

# Caleb D. Dorr and the Early Minnesota Lumber Industry

*Rodney C. Loehr*

OLDER RESIDENTS of Minneapolis remember Caleb D. Dorr as one who contributed substantially to the establishment and development of the lumber industry in Minnesota and whose career coincided with the period of extensive lumbering operations in the state. Although the passing of the years and the decline of lumbering have tended to dim his memory, the story of his life can be reconstructed from fragments of information that have survived. Investigation shows that his interests and activities extended beyond the industry which made him wealthy, to the benefit both of his city and of his state.

Dorr was born at East Great Works, now Bradley, in Penobscot County, Maine, on July 9, 1824. His father, Charles M. Dorr, was a native of Massachusetts, and his mother, Ann Morse, came from Maine. Four years before Caleb's birth his father migrated into the Maine woods. Charles Dorr was a small farmer, but since the area near the Penobscot River was heavily timbered, he carried on some lumbering operations. Many other early Maine settlers were likewise part-time lumbermen, and it was no accident that the Minnesota pineries attracted so many Mainites.

Besides Caleb, there were four children in the Dorr family. They grew up in moderate circumstances. Little is known of Dorr's early youth beyond the fact that his education was received in the village school during the winter months. But school days soon were over for Caleb. At the age of thirteen he was acquiring experience in lumbering. He worked in the neighborhood lumber mills and helped with logging and driving in the woods and on the streams.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Return I. Holcombe and William H. Bingham, eds., *Compendium of History and Biography of Minneapolis and Hennepin County*, 250 (Chicago, 1914); "He Brought in the First Drive," in *Mississippi Valley Lumberman*, vol. 32, no. 18, p. 19 (May 3, 1901).

After ten years of apprenticeship in the Maine lumber industry, Dorr, who had heard stories of wonderful stands of timber in Minnesota, decided to go West. Minnesota at the time was still largely wilderness. Only a few farms, most of which were in Washington County, indicated the agricultural possibilities of the region's future. The pioneer farmers depended upon lumber camps for the marketing of their surplus products, which consisted largely of beans. Most of the settlers in Minnesota, with the exception of officials, soldiers, and traders, were engaged in lumbering.

When Caleb Dorr went to Minnesota in 1847, commercial lumbering had been in progress for a decade, though its possibilities had been explored before 1837. The first lumbering in the region was carried on by members of the Fort Snelling garrison. The old government sawmill, so often mentioned by early pioneers, was erected in 1824 under the direction of Colonel Josiah Snelling. It stood on the west side of the Mississippi River at the Falls of St. Anthony, where power was secured by means of a water wheel. Its products, in the form of slabs and boards, were used in building the post quarters, and for a few years the mill was operated by the soldiers. Eventually it was abandoned and fell into decay, although occasionally in later years it was operated spasmodically by various individuals. The logs sawed at the mill by the soldiers were cut in the vicinity of the falls and on the lower Rum River, where Dorr later came across traces of early lumbering operations.

Commercial lumbering in Minnesota got its start after the land east of the Mississippi was ceded by the Indians in 1837. Two years later a sawmill was set up at Marine on the banks of the St. Croix River. Mill and equipment were transported up the river from St. Louis on a chartered boat, and the first lumber was sawed on August 24, 1839. Mills were soon established at Stillwater and at other places in the St. Croix Valley. Early Minnesota did not, however, provide much of a market for lumber. Settlers drifted in slowly. There were no railroads, and the transportation of lumber to eastern markets was impractical. The occasional steamboats on the St. Croix and the Mississippi rivers could not carry large quantities of lumber to Southern

markets. The problem was solved when the boom at Stillwater broke accidentally in 1843 and scattered timber down the river all the way to St. Louis. This fortunate accident led to log rafting on the Mississippi and contributed to the growth of sawmills at Red Wing, Wabasha, Winona, and points farther south.<sup>2</sup>

In succeeding years the great timber assets of Minnesota attracted lumbermen and others to the possibilities of logging about the Falls of St. Anthony. The falls could provide power for sawmills, and the heavily wooded upper reaches of the Mississippi offered timber in great profusion. Franklin Steele was in large measure responsible for the development of this region. Steele, whose name is perpetuated in Steele County and Franklin Avenue in Minneapolis, was an entrepreneur of great energy and vision. His talents were devoted to the development of Minnesota, particularly to the region about the Falls of St. Anthony. He recognized the possibilities dormant in the great flow of water at the falls, and he sought to develop its use in every way possible. Steele arrived at Fort Snelling in 1838 and for a time he was sutler at the garrison. Soon he was running a ferry to the fort, and during his career he was variously engaged as a merchant, a banker, a land speculator, a bridgebuilder, and a politician.

