THE ST. CROIX VALLEY AS VIEWED BY PIONEER EDITORS

The research student who goes through the Minnesota weekly newspapers of the territorial period is at once impressed by the wealth of material descriptive of the new region. Minnesota was bidding strongly for the immigrant and the tourist traffic, and pioneer editors rivaled modern tourist bureaus in broadcasting the merits of the region. That the editors were overwhelmingly successful is demonstrated by the fact that the population of Minnesota rocketed upward from less than five thousand in 1849 to a hundred and seventy-two thousand in 1860.

Not only did the editors wish to attract new settlers, but they wanted to inform their own public about developments in the territory, for communication in the early fifties was uncertain, and comparatively few persons, once comfortably established on a farm or in a town, went far from home except under pressure of an emergency. If a trip was made, the traveler was likely to write to his home-town editor about it, and the account usually received ample space in the columns of the local newspaper. The editors themselves seized every opportunity to make personal investigations and to inform their readers of the "who, what, where, and why."

Among the pioneer Minnesota editors who visited the St. Croix Valley region were James M. Goodhue of the Minnesota Pioneer and John P. Owens of the Minnesotian, both of St. Paul, George D. Bowman of the St. Anthony Express, and Field S. Cable of the Saint Croix Union, published at Stillwater. The accounts of the district that these

1A paper read on June 27, 1936, at the Hastings session of the fourteenth state historical convention held under the auspices of the Minnesota Historical Society. Ed.
men published in their news sheets form the basis of the present paper.

There were two ways of approaching Stillwater from St. Paul and St. Anthony—by steamboat via the Mississippi and Lake St. Croix, and by road. Goodhue, in the Pioneer for August 16, 1849, tells of an excursion trip to Stillwater and Taylor’s Falls on the steamboat “Highland Mary No. 2.” The excursion party of nearly a hundred included several territorial judges. Goodhue relates that they passed up the lake thirty miles, and then continues:

The country is surpassingly beautiful on both sides, being prairie along the shores, while at a greater distance, the land rises in gradual slopes and is covered with a scattering growth of oaks. Here and there a farm is seen; but the most of the lands are not yet even claimed.

Willow River, the present Hudson, on the Wisconsin shore a few miles below Stillwater, was the county seat of St. Croix County, Wisconsin. It occupied a “charming spot for a town, upon a beautiful sloping bench, overlooking the lake,” with splendid lands nearly all subject to entry tributary to it for a distance of forty miles inland. Goodhue exclaims:

Where can more productive lands be found than the whole of that rich peninsula between the St. Croix and the Mississippi river? Here is this very Highland Mary with 1500 bushels of Indian corn on board from below to supply lumbermen on the St. Croix at, say 50 cents per bushel, when corn can be raised at least as cheap, along the shores of this river, as any where else in the world—yes, cheaper; for those who raise corn here, have no sickness to combat and no doctors’ bills to pay.

Stillwater, “as fresh as a rose in a flower pot,” and “the salient point of lumbering operations on the St. Croix,” as well as the county seat of St. Croix County, Minnesota, was the site of “McCusick’s mills, propelled by an overshot wheel, thirty feet in diameter, by a small stream from the bluff.” After proceeding up the lake, the “Highland Mary”
entered the river again by a narrow channel. Goodhue continues:

In the night, we pass the Areola mills, owned by Moore and brother. Four miles higher up, we came to the Marine mills, under the direction of Mr. Orange Walker, one of the proprietors. These mills and the houses and property thereunto appurtenant, were built by five enterprising men, with no capital but their own untiring industry. The property is considered to be worth $50,000. The mills are propelled by a small stream falling upon a large overshot wheel. The buildings here, include several good houses, extending up the ravine made by the mill stream; and begin to look like quite a smart village.

The steamboat soon began to encounter sand bars, and eventually the crew of the “Highland Mary” was forced to unload the remainder of the corn and other freight that it carried upon the shore during a pouring rain and turn its nose downstream. Goodhue, however, consoled his readers with the reflection that a “boat of lighter draught can navigate the St. Croix, beyond all doubt.”

September, 1851, and June, 1852, saw the editor of the Minnesotian, Owens, leaving his sanctum for visits to Vermillion Falls, Point Douglas, Prescott, Willow River, and Stillwater. He made two trips, the first on the “Nominee.” His first landing below St. Paul was at Oliver’s Grove, the present Hastings, where H. G. Bailly had a trading post.

This point is only one mile and a half from the great water power at the falls of the Vermilion; has a good landing, and is a pretty site for a town. Dakota Landing, three miles above, on the same side, is also a good town site, with all the natural advantages.

