

THE "NEW YORK TRIBUNE" AND THE MINNESOTA FRONTIER¹

"*The* [New York] *Tribune* is the favorite paper of our neighborhood and cabin. We find always in its columns, besides the news of the week, articles of particular interest to farmers and their wives. From its politics down to the discussions on the proper manner to boil a potato, all are instructive." This statement, made by a St. Paul correspondent in the summer of 1857, was borne out by fact. The most influential paper published in the United States in the fifties, the *New York Tribune*, also ranked first in its influence in Minnesota. In the year 1856 its circulation in the territory was 2,943, larger than that of any local paper; and three years later, in spite of the depression that followed the panic of 1857, the list of subscribers in the newly admitted state was smaller by only six. The popularity of this journal grew largely from its identification with principles which the West supported—particularly abolition of slavery, encouragement of western development and settlement, and promotion of agriculture as a noble and worthy occupation. Although its support of a protective tariff ran counter to western sentiment, its encouragement of industrial association and co-operative effort met with approval. Information about Minnesota in the paper is largely in the form of letters written by residents and visitors there. Out of these grows the diorama of the settler's problems and experiences presented here, in which his disappointments as well as his opportunities are set forth.

The *Tribune* reflects the confidence of Horace Greeley, its editor, in the future of Minnesota Territory and be-

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littles the disadvantages of residence there. Aside from the hardships of pioneer life anywhere, frontier life in Minnesota, the *Tribune* maintained, was not more difficult than in other places, in spite of its northern latitude. To inquiries made by prospective settlers as to the attractions offered in that locality, the journal replied editorially:

Minnesota is a good State—one of the most fertile, best timbered, best watered, of all the New States. . . .

Her cold is an objection—more because of its effect on fruit-trees, &c. than from its direct influence on human beings—but it is not an unmixed evil. It unquestionably contributes to vigor of muscle, energy in labor, activity and longevity.

Some correspondents from the territory did not paint so roseate a picture. With the perspective of a few months' residence in Minnesota, a realistic observer advises:

Do not dwell upon the poetry of Western life. . . . To sunder all early ties, and come West to *live*, is no child's play, and the question of removal to the West should be seriously approached.

Who should go West? Frontiersmen answered this query by welcoming good citizens, good "moral" men, mechanics, women, and people with capital that they were willing to invest in industrial enterprises. The most desirable immigrant, in the opinion of one writer, was the newly married man. Bachelors were too careless about their manner of living, and the scarcity of unmarried women on the frontier made it unlikely that they would marry after they arrived. On the other hand, men with large families would find traveling expenses and provision bills too heavy a burden. People who were already comfortably situated in the East were advised to remain where they were, as were lawyers and doctors, of whom there already were enough in the West, and land speculators, always *personæ non gratae* on the frontier. Residence of nearly seven years on the frontier "painfully" convinced one writer that the "first-class" citizen rarely emigrated, and he warned the prospective settler not to expect to find society as he would

wish it to be, but to come with the intention of helping to build it up.

Having made the decision to establish a home in the new land, the emigrant had first a slow and arduous journey to make to his prospective home. Ratification of the Indian treaties of 1851 opened the fertile southern part of the state to settlement, and caravans of cattle, horses, and wagons streamed in from neighboring states. In the later fifties the emigrant perhaps traveled by rail to Dunleith and thence by ferry across the Mississippi to Dubuque, where steamboat passage up or down the river might be obtained. Due allowance, however, had to be made for delays. The passenger might find that, although he was in Dubuque, his baggage was still on the other side of the river when the boat left. On the other hand he might board a boat which had steam up and bells ringing, only to have it quiet down when the passengers had secured their tickets and repeat the same performance as later groups arrived until it had enough of a load to make the trip pay.

Arrived at his destination, the settler shared with hundreds of other prospective residents the problem of establishing a business or locating a farm. The rapid settlement of communities along the Mississippi River in the fifties is illustrated by the growth of Hastings. In the spring of 1855 the village consisted of eight houses, one store, and a tavern. A year and a half later it boasted a population of at least twenty-five hundred, fifty stores, several hotels, three churches, four schools, four sawmills, a flour mill, three banks, and two daily lines of four-horse stages. It was in the problem of locating a farm that the *Tribune* and its correspondents were primarily interested. Claims which would furnish prairie land, timber, water, and accessibility to market were "first class" and were not to be found in settled neighborhoods. To reach such locations, immigrants in 1857 were compelled to go forty to a hundred miles back from the Mississippi below St. Paul. An Iowa

visitor recommended to Easterners in 1857 that they buy "second hand lands" in preference to government lands, as they could thus acquire excellent improved farms with needed resources at from six to fifteen dollars an acre. In the depression years after 1857, financial difficulties of farmers and declining land prices combined to make available to the homeseeker many bargains.