Steele had located a claim on the west side of the Mississippi at the Falls of St. Anthony, and in the summer of 1847 he agreed to sell nine-tenths of his claim, which was valued at twelve thousand dollars, to William Cheever, Robert Rantoul, Arnold W. Taylor, Caleb Cushing, and others. It was proposed that mills should be built immediately and the timber area exploited. Cheever went East in July, 1847, and engaged Ard Godfrey, a native of Orono, Maine, to go to the falls to superintend the building of a mill. At the same time Caleb Dorr, John McDonald, S. Fernald, Ira Burroughs, John Peake, and others were hired to assist Godfrey. They had heard of Minnesota's great timber resources and were easily persuaded to go West.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> E. G. Cheyney, "The Development of the Lumber Industry in Minnesota," in *Journal of Geography*, 14:189 (February, 1916); Fred H. Gilman, "History of Minneapolis as a Lumber Manufacturing Point," in *Mississippi Valley Lumberman*, vol. 26, no. 5, p. 71 (February 1, 1895).

<sup>3</sup> Gilman, in *Mississippi Valley Lumberman*, vol. 26, no. 5, p. 72; William W. Fowell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1:228 (St. Paul, 1921).

Dorr was twenty-three years old when he left for Minnesota in the autumn of 1847. With his companions he traveled by rail from Albany to Buffalo. In later years he recalled that the railroad trip was a "rocky affair and they had a boisterous time." From Buffalo the lumbermen went by lake boat to Chicago, which Dorr remembered as a "dirty little village." There they bought a team and drove to Galena, where they embarked on the voyage up the Mississippi to St. Paul on the "Argo." The memory of that trip remained fresh years later. Dorr recalled that the lead mines at Galena were in operation and that lead was piled up on the river bank like cordwood. He could not remember seeing many evidences of settlement between Galena and St. Paul, except for occasional settlers' cabins and a sawmill for settlers at the mouth of the Black River. There were no private homes at the Falls of St. Anthony when Dorr arrived on October 1, 1847. Not until the next summer was there a residence, and then Ard Godfrey built the house which in its present restored state is a pioneer museum located in Cheever Square. When Dorr took his wife to Minnesota, they lived with the Godfreys until he could build his own house.<sup>4</sup>

Upon arriving at the falls, Dorr and others of the party set to work to put up the first log buildings erected there. They built a mess hall, a carpenter shop, stables, and a bunkhouse, which apparently included a combination store and blacksmith shop, and prepared to put up a sawmill. The mess house seems to have been used as a sort of community center for several years. Travelers could find there food and rest and, if so inclined, certain forms of relaxation. A pioneer Minnesotan recorded in his diary for December 1, 1848, that he "went to St. Anthony Falls & Stopd at the mess house," finding "all gambling there."<sup>5</sup>

The first job was to build a dam and a boom. Before Godfrey and Dorr arrived some work had been done on a dam by Jacob Fisher, but it was not finished. The newcomers were determined to send

<sup>4</sup> Holcombe and Bingham, eds., *Minneapolis and Hennepin County*, 250; "Caleb Dorr, 93, Tells of City's Early Days," in *Minneapolis Journal*, July 8, 1917; Minnesota Territorial Pioneers, *Proceedings and Report*, 2:108 (St. Paul, 1901).

<sup>5</sup> Holcombe and Bingham, eds., *Minneapolis and Hennepin County*, 69. The diary, which was kept by John Rollins, is in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

some timber downstream before the rivers froze, and a crew of men under Daniel Stanchfield was sent up the Mississippi to a branch, the Rum River, to cut logs for the dam, the boom, and the necessary buildings. Dorr and McDonald were detached from the Stanchfield camp and sent to the Swan River for big timber not available on the Rum. This was to be used in building mill frames. Dorr's group cut fifty sticks of lumber for which they paid Hole-in-the-Day, a well-known Chippewa chief, two hundred dollars. This was considered a big price at the time, but not all the early lumbering operations were so costly. Dorr later recalled that "the early lumbermen paid no fancy prices for their lumber. They paid for it in scrip issued by the government to the Indians and halfbreeds. It was generally cheap — about seventy-five cents on the dollar. The government sold its timber then at \$1.25 an acre, and by paying for it with scrip the lumbermen used to get the timber pretty cheap."<sup>6</sup>

