

## SOME SOURCES FOR NORTHWEST HISTORY

### HOME MISSIONARY RECORDS

Few historians and research students in the field of Northwest history realize that a wealth of historical information lies hidden in the archives of the American Home Missionary Society. This large body of records, which is preserved in the library of the Chicago Theological Seminary, is arranged according to states. The Minnesota Historical Society has copied by means of filmstrips about ten thousand pages of letters and reports relating to Minnesota and dating from 1849 to 1868. A survey of the Minnesota materials reveals that information about various phases of social and economic life in the Northwest is to be found in these documents.

The records of a home missionary society are chiefly important for a study of the religious history of a particular state. They show how churches sprang up in a frontier region, how small groups of Congregationalists and Presbyterians in new communities here and there organized into congregations and applied to the society for financial aid. The congregations pledged a small sum toward the salary of a pastor and asked the society to pay the remaining amount; but even so salaries were meager enough. The pastor at Stillwater in 1850, Joseph C. Whitney, received a hundred and seventy-five dollars a quarter. During the hard times following the panic of 1857 some pastors received only five hundred dollars a year. After a pastor was called to a congregation, he was not content to serve only his own little parish, but he was alert and eager to minister to new, outlying settlements. Whitney walked seven miles to Willow River and four miles to Marine Mills instead of hiring a horse, which would have cost two or

three dollars. Although Gideon H. Pond was stationed at Oak Grove, he preached at Minneapolis, ten miles away, at Bloomington, twelve miles away, at Kaposia, five miles away, and at a private dwelling, four and a quarter miles from his home.<sup>1</sup>

Stories of congregations that worshipped in homes, public halls, or even storerooms, and of their struggles to build their own churches are also told in the records. The pastors discuss in their letters the spiritual attitude and progress of their people; and in their yearly statistical reports they give the number of church members, Sunday school scholars, conversions, losses in membership, and the amounts of contributions. Although the churches supported by the American Home Missionary Society in Minnesota were mainly Congregational, the letters and reports contain references to the activities of other denominations and indications of a certain rivalry between them. In one church at Excelsior, the congregation was composed of Congregationalists, Methodists, and Presbyterians, and it adopted articles of faith which were subscribed to by the members before it applied to the missionary society for aid.<sup>2</sup> The society's superintendent for Minnesota, Richard Hall, traveled about the state and reported on conditions in various congregations, offering suggestions on their need for aid, on any difficulties they might have with their pastors, and on the advisability of establishing new congregations. The extent of home missionary work in Minnesota, the dependence of the frontier congregations on the society and eastern churches, and the relations between congregations and pastors have not been fully investigated.

These records throw considerable light on the story of the settlement and development of Minnesota. They indi-

<sup>1</sup> Joseph C. Whitney, January 4 and April 4, 1850; application from the Oak Grove church, December 5, 1853. The documents cited are addressed to the executive committee or to a single officer of the American Home Missionary Society.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Galpin, November 26, 1853.

cate the order and the period in which towns were settled and they are rich in information on the growth of villages and their population. For example, the first home missionary in Minnesota, the Reverend Edward D. Neill, wrote from St. Paul on April 30, 1849, that "since last fall the buildings have trebled and the population doubled." From Greenville in Wabasha County the report came that the first settlement was made in May, 1855, and that by August, 1856, most of the claims were taken and between five and eight hundred people were settled in the township. The dates of incorporation of many towns are given in the reports, together with accounts of the number and kinds of buildings erected. At Point Douglas in December, 1850, Richard Hall found a mill, ten houses, a store, a tavern, and a post office, and he saw the same number of houses on the Wisconsin side of the St. Croix River.<sup>3</sup> St. Anthony, Stillwater, and a place called Decorri in Benton County were among the early settlements described in the missionary letters.

Many references to the sources of Minnesota's population may be discovered in the home mission documents. Neill gives lists of the previous residences of the members of his congregations at St. Paul and St. Anthony and of the states from which members of the legislature of 1849 had emigrated. Charles Secombe, a missionary stationed at St. Anthony in November, 1850, mentions the fact that an agent had arrived to select a location for a colony of Pennsylvanians who planned to emigrate the next spring. A committee from a church at Excelsior reports that only twenty members of a colony organized in New York as the Excelsior Pioneer Association came to Minnesota, but that more were expected.<sup>4</sup>

The missionaries often discussed the economic situation

<sup>3</sup> Edward D. Neill, April 30, 1849; Congregational church of Greenville, August 15, 1856; Richard Hall, December 6, 1850.