The immigrant found every kind of conveyance costly, and in the spring he encountered "such roads as he never dreamed of." After days or weeks spent in searching for a good location, the settler, with the aid of his neighbors, "who were invariably kind and friendly," cut and put up the logs for his cabin. The new home commonly comprised a lower room lighted by two small windows and divided into two or three apartments by quilts and blankets, and a loft reached by a short ladder in one corner of the house. As the next step in home building, the settler was advised to have an acre or two of ground plowed, or if that was impossible, to spade up a garden and plant vegetables. Farming implements were costly and scarce, and the charge for hiring a breaking team was from five to ten dollars an acre. Corn meal, salt pork, and molasses were the staple foods of the new settler; butter, milk, and fresh meat he was forced to do without unless he had money to buy them. The new country supplied gratis such delicacies as strawberries, raspberries, wild plums, and cranberries, and there was an abundance of wild game.

The newcomer whose means were scanty was advised not to bring members of his family with him, but to leave them in the East until he had prepared a home for them and had earned enough money to pay their traveling expenses. If his neighbors saw that he was honest, industrious, and sincere in his intention to become an actual settler, he might leave his new home to earn money with the assurance that his claim would not be "jumped." If he sought work as a farm hand, he could usually find employment near his claim

for good wages. If he was a mechanic, particularly if he was a blacksmith, a carpenter, a shoemaker, a mason, a joiner, or a millwright, he would find that his skill was in demand in the vicinity of his claim. In winter he could earn money chopping wood or working in the pineries. Nature also provided marketable goods for the taking in the form of cranberries and ginseng. Cranberries, which might be gathered at the rate of fifteen bushels a day, brought from five to seven dollars a barrel in 1853. In 1859 a correspondent estimated that enough ginseng had been dug in Minnesota to make seventy thousand pounds of the dried root, and a second writer believed that the amount sold that season exceeded two hundred thousand dollars in value.

Thus even the poorest man, if he was industrious and trustworthy, could shortly establish a home that might not be elegant or convenient, but was at least comfortable. The western enthusiast held up this "certainty of a comfortable home and competence for life" as the "salvation" of the white laborers of the eastern cities who were enmeshed in the "serfdom" of the industrial system and who had the courage and the energy to make a break for independence. To the men of the family the transition to frontier life was accompanied by much hard work and planning for the future. This occupied their minds and dulled the shock of change from their accustomed manner of living. Women were more likely to be oppressed by the monotony and isolation of the new life pictured in the following account:

Back of the cabin is the forest, and in front of it stretches the wearisome prairie; half a mile off is the nearest neighbor; and here and there, on the rolls of the prairie, are seen the log cabins of the settlers. The store may be three, or it may be ten miles away. Church there is none. Silence is all around. . . . The musquitoes come early in the evening and stay all night. . . . When the excitement of moving into the new home is over and the family begin to look the fact in the face, that they have really come West to *live*; and, if the

wife and daughters don't have some "good crying-spells," then they are made of superior stuff to that of common folks.

Filing a claim, building a home, breaking the sod, clearing and fencing the land, and assembling the family were not the sum total of the farmer's problems. Eventually the land must be paid for. Crops—such as the grasshoppers, gophers, and field mice left—must be marketed. Money was scarce and often worthless. Mortgages and high rates of interest obscured the vision of independence and self-sufficiency. And the panic of 1857 stalked through the land.

In the all-important land question, the western settler found deep grievances against the government and the Democratic party. His meager resources were usually exhausted in building improvements, stocking his farm, transporting his goods and family, and buying provisions for his first year of residence. To pay for his farm, he was often obliged to borrow money or to mortgage his property after the twelve-month period of credit allowed by the pre-emption law had expired. Only under favorable conditions was the average farmer able to make more than his current expenses during the first years of residence on the frontier. In 1860 it was said that there were twenty thousand settlers on government lands in the state who could not pay for their holdings without disposing of all their other possessions, and ten thousand who could not pay for their claims under any conditions. Moreover, the western pioneer felt that by the work and sacrifice he had given to wrest the soil from the wilderness he had earned title to the land. Persistent opposition on the part of the Democratic president and a majority of the Democrats in Congress to a free homestead law and the erratic policy pursued by the administration relative to land sales irritated the Westerners and convinced them that their salvation lay in the Republican party, which, in the words of the *Tribune*, "saves them from spoliation of their homes." In the absence of a law

granting ownership in return for residence, the settlers sought to retain the use of their land without paying for it, first, by agitating for the postponement of land sales by the federal government so that they might renew time after time their pre-emption rights, and, second, by the formation of claim associations through which they could manipulate land sales.

The financial plight of the farmers on the frontier in the late fifties is well described in a memorial to President Buchanan on the subject of public land sales, which reads in part:

We came to this part of the country with the hope that by a few years of labor, economy, prudence, and deprivation, we could pay for enough land to make homes for ourselves, and our families. In this we have been disappointed. Many of us have raised enough produce and stock, which, if they could have been sold . . . at fair prices, would enable us to pay for our lands; but we have no market at home, and no railroads to carry it abroad. If we wish to exchange our produce for necessary articles, we must carry it from five to fifteen miles to find a store, and when there, we must give ten bushels of wheat to buy a pair of boots, and four bushels of corn to buy a yard of coarse woolen cloth. . . .