Part of the timber that Dorr cut on the Swan River froze in the Mississippi above Sauk Rapids and was used the following spring for the frames in two early mills. The rest was taken downstream to the mouth of the Rum, where Stanchfield's crew had assembled a large number of logs. Dorr and Stanchfield thought they had more timber than Steele could use, so they planned a great boom, preparations for which were nearly complete on the evening of November 1. But the night was bad, with snow falling fast and freezing to the logs. Dorr said later: "You can bet it was a wild night with rough men and whisky." In the night the temporary boom broke, and the logs went down the river, tumbling over the Falls of St. Anthony, or freezing in the ice. Nearly all were lost, at a cost to Steele of about three thousand dollars.<sup>7</sup>

When he was ninety-three years old, Dorr described the breaking of the boom. "The first log drive intended for Minneapolis failed to get there," he recalled. "Daniel Stanchfield had brought some logs down the Rum River and I had brought some down the Mississippi

<sup>6</sup> *Historical Sketch of St. Anthony and Minneapolis*, 6 (St. Anthony, 1855); *Minneapolis Journal*, July 8, 1917.

<sup>7</sup> *Minnesota Territorial Pioneers, Proceedings and Report*, 2:108; *Historical Sketch of St. Anthony and Minneapolis*, 6.

from about the Swan River, and we got them together at the mouth of the Rum River, where Anoka is now. They were intended to be sawed up to build the mill and other buildings. But those logs got away, most all of them. It was all Cheever's fault. There was ice in the river and it was high. I told him that night he had better loosen the boom so the ice could get through or it would take his boom out, logs and all. But he wouldn't listen to me. That night, sure enough, the boom went out, and the logs were carried down the river."<sup>8</sup>

Before going up the Mississippi, Dorr helped Godfrey build a temporary dam between Nicollet Island and the east bank of the Mississippi. They had hoped that the timber cut on the Rum River could be used in building a permanent dam, but after its loss they decided to build the dam of hardwood timber from Nicollet and Hennepin islands. Planks for covering the dam were hauled from the St. Croix River during the winter. Dorr worked on the dam through the winter and also put in piers for the lumber boom. In the meantime Rantoul, Cushing, and others were unable to pay Steele for his property at the falls, and it all reverted to him.

It was only through the energy and perseverance of Steele that various obstacles were overcome. The boat carrying goods for his employees sank in the Erie Canal, and many tools were lost. As a result he had great difficulty getting axes, augers, saws, and other tools for the men. The winter was severe and provisions were scarce. The old government sawmill worked so slowly that it could not cut enough timber for the winter needs, so twenty thousand feet were secured at a mill on the St. Croix. The mill irons were obtained in Maine and were hauled from the St. Croix by land.<sup>9</sup>

In the spring of 1848 Dorr made two trips to Crow Wing to gather up the timber Stanchfield had cut during the winter. It was used in building a boom at St. Anthony, which was completed by June 1. On July 2, R. P. Russell, who was Steele's agent, went to Dorr with a story of difficulties. This is the way Dorr later recalled the incident: "It was about the 1st of July, 1848, that R. P. Russell came

<sup>8</sup> *Minneapolis Journal*, July 8, 1917.

<sup>9</sup> *Minnesota Territorial Pioneers, Proceedings and Report*, 2:108; *Historical Sketch of St. Anthony and Minneapolis*, 7.

to me and wanted me to bring some logs down from the Watab rapids. I had been working on the temporary dam. Some other men had been driving the logs but had trouble, got scared and quit. I told him if he would give me the men and the supplies, I would get the logs. I brought them down all right, and that was the first log drive that ever came in here. When I brought in that drive, I went up again on the Rum River and brought down a lot of logs that had been left up there."<sup>10</sup>

After Dorr got the logs down, secured the boom, and finished his work on the dam, he stopped for the season on November 10. He had an important matter in mind which required his presence in the East; he was about to be married. On his trip Dorr encountered many difficulties. He left Fort Snelling on November 24, 1848. By that time the Mississippi River was so full of ice that the steamboats had stopped running. He walked through the woods to the mouth of the St. Croix, hoping that he could find a boat there, but in this he was disappointed. He did, however, meet a party of government surveyors and started down the river with them in a rowboat. Apparently it was not very satisfactory as a means of conveyance, for in later years Dorr recalled that part of the journey was made by land and that he was compelled to abandon all his baggage, except what he could carry on his back. After ten days of rough travel, the party reached Dubuque.

