

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

MARKING MINNESOTA'S WESTERN BOUNDARY¹

WHEN MINNESOTA TERRITORY was created in 1849, the northern, eastern, and southern boundaries had already been determined. According to the Organic Act of March 3, 1849, Minnesota Territory extended westward to the Missouri and White Earth rivers. The Minnesota Enabling Act of February 26, 1857, cut off a great deal of this western region and made the western boundary the Red and the Bois de Sioux rivers, Lakes Traverse and Big Stone, and a line from the outlet of the latter lake south to the northern boundary of Iowa. The line, eventually marked from Lake Traverse southward, was not immediately surveyed, but, as settlers poured into the western part of the state and surveys were extended into that region, the commissioner of the general land office recognized the need of establishing permanently the western boundary so that the lines of public surveys could be closed thereon. With his annual report to the secretary of the interior, on November 30, 1858, he submitted an estimate for the work.

On March 3, 1859, Congress appropriated five thousand dollars for the running and marking of that part of the

¹ This is a revised version of a report prepared on December 17, 1937, in answer to an inquiry from Mr. Charles A. Smith of Sioux Falls, South Dakota. As chairman of the landmarks committee of the Minnehaha County Historical Society, he asked for accurate information about the iron post at the southern terminus of Minnesota's western boundary. A bronze plaque, bearing an inscription based upon the information furnished, has since been placed on this post. Before an audience of about three thousand people, the marker was dedicated on October 9, 1938, with Judge Julius E. Haycraft of Fairmont, a member of the executive council of the Minnesota Historical Society, as the speaker. He took part also in a program that followed at Larchwood, Iowa, in which Mr. O. E. Klingaman of the Historical, Memorial and Art Department of Iowa and Mr. Lawrence K. Fox of the South Dakota State Historical Society participated.

boundary not defined by natural landmarks. On April 30, 1859, a contract for the work was awarded to Chauncey H. Snow and Henry Hutton and they began their survey in July.

Manuscript copies of the instructions to Snow and Hutton and of their field notes of the survey are among the state archives in the custody of the Minnesota Historical Society. Much can be learned from an examination of these papers. The "Special instructions to accompany the contract between Thomas A. Hendricks, Commissioner of the General Land Office, and Chauncey H. Snow and Henry Hutton, Surveyors, for running and marking that part of the Western boundary of the State of Minnesota which is not defined by the natural landmarks" are dated April 30, 1859. They are very specific, citing the laws of 1857 and 1859 by which the survey was authorized and the need for the establishment of the boundary, and describing in minute detail the monuments and markers that were to be set up. They state that "the beginning of that part of the boundary which is not defined by natural land marks is the Southern extremity of Lake Traverse." This starting point was to be ascertained with great precision and marked with an iron monument.

The field notes of Snow and Hutton cover the period from July 11 to August 4, 1859. They record the meandering of the southern part of Lake Traverse and the running of the line to the head of Big Stone Lake. The setting up of each of the wooden posts marking the hundred and twenty-four miles from the foot of Big Stone Lake to the Iowa boundary is chronicled, as well as details about the placing of the iron monuments at the southern point of Lake Traverse, the head and the outlet of Big Stone Lake, and the point of intersection with the northern boundary of Iowa. There are also comments on the surface of the country, the soil, and the trees.

The four permanent monuments are described as hollow

pyramids of cast iron, three-fourths of an inch thick, twelve inches square at the base tapering to seven inches at the top, and six feet long, and marked with raised capital letters on each of the four sides. They were placed three feet in the ground. The first three were marked "Minnesota" on the east side and "Dakota" on the west. "Initial point" was marked on the first post on the side facing Lake Traverse, while on the opposite side, facing Big Stone Lake, was inscribed "B. S. Lake, 1859."

The post at the intersection with the Iowa boundary has been of particular interest because it marks the southwest corner of the state, where Minnesota touches both Iowa and South Dakota. Misstatements about it, some of which are drawn from county histories, have been current for a long time. Until the manuscripts relating to the survey were discovered in the state archives, it was thought possible that surveyors running the northern boundary of Iowa in 1852 had set the post as a marker of that line. Proponents of this theory apparently disregarded the facts that the western terminus of the Iowa line was at the Big Sioux River and that Minnesota's boundary then extended west to the Missouri River. In their field notes, Snow and Hutton state explicitly that they placed the post at the termination of their survey when they reached the intersection with the northern boundary of Iowa. They report that it was marked as follows: on the north side "W. B. Minn.," on the south side "Iowa," and on the east and west sides, "43° 30' N.L." This monument is still in its original place. Recently, under the sponsorship of the Minnehaha County Historical Society of South Dakota, it was repaired and reset; and roads built by Rock County, Minnesota, Lyon County, Iowa, and Minnehaha County, South Dakota, now make it accessible to visitors.

LOIS M. FAWCETT



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