On Owens’ second trip, made on the “Ben Campbell,” he probably was influenced by Dr. Thomas Foster, a fellow passenger, who had taken a claim near Hastings and erected “a neat cottage.” Owens noticed more particularly the Vermillion River country with its splendid water power and beautiful scenery. On the Vermillion, writes Owens,

We found our friends Van Rensalaer, Truax, and the brothers Osborne, hard at work, crops looking well, and themselves hearty,
rugged and cheerful, after a suspended residence upon the Sioux lands of several months. The Vermilion is a beautiful clear stream, running through a high, rolling country, timber and prairie, of the same character and beauty which we generally find upon the west side of the Mississippi. There are some natural curiosities along the Vermilion, which upon our next visit we will examine more minutely.

Truax ferried Owens across the Mississippi to Point Douglas, which appeared "to be standing still at present." He expected it, however, to "take a start one of these days. It must ever continue a point of importance as a place of shipment for the produce raised upon the unsurpassed farming region adjacent." At the moment, Prescott on the opposite side was prospering, and Barker, the hotelkeeper at Point Douglas was just ready to move across the lake. According to Owens:

Prescott is going ahead rapidly. It has risen from nothing within the past few months, and is now a town, as large as St. Paul was when we first saw it. The new saw mill in course of erection is nearly finished. It is a fine, substantial structure, and when completed will be one of the best in this region. Mr. Barker's new hotel building is a large and complete house, and is now open for the accommodation of the public. It was much needed, as the emigration has been so great this season that people were forced in some instances, we were informed, to sleep and eat out of doors. Several other new buildings are going up, and many more would be erected immediately but for the scarcity of lumber.

In July, 1852, Bowman, the editor of the St. Anthony Express, believing that "this portion of Minnesota . . . though the oldest and one of the best in the whole Territory, has hitherto been neglected and unknown," made a hurried trip by team to the St. Croix Valley. According to him, the region had never had a newspaper devoted to the development of its attractions, and "the Mississippi papers have very naturally striven to set forth most prominently the charms of regions more adjacent and directly contiguous, and consequently tributary, to their own," namely, the Minnesota and upper Mississippi areas. Yet, continues Bowman, "in all that constitutes a desirable country for the
farmer, the merchant, the mechanic, and the laboring man, there is no section in Minnesota, presenting more attractions than the valley of the St. Croix.” The road followed by the editor passed through rolling country, “a mixture of hill and dale — deep ravine, and spreading upland prairie.” Trees and numerous lakes, the latter well stocked with fish, added greatly to the attractions of the route. He noted in particular the prevalence of oak openings, which “consist of an extent of land, interspersed with burr oaks at a distance varying from fifty to two hundred feet apart.”

Stillwater, of course, was the principal community among the thriving towns on the St. Croix, and Bowman stresses its importance as a lumber market.

The Penitentiary now building here, creates considerable activity, and supplies the town with a good deal of ready currency. This building occupies a very pretty situation on the river, half a mile above town, in what is called Battle Hollow (from a bloody Indian battle which occurred there about ten years ago, between the Sioux and Chippewas.) When completed, this structure will be an object of no little interest to those who visit our Territory.

In June, 1853, Owens of the Minnesotian was again on the St. Croix. On this occasion he traveled on the “Humboldt,” which was put on the river late in the preceding season as a triweekly packet between Stillwater and Taylor’s Falls. He writes:

The little Humboldt is a great accommodation to the people of the St. Croix. She stops anywhere along the river to do any and all kinds of business that may offer, and will give passengers a longer ride, so far as time is concerned, for a dollar, than any other craft we ever traveled upon. She is also, to outward appearances, a temperance boat, and carries no cooking or table utensils. She stops at the Marine, going and returning, to allow the people aboard to feed upon a good, substantial dinner; and the passengers are allowed, if they feel so disposed, to carry bars in their side-pockets and bricks in their hats. A very accommodating craft is the Humboldt.

The “June rise” was on at the time of Owens’ visit, and the high water was enabling the lumbermen to clear the
A Bill of Lading for Merchandise Shipped on the
"Humboldt"

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In Witness Whereof, the Owner, Master & Clerk of said boat has subscribed to...

Dated at Stillwater, this 6 day of August 1855.

A.F. Booth
upper stream of logs, something that had not been possible for the two preceding years.

From Stillwater to the Boom, six miles below Taylor's Falls, you are scarcely out of sight of rafts and strings of logs. The whole way up, and about the Boom, it requires no great stretch of fancy to imagine one's self passing through a country in military possession of Queen Victoria, so often do we pass detachments of stout, hardy men, dressed in red.

The boom itself was built by the St. Croix Boom Company, incorporated by the Minnesota and Wisconsin legislatures and was permanent in character.

Piers of immense size are sunk at proper distances from the Minnesota shore to the foot of a large island near the centre of the stream, and again from the head of the island to the Wisconsin shore. The boom timbers are hung from pier to pier; and the whole river is entirely commanded, with no possibility of scarcely a single log escaping.