The journey from Dubuque to Chicago took seven days and was made in a lumber wagon. From Chicago Dorr went by stage around the south shore of Lake Michigan to Niles, Michigan, whence he traveled by railroad to Detroit. There he hoped to find a boat for Buffalo, but the lake boats had gone into winter quarters. Dorr met a man named Ware, however, who took him to Chatham, Ontario, in a small boat. There Dorr saw a large number of Negroes and learned something of the workings of the underground railroad that helped them escape to Canada. From Chatham he went through lower Canada to the Niagara River, which he crossed below the falls in a yawl. The journey from Buffalo to Portland, Maine, was made by railroad,

<sup>10</sup> *Minneapolis Journal*, July 8, 1917.

and for the final lap—Portland to Bangor—Dorr took the stage. He arrived at Bangor on January 5, 1849, having been six weeks on the way.<sup>11</sup>

Dorr married Celestia A. Ricker on March 4, 1849. She was born on April 20, 1828, in Buckfield, Oxford County, Maine. Existing portraits suggest that she was plump and pleasant, and a number of anecdotes indicate that she was a resolute woman. On one occasion a Red River half-breed challenged her "to see who could dance the longest. I . . . danced until my teeth rattled and I saw stars," she recalled in later years. "It seemed as if I was dancing in my sleep, but I would not give up and jigged him down." Another story tells of an encounter with Indians. Mrs. Dorr was frying doughnuts one day when she was surprised to find that she was being closely scrutinized by some Indians, whose looks and actions seemed to hint at trouble. She was all alone. One of the braves gave her an especially ferocious glare and picked up a knife to test its edge. Shivering with fright she passed the doughnuts to him, but as he reached to take them, she jabbed him in the stomach with her elbow and then passed on to the next Indian. This action amused the Indians and caused great merriment among them. They admiringly exclaimed "Tonka Squaw," and, after finishing the doughnuts, left without causing trouble.<sup>12</sup>

The Dorr family started for the West on April 9, 1849, and arrived at St. Anthony on May 11. In the summer that followed Dorr was busy building his house on Second Street between First and Second avenues Southeast. There he and his wife lived for a number of years. After Dorr retired, they lived in Minneapolis hotels in the summer and in Florida or California in the winter. The last years of Dorr's life, following the death of Mrs. Dorr in March, 1909, were spent in the home of George W. Eddy of Minneapolis.

While Dorr was in the East, he purchased a shingle machine, but when it arrived at St. Anthony there was no room for it on the dam. Dorr sold it to Steele, who later installed it at Fort Ripley. There

<sup>11</sup> Minnesota Territorial Pioneers, *Proceedings and Report*, 2:109; *Mississippi Valley Lumberman*, vol. 32, no. 18, p. 19, 25.

<sup>12</sup> Mrs. Lucy L. W. Morris, ed., *Old Rail Fence Corners*, 27, 28 (Austin, Minnesota, 1914); Minnesota Territorial Pioneers, *Proceedings and Report*, 2:109.



mule power was used to run it while shingles were made for the fort buildings. Although Dorr was connected with the lumber business all his life, for a decade after his marriage he also engaged in a number of activities not connected directly with lumbering. In 1859 with E. W. Cutter he built the Cataract Flour Mill for Eastman and Gibson at the corner of First Street and Sixth Avenue South. With the exception of the old government mill, this was the first flour mill on the west side of the river at the falls. It was constructed of stone, and it measured forty-five by sixty-five feet and was four stories high. With four run of stones, it had a daily capacity of three hundred barrels of flour.<sup>13</sup>

In partnership with his brother, Albert H. Dorr, Caleb Dorr, leased a sawmill from Franklin Steele in 1852 at a rental of \$1,500 for one year. Steele agreed to make repairs, to allow the use of the millpond for floating logs to the mill, and to make available an open space near by for piling lumber. The Dorr's were to furnish their own saws and certain working materials. Apparently part of the rental was paid in lumber at Steele's order.<sup>14</sup>