On account of the scarcity of teams, we often have to carry our grain and other produce a part or all of the way to mill and market on our backs, and to bring back our flour, salt, nails, and cloths, in the same way. Tea, sugar, molasses, spices, and the like, we go without for years, or use them only as a medicine, or on special occasions.

We wear corn-sack pantaloons, and old moccasins and boot legs for foot coverings. We use leather hinges, and wooden latches, and glass enough barely to do our in-door work.

We are not presenting to you the cause of the indolent or the profligate—we have worked late, and we have worked early, and have used as much frugality and prudence as any class of people in the Union. Still, we are not able to pay for our lands.

The panic of 1857 sent farm prices into a tailspin of deflation, although prices of merchants' goods remained high. Property was reduced from fifty to seventy-five per cent in market price. To the debtor, the rise of interest charges to prohibitive heights was little short of disastrous. Bank-

ers discounted only for short terms and in small amounts on the best security at an average rate of twenty-five per cent. Five per cent a month was not an uncommon interest charge, and one individual was known to exact as much as eight if he knew the borrower needed the money badly. At twelve per cent a year, a reasonable rate to the Westerner, it was practically impossible to secure a loan. As a result of the increasing discrepancy between income and expenses, the settler who had borrowed money to pay for his claim was compelled to give up his holdings and move farther west, unless his lands adjoined a townsite and were thus increased in value.

The discontent of the frontier farmer concentrated in hatred of the land speculator, the man who purposed to make money in a new community without doing any work and who retarded development there by withholding large tracts of land from cultivation. It was not that the settler was averse to speculation as such, for he entered the game too, insisting upon securing title to at least two quarter sections, one to occupy and the other to hold until he could sell it for a satisfactory advance. In the contest between resident and nonresident speculators, the former kept the upper hand. The manner in which this was done is described by the observer of a land sale held in the summer of 1857 at Osage, a town in northern Iowa where conditions similar to those in Minnesota obtained. When the sale opened, the population of Osage was trebled by the influx of two thousand strangers, of whom five hundred were settlers from the adjoining region, two hundred were onlookers, and the rest, speculators. Legally, all government lands were first offered at auction and sold to the highest bidder, starting with a minimum price of a dollar and twenty-five cents an acre. In practice, however, settlers and speculators worked together to share the desirable tracts at the lowest price. Actual settlers who had "proved up" their quarter sections bought their lands at the minimum rate without question.

But having acquired one quarter section, they claimed the right to a second quarter at the same price. This the speculators agreed to on condition that the settlers state their numbers and when their land was taken. When the settlers refused to accede to this request, the speculators bid up the land, only to find that their opponents outbid them but failed to pay. Unless payment was made on the day of the bid, the land was auctioned off again on the following day, until the twelve days of the sale were over and the land came in again for pre-emption.

As the sale continued with very little land changing hands, both parties realized the need for an agreement. A successful arrangement seemed to have been made by the speculators when they organized a committee made up of one of their number from each state. This group drew up a plan of action by which the frontiersmen were to receive their extra quarter sections, and the remaining lands were to be distributed among the speculators in half section lots by a lottery system. When they found that the plan was working, the settlers interested other residents in buying land, with the result that by the last day of the sale about a thousand buyers had received certificates for a second quarter of land. The lottery system was then put into operation by the speculators, seven hundred and ninety-seven of whom were registered. Some of these men sold their drawings within a few hours at profits of twenty-five to a hundred and fifty dollars.

The auction sale closed on a Saturday, and on the following Monday the land office was to be opened to anyone for private entries with gold or land warrants. Competition among buyers was keen. Many pre-emptors were interested in entering land with warrants, which were applicable only for private entry after the public sale was closed and which at that time could be exchanged at a cash outlay of ninety-five cents an acre. Moreover, on Sunday hundreds of the self-styled settlers sold both the quarters they

had obtained, made new locations, and returned to the land office to file their new claims. The settlers, fearing that the speculators, because of superior numbers, would control the private sales on Monday, took proper precautions. At five o'clock on Saturday afternoon, five citizens of Osage seated themselves at the door of the land office. About twenty men spent the night there, and new recruits joined them on Sunday. By five o'clock on Monday morning, hundreds of men were awaiting the opening of the office. When the door was finally unlocked and the crowd pushed in, many of the men suffered broken legs and ribs, others fainted and were carried out through a window, and still others had their clothing torn to tatters. After all this difficulty, less than two hundred of the thousands who demanded admittance could squeeze into the land office, and only some fifteen received on the opening day the half section allotted to each. By such devious and dubious methods the immigrant became a landed proprietor.

Thus is the social and economic life of Minnesota and the Northwest in the fifties depicted in the columns of the *Tribune*. Conditions in frontier Minnesota were pictured with remarkable candidness and absence of exaggeration. The undesirable was presented as well as the favorable; discouragements as well as satisfactions were anticipated. It is difficult to imagine that an Easterner who was prepared for removal to Minnesota by a diligent reading of this journal could be greatly surprised or disillusioned by what he found upon his arrival.

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STAPLES, MINNESOTA



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