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## ST. PAUL: THE PERSONALITY OF A CITY<sup>1</sup>

IT HAPPENS that I have been talking lately for the radio, and my subject has been experiences of my own. So when the Minnesota Historical Society invited me to speak about life in St. Paul in 1841, I rather wondered if it thought my personal recollections went back quite that far!

Of course in circles where genuine pioneer memories exist, there is quite a different view about this matter. I discovered it when I visited some small Minnesota towns in search of historical data. I found that, whereas most of us leave no stone unturned to make people think we are younger than we are, genuine old settlers often go to equally great lengths to make people think they are older than they are. "You watch out for Mrs. Higgins," old Cy Hatchet would say, "she'll try to make you think she's ninety-seven and she can't be a day over ninety-three." And Mrs. Higgins would feel obliged to warn me that Cy Hatchet would not be a hundred until next year, no matter what he said.

But this question of years and the passing of time has another relevance to our subject. There is a certain type of philosopher who says we should never look back, that the past is past and therefore nonexistent, that the present is the only reality. Nothing, I think, could be more thoroughly untrue. For whatever else a man may be, he is certainly the sum, too, of all his yesterdays, of all the circumstances and

<sup>1</sup>An address presented before the luncheon session of the ninety-second annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society, at the St. Paul Athletic Club on January 20, 1941. *Ed.*

experiences of his life. This is true I think of a nation and also of a city. It was colorfully true of St. Paul.

Now I think it is generally admitted that St. Paul among Midwestern cities was not quite like other girls, but that she had a definite personality and flavor of her own. Certainly up to the time of the last World War, that nemesis of all traditions, she did have that personality, and it is easily traceable to the circumstances of her youth. We all know what those circumstances were. In fact, we may know them too well, so that the freshness of rather unique phenomena may have been lost.

In the 1840's European civilization and culture were at a very high point. In this country, too, we had reached the high watermark of the flowering of New England, so-called—which was, of course, the flowering of that European culture transplanted to this new soil. And I think that Americans who were really civilized then were perhaps more civilized than we have ever been since, as what they took over was a very complete thing. And yet, and in fantastic contrast, out here was a world that was contemporaneous with the garden of Eden, that belonged to another geologic era and was inhabited by a Stone Age people. It was as primitive and certainly more remote, if we remember the airplane and the radio, than any part of the world is today.

To be sure throughout this Northwest a few seeds of modern life had been dropped. There were a few army posts, fur-trading posts, and missions, but they were insignificant in these trackless immensities. Right here in St. Paul we had something quite different. The log cabins among which Father Galtier built the small basilica he called St. Paul were occupied by French and Swiss artisans—of all people on earth! The reason why they were here has always fascinated me, since it seems to involve one of the greatest obstacles to human progress—namely, the fact that a certain kind of idealism with a big, self-conscious “I” is so often not accompanied by common sense.

These people were refugees from Utopia. Along with other martyrs to a good intention, they had fled from the asylum established for them on the windy plains of Assiniboia in Canada by the good Earl of Selkirk. Most of those who did not die of starvation resulting from floods, droughts, plagues of grasshoppers and rats, or who were not murdered by bands of *bois brûlés* set upon them by a fur-trading company, came south and settled at different points along the Mississippi. *We* got some Swiss artisans, and contrary to a recently expressed opinion, they were pretty good citizens. The disreputable element was provided by the French half-breed voyageurs and illicit whisky traders, mostly of American extraction, who also settled in the neighborhood.

But St. Paul did not take its stamp from any of these groups. It was to take that stamp from privilege rather than underprivilege. And the greatest single factor was America's oldest and most aristocratic commerce, the fur trade. This commerce was royal in its origins. Among the British, its first head was the cousin of England's most fashionable king, Charles II. Its first charter was issued to a group calling itself the "Governor and Company of Adventurers of England Trading into Hudson's Bay." Its members were, with one exception, princes, dukes, earls, and knights, one of whom was to become a king. When their governors landed in the New World they were dressed in scarlet and gold lace and they never seemed to take a step without the music of fifes and bugles. The royal connection still goes on. When the then Prince of Wales visited Canada a few years ago, the Hudson's Bay Company tendered him the traditional tribute of two elk and two black beaver.