In the years that followed Dorr branched out into other enterprises. In 1856 he and R. W. Cummings were in partnership as real-estate and general agents, according to an advertisement in the *St. Anthony Express*. They offered to collect debts, invest money, buy and sell real estate, pay taxes, examine titles, and locate land warrants. Dorr's part in the business evidently consisted of locating lands. For ten years he was engaged in this work; among other things he located and protected the timber lands of the University of Minnesota. Soon after he returned from his wedding trip, he was commissioned by Dorilus Morrison to "cruise" for him, spotting good timber tracts. During the decade spent as a woodsman, he worked chiefly in

<sup>13</sup> *Mississippi Valley Lumberman*, vol. 32, no. 18, p. 19, 25; *Minnesota Territorial Pioneers, Proceedings and Report*, 2:109; *Tribune's Minneapolis City Directory*, 1873-74, p. 47.

<sup>14</sup> A lease for the sawmill signed by Franklin Steele and C. and A. Dorr, July 23, 1852, is in the Steele Papers, in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society. Albert Dorr joined his brother at St. Anthony in 1849, and he died there on November 3, 1852. See *St. Anthony Express*, November 12, 1852; John H. Stevens, *Personal Recollections of Minnesota and Its People*, 91, 182 (Minneapolis, 1890).

the Rum River country, which "was heavily timbered, with fine white pine."<sup>15</sup>

Dorr is listed as a merchant in the United States census for 1860, which also reveals that he owned real estate valued at two thousand dollars and personal property worth a thousand. Ten years later, in 1870, he was superintendent of booms, according to the census, which shows that his real-estate holdings had increased in value to fifteen thousand dollars and his personal property to two thousand. A business directory for 1860 lists Dorr as the proprietor of a livery stable, but it is known that most of his income was derived from timber. In his earlier years he worked the timber himself, and in later years he sold large tracts to lumber companies. As late as 1900, in partnership with a man named Fowler, Dorr sold pine lands on the Mesabi Range to the Weyerhaeuser interests. The price, which was reputed to be \$205,000, covered some fifty-five million feet of timber.<sup>16</sup>

Most of Dorr's active career on the Mississippi River was in the service of the Mississippi and Rum River Boom Company. He served as superintendent of booms from 1866 to 1882 and from 1885 to 1888, directing the log drives down the river and managing the affairs of the company. In one capacity or another he continued his connection with the boom company throughout its independent life. After retiring from active management, he served as a director of the company, in which he had substantial financial interests.<sup>17</sup>

A boom company served loggers as a public utility, helping them and the lumber mills to settle a number of vexatious problems. The

<sup>15</sup> *St. Anthony Express*, May 10, December 27, 1856; *Minnesota Territorial Pioneers, Proceedings and Report*, 2:109; George E. Warner, *History of Hennepin County and the City of Minneapolis*, 540 (Minneapolis, 1881); *Minneapolis Journal*, July 8, 1917.

<sup>16</sup> H. E. Chamberlin, *Commercial Advertiser Directory for Saint Anthony and Minneapolis*, 1859-60, p. 152; *Minneapolis Journal*, February 17, 1900. The manuscript schedules of the federal census in Minnesota for 1860 and 1870 are in the custody of the Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>17</sup> *Minneapolis Journal*, June 21, July 8, 1917; *Minnesota Territorial Pioneers, Proceedings and Report*, 2:109; Holcombe and Bingham, eds., *Minneapolis and Hennepin County*, 250. See also the testimony, preserved in manuscript form by the Minnesota Historical Society, taken in a suit between William Burfening and the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis and Omaha Railroad Company. It includes Dorr's expert testimony on early river conditions given before the United States land office at St. Cloud from February 9 to 11, 1904. This material appears on pages 415-420 and 667-678 of the manuscript.

many loggers cutting timber and using the same main stream to carry their products to market identified their logs by branding them. A list of some of the early brands is preserved in the papers of Franklin Steele. Caleb Dorr used a number of brands; one of them was CD. But in spite of branding, disputes frequently arose between loggers and mill owners over the number of logs received at the mills. The boom company prevented such disputes by counting and measuring the timber received by each mill, and it also controlled the movement of timber on the river in order to assure the mills a steady supply of logs for continuous operation.

