

Some Sources for Northwest History

EARLY GEOGRAPHY TEXTBOOKS

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AN EXAMINATION of the early geographies in the textbook collection of the Minnesota Historical Society discloses some unusual and interesting treatments of the section of the United States which later became Minnesota. Although the society's collection of geographies is neither extensive nor complete, it is representative enough to show how the available information on a little-explored region expanded as the wave of settlement engulfed Minnesota, and how it developed from a mingling of fact with myth and hearsay into a picture of the state as it actually is.

Geographical knowledge of the interior portions of the United States passed through several stages. Many of the earliest books on the subject were the work of the Reverend Jedidiah Morse of Charlestown, Massachusetts, whose *American Geography*, *Geography Made Easy*, *Elements of Geography*, and *American Gazetteer* appeared in more than fifty editions between 1784 and 1828. Morse was widely known as "the father of American geography."¹

The reports of early explorers were at first the chief source of information about the Minnesota country, for it seems doubtful that the geographers themselves went much beyond their libraries to verify or correlate their statements. Consequently, some of their accounts are contradictory and even highly fantastic, in the light of present-day knowledge. It was only after the purchase of Louisiana that geographers began to make separate mention of the upper Mississippi Valley.

¹ For detailed discussions of the contributions made by Morse, see Ralph H. Brown, "The American Geographies of Jedidiah Morse," in the Association of American Geographers, *Annals*, 31:145-217 (September, 1941); and H. E. Rumble, "Morse's School Geographies," in the *Journal of Geography*, 42:174-180 (May, 1943). The Minnesota Historical Society has sixteen editions of the four works mentioned, including the second edition of the *American Geography* (London, 1792). Later editions of the work bear the title *American Universal Geography*.

In the 1805 edition of his *American Universal Geography*, Morse briefly describes upper Louisiana as "one immense prairie," continuing with the statement that "it produces nothing but grass; it is filled with buffaloe, deer, and other kinds of game; the land is represented as too rich for the growth of forest trees. It is pretended that Upper Louisiana contains in its bowels many silver and copper mines."² In the seventh edition of his geography, which appeared in 1819, he names the Indian tribes that Carver and McKenzie reported as inhabitants of what he calls the "North-West Territory." In closing, however, Morse notes that "Whether the same, or different, tribes now occupy this country we are unable to say," though he was aware that "The N. W. Company have a post established in this territory, on the head waters of the Mississippi river." Since there were at least two North West Company posts in the area by 1819, one on the east side of Lake Bemidji and another on Cass Lake, it is not clear to which Morse refers.³

John Pinkerton, whose *Modern Geography* was published in London in 1802, went into some detail about the Great Lakes region, but his knowledge of its climate and topography was hazy. He observed that "it does not appear that these lakes are ever impeded with ice" and "that there are probably above two hundred lakes of considerable size in North America; a singularity which distinguishes it from any other portion of the globe." Of the Mississippi River he wrote that it "is the most distinguished among the rivers of North America; its source having already been traced to three small lakes above lat. 47°, and it enters the sea in lat. 29°, after a comparative course of about 1400 B. miles." The Falls of St. Anthony are described by Pinkerton in greater detail than any other feature of the upper Mississippi. Although Pinkerton asserts that he is quoting from an unnamed "recent system of American geography," the author of which "must have had several opportunities of

² Since the Minnesota Historical Society does not have the 1805 edition of Morse's work, these passages are quoted from an excerpt reproduced by Harrison A. Trexler, in an article on "Missouri in Old Geographies," in the *Missouri Historical Review*, 32:148 (January, 1938).

³ Morse, *American Universal Geography*, 1:640, 641 (Charlestown, 1819); Grace Lee Nute, "Posts in the Minnesota Fur-trading Area," *ante*, 11:369, 370.

being well informed," his statement contains a number of errors. For example, he reports that the oak trees on what is now known as Nicollet Island "are, in the proper season of the year, loaded with eagles' nests" and that "the St. Lawrence, the Mississippi, the river Bourbon, and the Oregon, or the river of the West, have their sources in the same neighborhood."⁴

Pinkerton's source of information proves to have been Jonathan Carver's *Travels through the Interior Parts of North America*, which ran through more than twenty editions between 1778 and 1838. Pinkerton quotes some passages verbatim, but he paraphrases others. Although Carver himself visited some of the localities he described, he too depended partly on hearsay and accounts of earlier explorers for his information. The map accompanying his *Travels* labels the present Nelson River, not the Red River, as the Bourbon. Later explorations, particularly that of Schoolcraft in 1832, expanded the knowledge of the topography of northern Minnesota and of the sources of the chief river systems of the North American continent.

