sacks Oats here

⁸ The manuscript schedule of the census of 1850 for St. Anthony and St. Anthony precinct shows a population of 656 persons. Though a very large proportion of them were from Maine, they were by no means seventy-five per cent of the total, as claimed by Laird. Since the census of 1849, submitted on July 4 of that year, lists 248 persons in St. Anthony, it is clear that Laird's statement that there were but three houses in the settlement is inaccurate. Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1: 351, 352.

⁹ This was the "Governor Ramsey," John Rollins, master. For other references to this boat, see *ante*, 7: 106, 131, 177.

¹⁰ Philander Prescott, who began trading in the vicinity of Fort Snelling in 1820, was not a French-Canadian, as so many of his fellow traders were. He was born in Phelpstown, New York, in 1801. See his "Reminiscences," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 6: 475-491.

¹¹ There were two boats at this time of the same name. See Blakeley, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 8: 381, 382. The *Minnesota Pioneer* for October 31, 1850, shows that the "Dr. Franklin No. 1" had arrived recently.

Sabbath Oct. 28.¹² have been in my state room all day pretty much. stopt at St. Pauls last night about 12 oclock a few min.

Oct. 29th. got off the boat last night at 9 oclock at prairie La Cross, with those two men I spoke about made arrangements to travel with them down through Iowa and up Ill. the man they left their horses with let their horses run off next day after they left and ha[d]nt got them yet. went to hunt geese and ducks to day they are very plenty the man came home to night (after being out 3 days) without the horses he is worth them

30th. Concluded to not wait longer on the horses jumped on a raft that lay there and am travelling down the river at the rate of 2 or 3 miles an hour

31st nothing of importance.

Nov. 1. old fashion. stop I got a head of myself one day some how Nov. 1st. 2 boats passed us to day the first since I got on the raft or I should not have been on so long, but got off raft at noon at Clayton City Iowa, 1 ware house 2 stores 1/2 dozen dwellings commenced last fall. walked 18 miles throu[gh] a nice country to Elkader on turkey river. stayed at a private house where they keep straglers. had a taste of real western life eat and sleep all to gether no ways bashful though

Nov. 2nd. have to walk again 25 miles to west union where Harvey Bruns lives got to west union after dark still 3 miles to cousin Jane B— so put up for the night. its a big town 1 tavern and store country rough and broken to day.

Nov 3r Sunday walked to cousins today they are all well. stayed with them until Wednesday after noon then started back part of the way, as I cannot [walk] much more than 20 miles a day on account of my feet. hardly any person living out here yet had to stop at a cabbin 12. by 15 feet. 2 old folks 3 big girls 5 men 1 boy mysilf and another stragler no other place to stop eat and sleep all together

¹² The Sunday of this week fell on October 27. Laird on November 1 realized that he had made a mistake in his dates, but his remarks for that day do not explain when or why.

Nov. 7 got to Elkader in good time have a ball here to night I helped them to dance one or two sets and then went to bed at 9 o'clock. Elkader contains 4 or 500 inhabitants they have a very large flouring mill.

Nov. 8th expected to take the stage for Dubuque which is 60 miles, but owing to high water in a branch of Turkey the driver did not bring the coach so he and I walked and rode turnabout for 12 miles more. travelled through pretty rough country today stopt in what is called the colony settled by Pennsylvanians it is a very pretty piece of prairie and timber.

Nov. 9th. country still quite broken passed through one place that was pretty good settled by Dutch here I see the first wooden shoes in my life. they have quite a large woolen factory which I saw in operation got to Dubuque about sunset it is quite a nice city some 5 or 6000 inhabitants nearly as large as Galena and will in time be the largest.

Sunday Nov. 10th. would like to have been at home to day. stage was to leave for Galena at 2 o'clock but did not go went to church to night heard a Baptist minister preach the funeral sermon of Dr. Judson the missionary.¹⁸ it was very good and I felt more at home than I have in any church since I left Pennsylvania

Nov. 11th stage don't go to Galena until 4 o'clock and when I get there still 12 miles from home and they want to charge me 5.\$ to take me home in buggy it is 20 miles to Galena and only 20 to home through by Hazle Green Wis. so I new no easier way to earn 5.\$ than to walk crossed the river to Ill. and traveled out of Ill. to Wis. three states in one day. got home in the evening found them all well and glad to see me thought I had got lost for I did not expect to be gone more than 10 days. I was not long in getting the letter from home I tell you. got one from Wm. Wilson, which had been here near 3 weeks he was at Aunt [sic] Nellys when he wrote.

¹⁸ Laird probably is referring to the veteran Baptist missionary in Burma, the Reverend Adoniram Judson, whose death had occurred in the spring of 1850. Many public accounts of his career were appearing at the time of Laird's trip.

Nov 14th had intended sending this today but did not get it finished in time for the mail. I think of going down to Freeport [Illinois] in a day or two.¹⁴ Well James I do not no whether you can read this or not or whether its worth reading. my hand is getting tired and my sheet is full. I want you to write soon, and tell me all about matters and things.

J. C. LAIRD. to M. J. LAIRD

[P. S.] Catherine says tell them I never enjoyed better health in my life. children are very hearty. Willy is as fat as a bear love to all ask Cretia if she has forgotten me.¹⁵

J. C. L.

JOHN C. LAIRD TO LUCRETIA FRUIT

[Orrin F. Smith and Family MSS.—A. L. S.]

NEW DIGGINGS March 15th 1851

DEAR SISTER,

Abner was writing a few lines to you, and said he could not write much so I concluded to write a sentence or two I received your company letter a few days since and was very glad to hear from you all and know you were all weell. I had indeed began to think you were never agoing to favour me with a scratch of a pen I have enjoyed most excelent health this winter. I came up here to the diggings some 4 weeks since but expect to go back to Freeport next week. You talk about wanting to see me at home I would like most dearly weel to see you all but do not know when it will be. it may not be for six months or a year yet. About the first or second week in April I think of going up the river some distance to a place called Prairie La Cross, or it may be some other place. I want to secure me some Land some place before returning home. I have found no place that I would rather live than in Stephenson Co. Ill. but as you say every person cannot live there, and a person must have some capital to settle there as the railroad

¹⁴ Laird went to Freeport, but by March 15, 1851, was back in New Diggings, as the second letter shows.

¹⁵ Catherine was Mrs. Abner Goddard; Cretia was her sister, Lucretia Fruit.

excitement has put the price of Land up very high. so I think if I go into a new place [I] can grow up with it and be somebody and then I want to get as near the river as possible. the advantages of the place I speak of are considerable. it has a firstrate steamboat landing, which is the only one for some distance above or below, and then ther[e] is a fine section of country back you recollect I spoke of the place when I was up the river Last fall. And if I stop there I will try and secure you some land too. it is rather far north but if a person gets used to it they dont mind trifles It is about time for the mail to leave and I must stop but you will hear from me again before long so good bye Give my love to all

Yours &c.
JOHN C. LAIRD



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