The Hudson's Bay Company's most important rivals, the Nor'westers, carried on in the same high style. When the Montreal partners of the Northwest Company set out to meet the wintering partners at Michilimackinac, their birch-bark canoes carried champagne and silver plate, French

cooks, and valets to dress them for dinner. Our own great American Fur Company followed somewhat the same tradition. Its founder, John Jacob Astor, did not come from the so-called upper classes, but many of the partners in charge of the wilderness posts did.

I have never heard that the terms aristocratic and ethical are synonymous, yet I believe that any enterprise or group that is successful over a long period of time must have an ethics of its own, however special and limited. The ethics of the fur trade was personal, a kind of aristocracy of character. The factor in charge of a remote post had a job that was difficult, dangerous, and delicate. He had to establish a purely personal ascendancy over a tough gang of ignorant, unruly voyageurs and *engagés*, and over savages who outnumbered his men thousands to one. Indians, like all primitive people, are chiefly responsive to the aristocratic virtues — courage, integrity, leadership, and good manners. And the men who rose highest in the fur companies had these qualities. Moreover, there could be little check upon them in business matters. There was only their word. It had to be as good as their bond, and it usually was.

The men who dominated earliest St. Paul were, with a few notable exceptions, partners and ex-partners of the American Fur Company. There were Henry H. Sibley, Henry M. Rice, and Dr. Charles W. W. Borup and his partner Charles H. Oakes, who became the first bankers of the city. There were Norman W. Kittson, later a partner of James J. Hill in some of his epoch-making enterprises, and Martin McLeod, to whom much of our excellent educational system was due. It was, I think, the forcefulness, elegance, and large gesture of these men that gave to St. Paul its most characteristic tone.

But there were, of course, other factors. Let us turn for a moment to geography. Here both positive and negative elements are involved. There were no mines at St. Paul to attract large groups of unskilled workers. On the other

hand, our position at the head of navigation on the Mississippi attracted merchants and men interested in transportation and finance. Along with them came lawyers, of whom St. Paul has always had an exceptionally distinguished list, as well as professional men of all kinds.

Our geographical position had other effects. Contact with a wild country has an influence on personality. There is a liberation, a deep appeal to primitive instincts, that are the danger and the fascination of the frontier. It is too heady a draught for the weak, of whom we had a good many, but an inspiration and a stimulus to the strong, of whom we had a great many more. Then, too, the beauty of this place had its effect. We have forgotten how very beautiful it was, with the magnificent groves of hardwood trees that covered the bottom lands, the waterfalls, streams, and wild flowers.

St. Paul also had what was then considered a perfect climate. People mostly came by steamboat, so it was always summer when they arrived, and always, according to them, on a delicious and sparkling day. You and I can remember a great many summer days in St. Paul that were neither delicious nor sparkling, but the spell of the wilderness is not upon us.

And, finally, St. Paul was a famous health resort. Just as now everybody rushes away from here to California or Arizona to get rid of a cold, so in those days they rushed away from everywhere else and came here to get rid of a cold. And many of them never left.

In that early formative period St. Paul changed continuously and rapidly. The most important year after 1841 was 1849, the year in which Minnesota became a territory. Sibley was the man sent to Washington to bring it about. His home town of Mendota was suggested as capital of the territory. This would have meant a fortune to Sibley, but it was he who insisted that the capital be St. Paul, a very characteristic incident.

We were fortunate, too, in the young lawyer and Congressman from Pennsylvania who was made governor, Alexander Ramsey. And incidentally, when the Ramseys left Pennsylvania their neighbors were not sure whether they would have to cross the Isthmus of Panama to get here or sail around the Horn. Ramsey was a man of the greatest ability, soundest common sense, and a remarkable public spirit. These facts, and the fact, too, that his wife was a woman of rare distinction, played an important part in making St. Paul what it was.

A notable date of that year 1849 is April 28, the birth date of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, then the *Minnesota Pioneer*. Its founder, publisher, editor, and chief reporter was James M. Goodhue. He was a fiery, uncompromising man and a very well-informed and humorous one as well. His very fine paper reflected these characteristics. There were no telegraph wires to St. Paul and the news came by stage-coach and steamboat. The foreign flashes were months on the way, as there was as yet no transatlantic cable.

Goodhue was a man of very exacting standards. He stood violently for law and order, so violently, in fact, that he became involved in an incredible street brawl in the course of which he was stabbed in the stomach by the gentleman at whom he was shooting with a pistol. All in the name of law and order! Goodhue's brilliant career was cut much too short by his death in 1852, but he left a standard, not as to the best way to settle a quarrel, but in journalism, which became a part of our city's development.