Another geographer whose texts ran into numerous editions was Jesse Olney. His *Practical System of Modern Geography*, which reached its thirty-third edition in 1840, passed over Wisconsin Territory, of which Minnesota was then a part, with a very brief statement about its mineral products and about the fact that the eastern and southern parts were being settled.⁵

In 1851 George Van Waters published a curious little book called *The Poetical Geography, Designed to Accompany Outline Maps or School Atlases*. It contains several passages on the upper Mississippi and the Minnesota country.⁶ The first, under the heading "Mississippi," reads as follows:

The *Mississippi*, from I-taś-ca Lake
In I-o-wa,⁷ bids the broad Gulf awake.

⁴ Pinkerton, *Modern Geography*, 2:542-548 (London, 1802).

⁵ Olney, *Practical System of Modern Geography*, 145 (New York, 1840).

⁶ Van Waters, *Poetical Geography*, 13, 66 (Louisville, 1851).

⁷ Parts of what is now Minnesota were attached to Iowa and Wisconsin territories at various times from 1836 to 1849. Although Van Waters published his booklet in 1851, when the southern and eastern boundaries of Minnesota had been fixed, it was copyrighted in 1849 and probably was written earlier; hence the confusion in geographical data.

Wisconsin for the Eastern Coast survey,
 Then Illinois, Kentucky, Tennessee.
 Then Mississippi's soil is next beheld,
 With Louisiana's most southeastern field
 With I-o-wa; Missouri's on the west.
 Where, with Arkansas, Louisiana's pressed.

Both the eastern and western branches of the Father of Waters next receive attention, the latter as follows:

From I-o-wa, the *Willows*, and the *Pine*,
Crow Wing, and *Swan*, and *Elk*, and *Sack* [Sauk], combine;
 Then, casting up their bubbles by the billion,
Crow river comes, *St. Peters*, and *Vermillion*.
White Water, *Root*, and *Upper Iowa*,
 With *Turkey river*, sing their roundelay.
Red Cedar then, with *Iowa* made fast;
Skunk river next with dark *Des Moines* the last.

With an enumeration of lakes in Minnesota and other parts of the Northwest, Van Waters appropriately opens a section devoted to lakes of four continents. Some pertinent passages follow:

Lake of the Woods and Rainy Lake are found
 Skirting Columbia on her northern bound;
 Then comes *Superior*, *Huron*, and *St. Clair*,
 And *Erie Lake*, with one *Ontario* fair.
 'Tween Michigan and state Wisconsin roars
Lake Michigan, that laves the yankee shores. . . .
 Wisconsin hears her *Win-né-ba-go* talk,
 With *St. Croix Lake*, *Flam-beau* and *Tomahawk*.
Leech Lake, *Itasca*, *Devil's* and *Ottertail*,
 In Minnesota with *Fox Lake* we hail;
 Then *Pepin Lake* and *Spirit Lake* we see,
 And *Big Stone Lake* there finds a pedigree.

Later textbooks reflect the more accurate knowledge of the upper Northwest which followed in the wake of white settlement. Among them is S. Augustus Mitchell's *System of Modern Geography*, which ran into a dozen or more editions after 1847. The edition of 1871, which is in the Minnesota Historical Society's collection, gives a typical account of Minnesota as presented to the school children of

the period. The author deals with such topics as natural features, lakes, rivers, cataracts, soil and climate, products, population, settlements, and education.⁸

By 1885 geography texts had become sufficiently specialized to include large sections devoted to the state in which they were to be used. Sanford Niles's *Elementary Geography* is an early example of such a text. It contains eighty-eight pages about the world, including all of the United States outside Minnesota. Forty-six pages cover the state in considerable detail. The book contains many illustrations.⁹

The samples given herewith, with one exception, are drawn from the small collection of geographies in the library of the Minnesota Historical Society. They have been selected almost at random, though attention has been devoted largely to books issued in many editions because they were in wide demand. As historical sources, these textbooks supplement the narratives of explorers in serving as guides to the growth of geographic knowledge of the Minnesota country and the Northwest.

⁸ Mitchell, *System of Modern Geography*, 175, 176 (Philadelphia, 1871).

⁹ Niles, *Elementary Geography, Including the Geography, History and Resources of Minnesota* (St. Paul, 1885).



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