<sup>4</sup> Neill, September 12, 1849; Charles Secombe, November 2, 1850; Congregational church of Excelsior, November 26, 1853.

in their letters, since this naturally affected them acutely. They were careful to lay specific facts before the society, emphasizing their need for financial assistance. Many letters contain mentions of prices such as these: wood, two to three dollars a cord; potatoes, a dollar a bushel; flour, six and a half dollars a barrel; meats, eight to fifteen cents a pound; eggs, twenty to forty cents a dozen; and butter, thirty to forty cents a pound. The panic of 1857 and its consequences receive a good deal of attention. In February, 1858, Sherman Hall, missionary at Sauk Rapids, mentioned the lack of business, the number of unemployed, and the scarcity of money, but he stated with the optimism of the frontier: "There is a kind of general understanding that it is best for everyone to remain content as he is for the present, living on what he has got, and wait patiently for better times." Better times were slow in coming. A letter dated October 12, 1859, reads:

The time for Minnesota's deliverance is not yet. The lamentable condition of her banks, the bankruptcy of her Rail Roads, the murderous effect of her *three* and *five* per cent money system, together with the enormous taxes under which she now groans, and is destined to groan for a long time to come are dark spots upon the escutshun of her present history, while they enshroud her future in a perverted and still deeper gloom.<sup>5</sup>

As a rule the missionaries were not a complaining lot, but they gave frank descriptions of the hardships and trials of life on the frontier. George Spaulding, who was stationed at Marine in 1858, constructed his own bedsteads, tables, and chairs. He had a borrowed stove in his living room and only one threadbare carpet in the house. In many cases a pastor built practically his entire house himself. At Glenwood the parsonage had neither doors, windows, floors, nor ceilings. Only one room was plastered; in that the walls froze and, during a thaw, particles of plaster fell on and

<sup>5</sup> Whitney, April 22, 1850; Sherman Hall, February 3, 1858; Benjamin F. Haviland, October 12, 1859.

into everything, including the food on the table.<sup>6</sup> Boxes of clothing sent from the East were a great boon to the missionaries, whose letters often report to the society urgent needs and acknowledge gifts. Charles Secome wrote that the coat and vest he wore for public appearances were threadbare and ragged, and added that he had been obliged to reduce his winter's stock of provisions. Other phases of pioneer life also are touched upon in the letters, such as the danger from marauding Indians, the difficulties of travel over poor roads that lacked bridges, and the destruction of crops by grasshoppers. A good harvest is always noted. Farmers often realized but a small profit; the price of wheat in the summer of 1861 was so low that it scarcely repaid the expense of sowing and reaping.<sup>7</sup>

Social activities on the frontier, such as a Thanksgiving festival and a Fourth of July celebration for the benefit of a church, are chronicled in the correspondence of religious workers. As early as February 23, 1850, reference is made to lyceum lectures and a library association in St. Paul. In later years similar activities are recorded in other towns. In 1858 a missionary working in Glencoe reported the existence of a lyceum, a writing school, and a singing school.<sup>8</sup> A meeting of a territorial temperance convention was reported on January 15, 1853. As temperance societies were organized, they were noted in the letters. The liquor traffic with the Indians was condemned. The hard times following the panic of 1857 were blessed for having closed many whiskey shops.<sup>9</sup>

Educational history also may be studied in the missionary documents. A Sabbath school was founded in 1849 at St. Anthony Falls by a teacher who was sent out by an eastern

<sup>6</sup> George Spaulding, February 11, 1858; Alfred C. Lathrop, December 1, 1861.

<sup>7</sup> Secombe, November 11, 1852; H. Doane, July 1, 1861.

<sup>8</sup> Neill, February 23, 1850; J. J. Hill, February 6, 1858.

<sup>9</sup> Neill, January 15, 1853; L. Armsby, January 28, 1858.

society for the promotion of national education. At Belle Prairie efforts were made to establish Mrs. Frederic Ayer's school for Indians and half-breeds on a permanent basis, to enlarge its operations, and to build a boarding school. The beginning of a female seminary at Lake City is mentioned in a letter of March 2, 1857. A missionary at Red Wing reported that eighty students attended Hamline University during the winter term of 1856-57, which closed with a public examination.<sup>10</sup>

Political and current events were not neglected by the missionaries. Mention is made of such topics as the Congressional bill to organize the territory of Minnesota; the Indian treaties proposed in 1850; efforts to admit Minnesota as a state with a constitution permitting slavery; the beginning, suspension, and extension of railroads; the hasty and excited mustering of troops at the outbreak of the Civil War; and the hysteria that followed the Sioux War of 1862.

The home missionaries in Minnesota were keenly aware of the fact that they were watching a frontier develop into a great commonwealth. In addition to recording the religious progress of the region, they commented on the growth of settlements and population, on economic conditions, on social events, and on political questions.

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<sup>10</sup> Neill, July 19, 1849; E. Newton, January 4, 1856; DeWitt Sterry, March 2, 1857; Joseph W. Hancock, April 1, 1857.



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