This development was now to take on a violently accelerated pace, and for one of the causes we must turn to an element which was comic or tragic, squalid or picturesque, pitiful or ominous, according to one's point of view. Or perhaps all of these. I am speaking, of course, of the Indians. The town was filled with them. Their canoes were on the river, their braves in their proud eagle feathers were on the streets, performing and degrading their war

dances for pennies thrown to them by tourists. Contact with us had already badly demoralized them.

This was Sioux land. The territory east of the river had been ceded in 1837, but the rich prairies stretching westward from the river were still Indian lands. Our intention toward this territory was clearly stated. It was even depicted on our first great seal of Minnesota. On it we see the noble white man with his plow on one bank of the river, and, on the other, the noble red man with his horse riding away toward the sunset. The fact that the sunset was placed in the East "dulled not," as one historian puts it, "the keen message of the seal." The motto on our first seal was, "I fain would see what lies beyond." And a very lovely motto it was! But it was written in Latin and was so misspelled that it meant nothing at all. It was subsequently changed, however, and the sunset, too, has been moved.

Within two years after the territory was formed, the Indians were persuaded to cede all their lands as far west as the Red River and Lake Traverse, with the exception of certain tracts retained by them along the Minnesota River. With this treaty the wilderness was annihilated. Soon a great tide of immigration began to pour into that land and most of it flowed through the St. Paul gateway of the Northwest.

Our city began to grow with phenomenal rapidity — much too fast, because we now entered into that peculiarly American, and, while it lasts, delicious frenzy known as a boom. But first let us glance at this new hustling city. It is summer in the early 1850's, and it is, of course, a delicious sparkling day. Twenty or thirty white steamboats are tied up at the dock, the streets are crowded, and everybody moves fast. The fragrance of the woods is mixed with the clean smell of new lumber, for buildings are going up everywhere, and the sound of hammering fills the air. There will be, too, a few shots, if a band of Chippewa meets a band of Sioux, or if a gentleman standing in his office door happens

to spot some prairie chickens across the way. But no matter how noisy the day, when evening comes almost the silence of the wilderness returns. It is so still that the clear bugle calls at Fort Snelling can be heard, and the roaring of the waterfalls above St. Anthony.

These waterfalls, and those of Minnehaha, were the mecca of the tourists, as waterfalls always are. I'm sure I don't know why. And the next sight to see was a colorful gypsy-like encampment out about where Montgomery Ward's now is. Here were hundreds of wild half-breed buffalo hunters down from Canada, with their wives, children, dogs, oxen, and the carts in which they had brought furs from the North to be shipped to the East and to Europe. For St. Paul had now become an international port as well as a portal of empire in the Northwest.

We had almost too much to offer and it went to our heads. We got the idea that city real estate was worth its square inches in gold and there was a wild scramble to buy it. A real-estate sign appeared on every other office. Men stood on street corners with maps, hawking town lots like peanuts at a fair. Prices soared, interest rates soared, everything and everybody soared. "Big time" gamblers, swindlers, fly-by-nights, too, who had been following the gold rush to California now came here. Money was spent like water, but not *for* water. It was spent, we are told, for fast horses, fast women, wine, and cards. Wine in incredible amounts, and stouter liquids too, were shipped into the city — and not for the sporting element alone. Dinner tables bright with ancestral silver displayed half a dozen different shaped wine glasses, and groaned, as the phrase is, under the feasts of oysters and wild game. Horses and carriages as smart as could be seen in New York City pranced about our unpaved streets, and everybody knew he would very soon be a millionaire.

Adolescent St. Paul was riding for a fall and got it. The panic of 1857 hit the town like a cyclone. Real-estate prices

dropped to nothing. Seventy-five per cent of the businesses and individuals were ruined. Money almost disappeared and script was used for several years. Half the population, including most of the dubious and disappointed adventurers, also disappeared. An amusing footnote to that disastrous year of 1857 states that a certain William Markoe built a very handsome balloon and that it, too, crashed—very appropriately—during the territorial fair and nearly killed several people.

The sober citizenry—or is sober quite the word?—the genteel and elegant citizenry, pulled in its belt and began to rebuild the prosperity of the city. St. Paul's childhood from 1841 to 1849, its adolescence from 1849 to 1857, are over. The town is almost grown up, with the outlines of its personality well defined. We shall understand that personality better when we have heard what some of the ladies have to say.