The boom company's charter compelled it to give free passage to all boats, rafts, and other craft ascending or descending the river, but on at least one occasion in 1853 a compact mass of logs some three or four miles long forced a steamboat to unload its cargo for freighting by Mackinaw boat at the company's expense to Taylor's Falls. When Owens reached this point on the "Humboldt," the boat, "weak and exhausted" worked its way through the logs of the boom only with great difficulty. But, continues Owens:

The "Captain," as we neared the Delles, signified his intention of not going through the swift water up to the landing, on account of the running logs; so we were put ashore some half mile below, and compelled to "foot it" over the break-neck surface of uneven outcrop[p]ing trap-rock to Taylor's Falls.

Owens describes this place as follows:

The celebrated Falls of St. Croix are half a mile above, but boats cannot ascend over Taylor's Falls; although there is no precipitous fall at the latter place, only swift rapids. . . .

The geologists have told us all about the formations of this region. The dark green trap rock—known by the common name of "green stone"—similar in texture and general appearance to the more
grayish copper-bearing rock of Lake Superior, is thrown up here in immense masses, lying all over the surface so thick that a team cannot be driven over it with safety. — This upheaving process has only been carried on in the immediate vicinity of the Falls. Half a mile back on the Minnesota side it entirely disappears.

Taylor’s Falls in 1853, although “one of the oldest places in Minnesota,” consisted of some “thirty or forty houses — all tastefully built and cleanly painted” erected during the preceding two years on the claim originally made by Jesse Taylor of Stillwater in 1837. Owens relates the history of the place:

Messrs. [B. F.] Baker, Taylor and others proceeded here to erect the first mill ever commenced on the St. Croix. Mr. Baker died before it was completed, and the frame was afterwards removed to Osceola, six miles below, on the Wisconsin side, where it was re-erected and still stands, doing good service for its present owners.

Jesse Taylor sold his claim to Joshua L. Taylor, who in 1853 still owned a part of the old holding. Owens stopped at the Chisago House, which he describes:

The Chisago House, is better furnished, and as well kept — barring the inconvenience of having no meat and vegetable market at hand — as any house in St. Paul, St. Anthony, or Stillwater. . . . We never hated to leave a place so much in our life, when absent from home. Some of the finest trout and other fishing, as well as hunting, to be found in this north-western region, is about these Falls.

In pursuance of his investigations, the editor of the *Minnesota* crossed the river to St. Croix Falls.

This old milling site, which it would take all the Courts in Christendom, and all the Philadelphia lawyers, with their number multiplied by ten thousand, to decide to whom it rightfully belongs, is now wearing greater signs of active prosperity than it has since the famous “Boston Company” laid the withering curse of their hands upon it.

Such water power, in close proximity to “one of the most inexhaustible pine regions in the world,” said Owens, should certainly be utilized.

We do not wish to be understood as giving any opinion as to which of the parties litigant are in the right; but certain it is, Mr. Hunger-
ford, who now has possession, is making the Falls look vastly more like a business place than it has for years. The mill has been fitted with new machinery the past winter, and is now driving ahead rapidly, day and night, running four saws, with the remaining two almost in readiness to start. Things about the village wear a prosperous appearance; and if the property were only out of law, there would be no more thriving, driving, go-ahead village in the State of Wisconsin than St. Croix Falls.

By 1855 Taylor's Falls contained "about two hundred inhabitants, one grist mill, two dry goods stores, two grocery stores, one law-office, one physician, one shoemaker shop, one blacksmith shop, one carpenter shop, one wagon-maker shop, one livery stable," and other business houses, as well as a large warehouse. The town had one vital defect, however, according to Cable of the *Saint Croix Union*.

It is that there are but few women. We saw scores of old bachelors who have pined away their three and thirty without being consoled by the smiles of this fair portion of God's Creation, and they are very likely to remain so unless a great revolution takes place. We would recommend them to the daughters of Stillwater were it not that our people are tenacious in holding their own, and especially that which is good. We do recommend, however, to the good people of the East, that their philanthropy be extended towards us and the goodly bachel's of Taylor's Falls, and that they do send by their earliest possible convenience, a cargo of this valuable commodity.

In late February the editor of the *Union* came some twenty miles from Marine Mills by team, "stowed among meal bags, barrels, guns, blankets, etc." He exclaims:

Jupiter! what a road. We think the indefatigable Captain of the Corps Topographical Engineers should be made to do penance for the manner in which the road is constructed by driving over the road for ten years. The goats upon the mountains could not have engineered a worse road. Some of the hills were hardly known as anything else but "Perpendicular Hills," and the "dogs" (a lock used on a sled) were brought into requisition.