In 1851 Franklin Steele and his associates organized two boom companies. The first, the Mississippi Boom Company, was chartered on February 3, 1851, with a capital of \$25,000. Shares sold at \$100, and the charter was to run for fifteen years. The company was permitted to charge fifty cents for each thousand feet of lumber sorted, rafted, and delivered at the foot of the boom, and in addition it was granted scalage, a fee covering the cost of measurement. Apparently, the Mississippi Boom Company took the logs to the boom at the Falls of St. Anthony, where the St. Anthony Boom Company, which received forty cents per thousand feet of lumber for its labors, took charge. A few years' experience proved that it was futile for two companies to carry on the same type of work, so in 1856 a new company, which absorbed the two earlier concerns, was organized.<sup>18</sup>

This was the Mississippi and Rum River Boom Company, which was founded on November 29, 1856, with the sum of \$9,200 subscribed to its capital stock. Later, on March 21, 1857, when the territorial legislature granted a charter, the capital stock authorized was placed at \$15,000. The company had jurisdiction over streams extending from a point four miles above the Falls of St. Anthony to one five miles up the Rum River. In 1862 these limits were expanded to reach down the Mississippi to Nicollet Island and up that stream to the mouth of the Crow Wing River. Various other acts from time to time extended the company's jurisdiction, increased its capital stock to \$100,000, gave it the right to condemn land for its use, and

<sup>18</sup> Warner, *History of Hennepin County*, 401.

granted it power to regulate the admission and discharge of logs into its jurisdiction.<sup>19</sup>

As boom master Dorr directed the various functions of the Mississippi and Rum River Boom Company. The company took charge of the logs when they were driven into the main stream and undertook to keep them going until they reached the mills. This meant that the logs had to be constantly watched and followed as they moved down the river. During the drives, boom company employees lived on the river in barges called wanigans, on which sleeping bunks were built and supplies were carried. Propelled by an old side-wheel steamer, the wanigan followed the rear of the drive down the river. After the main boom above the Falls of St. Anthony was reached, the steamer towed the wanigan, with the crew and equipment, upstream for another drive.

During the drives, logs sometimes were snagged on sandbars. Then the men, occasionally with the help of horses, rolled them back into the river. Some places on the river were especially dangerous, and the boom company built small booms of logs chained end to end in long strings to keep the moving logs away from these bad spots. Occasionally logs piled up behind the small booms, partially damming the river and causing it to overflow onto adjacent lands. Where this occurred frequently, it was cheaper to buy the flooded land than to pay damages. Consequently, the boom company gradually acquired land all along the river from Nicollet Island to Brainerd.

Since it was desirable for the mills to receive a regular flow of logs, it became necessary to devise a method of storing the surplus. Storage pockets, in which logs could be held until it was time to feed them into the channel and deliver them to the mills, were built in connection with the booms. As time passed and the sections near the Falls of St. Anthony were cleared of good timber, the loggers pushed farther and farther northward beyond Brainerd. About 1899 the Northern Boom Company was organized to handle logs in the river north of Brainerd.

Not all the logs that went down the Mississippi were destined for

<sup>19</sup> Warner, *History of Hennepin County*, 401.

the Minneapolis mills. Some were sold to mills as far south as Hannibal, Missouri. In order to separate them from logs constituting the Minneapolis supply, a sorting boom was built. There the logs intended for local mills were diverted from the river, and the rest were sent down sluices past the Falls of St. Anthony to a big storage boom near Mendota, where the St. Paul Boom Company stopped them and lashed them into rafts. Those headed for down-river mills were propelled by small but powerful boats. The last of the great rafts went down in 1915, and the St. Paul boom was discontinued.

In later years Dorr recalled some of the difficulties that attended the drives. The water was seldom at just the right stage. Log jams, which tended to flood lowlands and to imperil property below when they broke, formed when the water was high, and nearly every year some booms were carried away by high water. On the other hand, low water meant a slack current with logs stranded on sandbars. Usually some logs became water-soaked, dropped to the bottom of the river, and were lost. In many places water-soaked logs, which were called "deadheads" or "sinkers," formed layers several logs deep. When dried, deadheads made good lumber, but in the days of cheap and plentiful timber it was not profitable to recover sunken logs and drive them any distance. After the last of the great drives reached Minneapolis, many deadheads were recovered from the river, and as late as 1917 two small mills there were sawing them.<sup>20</sup>