One of the earliest of these is Miss Harriet Bishop, who came up the river in 1847. She is the author of almost my favorite book, and a lady with the kindest heart and the most dreadful prose style in the world. She was St. Paul's first schoolteacher, first Sunday-school teacher, and the founder of the first woman's club—a sewing circle organized to raise money for the first schoolhouse.

In her book, *Floral Home*, Miss Bishop disapproves of a great many things. She disapproves of St. Paul society because "the *bottle* was the unfailing attendant on *every* occasion." She disapproves of the nakedness of the savages. But in revealing a proposal of marriage made to her by a young Sioux Indian, she does not forget to tell us that he was exceedingly handsome, with eagle eyes and a deep sonorous voice. She adds that upon being refused, he tried to borrow a dollar.

But Miss Bishop is not characteristic of what we are examining today. That thing is wonderfully expressed in a single sentence written by a lady who came up the river in

1852. As her boat was approaching the city, she says, "Our stately dames had arrayed themselves in rich silks, with embroidered shawls and bonnets of delicate gauze, to enter the capital of Minnesota."

And well they may, because they will find plenty of stately dames with silks and shawls as good as theirs when they get there. As early as 1849 we read of an exclusive best society. The circle gave a Christmas ball that year, and met too at the house of Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Rice on New Year's afternoon. But there the male guests, although a contemporary writer assures us they were all gentlemen born and bred, did not do so well. In fact the writer compares them unfavorably to the Indians, who also called. The Indians sat peacefully on the floor until Rice gave each of them a loaf of bread, when they departed with dignity. But the gentlemen born and bred both arrived and departed a little on the bias, causing the ladies to burst into tears.

A letter writer of the 1850's tells at some length about this exclusive circle. Her brothers are Indian traders, not of the fine old fur-trading tradition, but annuity traders, which was not too good. This does not, however, infringe upon her sense of her family and social superiority. Her brother brings an agent and his wife to call. "Was glad when they departed, they were such *plain* people." She goes to a cotillion at Mazurka Hall, "not attended by newcomers, therefore quite nice." She is invited to what she calls a "pleasant little mob" at the governor's, and adds complacently "very select." She makes and receives, of course, innumerable calls. Would you like to hear what she wears while waiting to receive a visitor? "I have on my new delaine and black silk apron. When not busy I put my hands in my pockets, as I have my rosettes on my wrists." Although she makes many visits, she does not call on the Y's, having heard that "*she* is not quite a lady." She does call on Mr. R.'s bride, but only because she has to. "'Tis said

her father is a mechanic in Hartford. Too bad to let such a rumor get about." That sentence, I think, tells more than a chapter.

But this is only a small part of the feminine side of St. Paul's personality. These ladies did a great deal more than dance cotillions, or leave cards on the elite, or raise their eyebrows at those who were not. They attended church very regularly — the Episcopal, Neill's Presbyterian, and various other churches, Catholic as well as Protestant. Also, the pest of lectures was in full swing. St. Paul's first fire engine was, in fact, paid for by a "series of instructive talks." But it was in something else these ladies showed what they really were. It was in sickness, in childbirth, in death. No trained nurses then. It was the friends who did the nursing, who looked after the children and the household of the sick, who helped deliver the babies, and lay out the dead.

We must remember, too, the dreadful discomforts. No central heat in those hastily built houses. No plumbing. No running water, hot or cold. No gas or electric lights. Nothing but oil or candles. The town, moreover, was entirely cut off from the world during all those long cold winter months. No way in or out, except by occasional stagecoach to La Crosse or Prairie du Chien. Yet I have almost never read one single word of complaint — nothing but delight in that beautiful new land, or, if the memoirs were written much later, a woeful nostalgia and pained regret that St. Paul should have changed so continuously for the worse ever since. Of these ladies one husband writes: "Ah, what do we not owe to the wives and mothers of that time. How well they did their part. Many of us would have fallen by the wayside, but by their prayers and helping hands, they made us rise again and face the stern realities with courage."

And so we leave St. Paul reaching maturity at the time the nation faces the crisis of the Civil War. Her personality is formed. It is partly a genteel and partly an aristocratic

personality, with the faults and virtues of its type. It has elegance, complacency, and a great capacity for seeing what it wants to see and for not seeing what it doesn't. Time has made us see its faults. I wish it could give us the strength, the high spirit, and the high heart to emulate its virtues.

GRACE FLANDRAU

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA



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