Marine Mills, Cable found to be a community of about a hundred and fifty persons, "all workers, (no idlers there)," with unusual opportunities for trade. It boasted one hotel, the Marine House, "kept by that attentive land-
lord, Mr. Lightner," serving edibles "in a style that has
classed the Marine House as a favorite resort for those who
alone know the value of a good meal . . . one dry goods
store, (Messrs. Judd, Walker & Co.), one blacksmith shop,
and one shoemaker shop." Its sawmill, with two upright
and one rotary saw capable of cutting lumber, was in full
operation. The town, according to Owens, was noted "not
only for its extensive manufacturing facilities, but for the
hospitality and agreeable social qualities of its citizens.
Mr. Walker and his associates are extensively known over
the Territory, and gratefully remembered by every stranger
who has ever visited the St. Croix Valley."

No visitor to the St. Croix country could overlook the
importance of Stillwater, and as might be expected, the
editor of its own paper, the Saint Croix Union, extolled its
virtues with a lavish pen. "Where is Stillwater? Stillwa­
ter is very near the geographical centre of North America."
Railroads from the north, the south, the east, and the west
must pass through the community. "Whenever rail cars
shall learn to run 300 miles an hour, Bostonians who break­
fasted at home, may expect to dine with Trussel or Gray,
and to sip tea at the hospitable boards of some boniface in
Olympia, Washington Territory." As the county seat of
Washington County, Stillwater had a courthouse, "a good
frame building, of good size; built on a point of ground
overlooking the town and lake." There, too, was the terri­
torial penitentiary, with walls and buildings that "appear
to be of the most approved and substantial kind." "The
Catholic, Methodist, Episcopalian and Presbyterian denom­i­nations each have comfortable and substantial houses, and
we believe each of them is supplied with preaching every
Sabbath." In 1855 the Baptists had not yet erected a
church.

Fine water from underground springs was available in
quantities and this water had been piped under the cellars
of some of the residences. Signs of activity were numerous in the upper town and a short distance beyond the penitentiary. Schulenberg’s new steam sawmill was just beginning operations in May, 1855. “It cost between $30,000 and $40,000; and will take about 50 hands to attend it.” The editor then calls attention to the improvements above the mill.

On the fifteenth of April last, there was not a solitary house there; now there are sixteen, and we noticed preparations making for several more. — Some of these buildings are worth $200; others $1,000 and some $1,500.

The sawmills and the lumber industry were the keys to the prosperity of the St. Croix Valley, in the eyes of the editors, and they never tired of retailing to their readers the latest developments in the business of turning standing pine timber into finished lumber. In refreshing contrast to the whine of the sawmills, is Goodhue’s account of “A Ride to Red Rock and Cottage Grove,” in the Pioneer for August 30, 1849. After descending “the steep bluff in the rear of Pig’s Eye” he rode along the Mississippi bottom lands through “wide fields of heavy and excellent grasses, which we presume to be free to such as may desire to lay in their winter’s stock of hay,” and found that some people of the neighborhood had already begun to avail themselves of the opportunity. As Goodhue proceeded, he found that:

At a distance of some ten miles, in an air line from St. Paul, we emerge from the oak openings which are principally on our left and the meadows upon our right, into a clear, dry prairie called Red Rock. In a pleasant little thicket of various kinds of trees, we arrive at the house of Mr. John Holton, who, after a residence of some five or ten years, has made himself and family almost as comfortable as they could be in an older country. His lands extend back from his house among the oak openings, and in front reach the river.

About a mile beyond on the riverbank were the residence, store, and woodyard of J. A. Ford. Within ten rods of his home, close to the Mississippi, was the rock from which the place derived its name. “It is red—having been painted
by the Indians, and made an object of worship." A quarter of a mile farther on stood "two good block-houses, which were formerly occupied as a Mission school for the Indians. The Rev. gentleman who had charge of the school resides there still in the quiet pursuit of agriculture." One improvement after another met the editor's eye as he rode along toward Cottage Grove.

Entering the west side of this grove, we pass down a gradual descent, in a southeasterly direction by a small pond, and through diversified scenes of knolls and dells, over an extent of some three miles, when we emerge upon another wide, and to our eye limitless, prairie, until we arrive at the house of Mr. R. Kennedy. Our course has now bent around to this point, until we are brought within a mile [and] a half of the Mississippi.

Goodhue noted various other developments in passing as he turned back to St. Paul. He writes:

We have viewed this section of Minnesota with surprise and delight. In respect to its beauty and fertility, it will vie with the best sections of upper Illinois. And taking into account its unqualified healthfulness, we pronounce it emphatically the best section of country in all the West.

Goodhue was writing in 1849 of the "delta" country between the St. Croix and the Mississippi, but he expresses also the sentiments of the other pioneer editors quoted herein who visited the St. Croix Valley in the period between 1849 and 1855.

Willoughby M. Babcock

Minnesota Historical Society
St. Paul