When Dorr arrived in Minnesota and for some time thereafter, logging could be conducted on small amounts of capital. Dorr was independently engaged both in logging and in lumber milling. But as time went on the small operators were either forced out or were obliged to work for the larger companies under contract. There were several reasons for the change. In the early days it was easy to cut timber close to sizeable streams, but later it became necessary to conduct operations at a considerable distance from streams, and in order to transport the logs to the rivers, railroads were needed. No one could afford to build a logging railroad unless he had a substantial amount of capital to invest, a vast quantity of timber to cut, and a

<sup>20</sup> "Last Log Drive On," in *Minneapolis Journal*, June 21, 1917.

large mill or market to consume the logs. Consequently, lumbering gradually fell into the hands of the large timber companies, and the day of the small independent operator was over.<sup>21</sup>

When Caleb Dorr returned from Maine after his marriage, he was accompanied by Captain John Rollins and his family. Rollins has been called the father of navigation above the Falls of St. Anthony, and it was through him that Dorr became interested in steamboating. As a result of Rollins' interest in the project, the keel of a steamboat for transportation above the falls was laid in 1850. The hull and woodwork were made at St. Anthony, but the machinery was obtained in Bangor, Maine. It was shipped to New Orleans on a sailing vessel, and thence by steamboat up the Mississippi. The new steamer, the "Governor Ramsey," was a hundred and eight feet long; it had a beam of twenty-five feet; and it was supposed to draw eleven inches of water when loaded to capacity. Its trial trip, which was made on May 25, 1850, was said to be successful, so the boat was put into service, running from St. Anthony to St. Cloud and Sauk Rapids. Later trips, however, were unsuccessful; the boat drew too much water, and in periods of low water it had to be laid up.<sup>22</sup>

In March, 1852, Rollins sold his interest in the "Governor Ramsey" to Benjamin Parker, and at the same time Caleb and Albert Dorr each bought a quarter interest in it. It was overhauled and refitted with berths for forty passengers, and in April Parker resumed its regular weekly trips up the river. But in 1854 the water was low and the boat had to be laid up in August, idly floating in the millpond by the dam most of the time. There was a demand for a lighter boat and a company was organized to build one. Work began in 1854, and by July, 1855, the boat, which was known as the "H. M. Rice," was ready for navigation. It was longer and slightly wider than the "Governor Ramsey." Its engines were manufactured at Pittsburgh, shipped to Rock Island by railroad, and then taken up the river by steamboat. For a year the two boats competed for the up-river trade. Then in 1856 the "Governor Ramsey" was sold to

<sup>21</sup> Cheyney, in *Journal of Geography*, 14:192.

<sup>22</sup> Fred A. Bill, "Navigation Above the Falls of St. Anthony," in *Saturday Evening Post* (Burlington, Iowa), February 7, 1925.

Z. E. B. Nash, who transferred the machinery to a new boat, the "North Star."<sup>23</sup>

This episode did not end Dorr's interest in steamboating. One of the small boats used on the river to pull wanigans was built in the early 1880's by the Mississippi and Rum River Boom Company and was named the "C. D. Dorr." It was a hundred and ten feet long, had a beam of twenty-two feet, and an engine with cylinders measuring one by six feet. The "C. D. Dorr" continued in service until 1894, when the hull was condemned and the machinery was transferred to a new boat, the "J. B. Bassett."<sup>24</sup> Steamboats, however, were never a main issue with Dorr. They were only incidental to his work on the river with lumbering.

Dorr seems to have had only a slight interest in politics. In the autumn of 1848 when a territorial delegate was elected, he was clerk of the election. Some forty-two votes were cast. In 1850 he was nominated to the position of surveyor of lumber. His only claim to political fame, and one in which he took pride, was his election in 1855 as one of two aldermen from the third ward of St. Anthony in the first city council. He was not re-elected, but for many years he took an active part in civic affairs. In 1856 he joined the St. Anthony Fremont Club, thus backing the nomination of the first Republican candidate for the presidency.<sup>25</sup>

A few stories about Dorr's later life have survived. One day, perhaps about 1900, he stopped at the office of Mr. Fred E. Barney, a Minneapolis real-estate man, and suggested a fishing trip. Dorr recalled that about twenty-five years earlier he had planted some trout in a small stream near Anoka. The Barneys, father and son, were enthusiastic trout fishermen and gladly agreed to go with Dorr. So on the following Sunday morning, with a fourth fisherman, they went to Anoka in a carriage. The farmer through whose land the stream

<sup>23</sup> Bill, in *Saturday Evening Post*, February 14, 21, 28, 1925; *St. Anthony Express*, May 31, 1851, March 27, April 23, 1852, July 1, November 4, December 9, 1854, July 16, July 7, October 13, 1855.

