

SOME SOURCES FOR NORTHWEST HISTORY

THE AMERICAN TURF REGISTER AND SPORTING MAGAZINE¹

The Christmas season was approaching in 1839 when Henry H. Sibley, the youthful agent of the American Fur Company at Mendota, made the following request of Ramsay Crooks, the president of his concern in New York: "Will you do me the favor to pay for and have forwarded to me from 1 Jan. the 'Spirit of the Times,' and the 'Turf Register & Sporting Magazine' . . . & charge amt. of subscription to each to my private a/c."² Thus subscriptions for two popular magazines reached the publishers, and doubtless the periodicals found their way each month to the fur-trading post on the upper Mississippi.

Sibley was not the first frontiersman residing in the upper Northwest to be a regular reader of the *American Turf Register and Sporting Magazine*. This magazine, which began publication at Baltimore in 1829, was devoted particularly to horses. Sections were regularly given over to a racing calendar; owners could here register horses and their pedigrees; stable management, breeding, veterinary practices, and fox hunting were given due attention. Some space also was devoted to sports such as fishing and the hunting of wild game and birds. It was in this connection that the editor in an early issue called upon subscribers to contribute accounts of "sports and game in the far west." And they responded in surprising numbers. From St. Louis, Jefferson Barracks, Fort Dearborn, Fort Howard

¹ This is the first of a series of brief discussions of rare, unusual, or little-used sources for the history of Minnesota and the Northwest. *Ed.*

² The original of this letter, which is dated December 21, 1839, is in the Sibley Papers in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society. It is printed in Theodore C. Blegen, ed., *The Unfinished Autobiography of Henry Hastings Sibley*, 71 (Minneapolis, 1932).

on Green Bay, Kaskaskia in Illinois, Prairie du Chien, and various points on the upper Mississippi came letters to the editor discussing hunts, game, and related topics that might prove of interest to the sportsmen of the East. Most of the writers used pseudonyms or initials in signing their contributions, but several of them can be identified and it is obvious from the contents of the letters that most of them were army officers stationed at frontier posts.

Some interesting and unusual accounts of life on the middle-western frontier a century ago are to be found in these letters. They reveal that army officers who had spent their early years in the old South, where fox hunting was a favorite sport, often found that the pursuit of deer or wolves was an equally exciting diversion. Of special interest are the letters of Lieutenant John G. Furman of South Carolina, for he pictures the Chicago region much as it must have been at the opening of the city's "Century of Progress."³ From Fort Dearborn in the spring and summer of 1830 he wrote spirited accounts of wolf, deer, and fox hunts on the Illinois prairies, and of bird shooting in the swampy reaches that are now occupied by the metropolis of the Middle West. A district south of the fort he describes as a huntsman's paradise where "vast quantities of aquatic fowl congregate to feed. . . . Swan, geese, and brant, passing to and fro in clouds, keep up an incessant cackling: ducks of every kind, from the mallard and canvass-back, down to the tiny *water-witch* and *blue winged teal*, add their mite to the 'discord dire,' while hundreds of gulls hover gracefully over. . . . In April, myriads of plover and snipe take the place of the afore mentioned: still later,

³ Furman signed his contributions with his initials only, but he is identified in the *Turf Register* for February, 1831. He was graduated at West Point in 1827 and he died at Fort Dearborn in August, 1830. His letters appear in the issues for August and September, 1830, and February and June, 1831 (1: 595, 597, 2: 40-42, 286, 491-493). For a record of his military service see Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army*, 1: 441 (Washington, 1903).

great quantities of woodcock, grouse, and ortalans, make their appearance." The exploits of Captain Richard B. Mason, a Virginian stationed at Fort Crawford in the early thirties, are frequently mentioned in the *Turf Register*. "Great Shooting" by the captain is described by one who signs himself "A Hunter in the Prairie" in the issue for October, 1830. Mason also contributed to the magazine.

A number of items in the early volumes of the *Turf Register* touch upon the region of the upper Mississippi. Among them are accounts of trout fishing in the Wisconsin Valley, of "Deer Hunting on the Water by Lamp Light," of the way the Indians "frequently combine shooting, fishing and gathering the wild rice," and of a deer hunt on the Wisconsin River. To Minnesotans a description of a "Wolf Chase on the Ice" which is signed by "A.H.P." is of special interest.⁴ The writer relates that "Perhaps to hear of a wolf chase upon the ice, may not be less novel to some of your southern readers than 'fishing on skates.' . . . Having my horse shod for the sport, with sharp heels and steel toes to his shoes," he continues, "I ran down and killed upon the ice thirteen wolves during the month of January." With this account is printed, to verify the writer's statement, a "Certificate of E. T. Langham, Sub. Indian Agent," dated at Fort Snelling, February 3, 1831.

From time to time the *Turf Register* reprinted extracts from the published works of John Tanner, Lewis and Clark, Audubon, and other writers on the West. An account of "Game in Wisconsin" is reprinted in the issue of September, 1837, from the *Wisconsin Territorial Gazette*. Some

⁴This item appears in the *Turf Register* for December, 1831 (2: 182). The frontispiece for the issue is an engraving by E. W. Clay of the scene described. Two of the other upper Mississippi items noted are accompanied by illustrations by Peter Rindisbacher, whose work is described *ante*, p. 283-287. See the *Turf Register* for February and October, 1832 (3:296, 4:57-59). The latter account, which is signed "R.," may have been written by the artist. It includes an excellent description of the Indian methods of gathering and preparing wild rice.

material from George Catlin's *Letters and Notes* is reproduced with one of his drawings in the May, 1842, number. Several years earlier Catlin contributed a letter to the *Turf Register*.⁵ Another well-known contributor was Henry W. Herbert, who under the pseudonym of "Frank Forester" prepared several series of articles for this periodical in 1839 and the early forties.

The *Turf Register* was published regularly until December, 1844, when volume 15 was completed. In the last issue appears an announcement that the magazine is to be discontinued, and that in the future for those who desire to register "pedigrees of Blood Stock, etc., . . . the columns of the '*Spirit of the Times*' will be open." In 1839 the ownership of the *Turf Register* was taken over by William T. Porter, editor of the *Spirit of the Times*. The latter magazine has as its subtitle, *A Chronicle of the Turf, Agriculture, Field Sports, Literature and the Stage*. Thus the subject matter of the periodicals overlapped, and after publishing both for six years Porter probably found that subscribers were lacking for two magazines of so similar a type. Consequently he decided to combine them.

Although the *Turf Register* appears to have had numerous subscribers in the Middle West, only one complete file of the periodical is now available in that region, according to the *Union List of Serials in Libraries in the United States and Canada*. It is owned by the University of Minnesota and is to be found in its agricultural college library in St. Paul. Two other complete files of this early sporting magazine are noted in the *Union List*—one in the New York Public Library and the other in the library of the University of Oregon. An evidence of the extreme rarity of this once popular magazine is the fact that in 1931 a set sold at auction for \$450.00.

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⁵ See the issue for August, 1836 (7: 554-561).



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