<sup>24</sup> Bill, in *Saturday Evening Post*, February 29, 1925.

<sup>25</sup> *St. Anthony Express*, May 24, 1856; Isaac Atwater and John H. Stevens, eds., *History of Minneapolis and Hennepin County*, 1:553 (New York, 1895); Holcombe and Bingham, eds., *Minneapolis and Hennepin County*, 77, 251; Frank G. O'Brien, *Minnesota Pioneer Sketches*, 252 (Minneapolis, 1904).

ran was doubtful about the existence of trout there, but he agreed to let the fishermen try their luck. The stream was hardly more than a brook which started in a tamarack swamp and ran through a meadow into a larger stream. The Barneys caught nearly three dozen trout, Dorr got four with an old bamboo pole, and the other fisherman caught one. Dorr never asked to return. He proved that the fish he had planted twenty-five years earlier had survived and propagated, and he was satisfied. Dorr's interest in fish is illustrated by a provision in his will. He left a large amount of real estate to the city of Minneapolis, on condition that it be used within five years for an aquarium. It was never built, and in accordance with the will, the property went to the University of Minnesota.

Dorr was deeply interested in the development of Minneapolis. He liked to walk about, see which buildings were being torn down, and what new ones were going up. Nearly every day he went to the Barneys' real-estate office, sat in a chair near the front window, and watched the city pass. About 1915 he told the elder Mr. Barney that he believed he would buy an automobile; it would make it much easier to get about, he said. Mr. Barney encouraged him, and urged him to buy a Packard, which at the time was an enclosed model. A few days later Dorr told Mr. Barney that he had purchased an open Ford touring model. In it he rode about the city, with George Eddy as his driver.

Dorr was always especially interested in the growth of St. Anthony. He had dreams of building a hotel on the east side of the river and often spoke of this project to Mr. Barney, who discouraged him. It may have been this dream of a hotel or a community center on the east side of the river which impelled Dorr to bequeath property and funds for the construction of the East Side Commercial Club. Since he was childless, he apparently wanted to leave a permanent memorial.<sup>26</sup>

Although Dorr had little formal schooling, he was deeply interested in the education of young people. As a result he made a number of benefactions to the University of Minnesota. As early as 1902,

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Fred E. Barney, January 31, 1941.



he gave the university a drinking fountain, which was erected opposite the old physics building on the main campus, at a cost of three thousand dollars. But Dorr's most important gifts came after his death on November 2, 1918. In his will he left stocks valued at fifty thousand dollars to the university college of agriculture, in order to "promote and improve the practice and study of agriculture throughout the state." Since he had been a poor country boy himself, he thought he could promote agriculture in the state by encouraging young people of the "right stamp and character" in the pursuit of agricultural studies.<sup>27</sup>

By this bequest the Dorr Fund was established. Under the terms of the will, it can use only the net income from the stocks. Part of the income is set aside for research fellowships; the rest is used for scholarships, donations, or loans, in such a manner as will be "most helpful to indigent and worthy students, and as will best promote good character, industry, and intellectual attainments among the students, and best encourage and assist them in continuing their studies in the college and school of agriculture, and in best fitting themselves for usefulness in life."

A substantial addition was made to the fund in 1924, when the university, under the terms of Dorr's will, claimed the real estate bequeathed to the city of Minneapolis for an aquarium. The property was then worth nearly sixty thousand dollars, and over five thousand dollars had accumulated in interest and profit. In recent years this real estate has brought in little or no income, and its future is highly uncertain. Nevertheless, through his generous bequests to the University of Minnesota, Caleb Dorr, pioneer lumberman, removed from the paths of scores of boys and girls obstacles like those he encountered in his own youth.

<sup>27</sup> *Minneapolis Journal*, January 25, July 9, 1902; letter of J. B. Phelps, February 16, 1922. Mr. Phelps drew up Dorr's will.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).