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From Kenora to Fort Frances with Edward C. Gale

THE LATE Edward C. Gale's penchant for places connected with historic events was a characteristic long familiar to his friends and associates. On one occasion it led him to include in a European itinerary the little Belgian town of Ath, where Father Hennepin was born. Mr. Gale believed it only natural that an individual who had lived long beside the Falls of St. Anthony should wish to visit the birthplace of the first white man to see them. But one doubtless could seek far for another Minneapolitan who has seen Ath! His visit to the friar's native haunts taught Mr. Gale much about Father Hennepin that he could not have learned from books. He found, for example, that Ath as well as Minneapolis has honored Hennepin by naming a street for him. When the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Hennepin's discovery was marked in 1930, Mr. Gale shared the experiences of his Belgian journey with readers of this magazine by contributing to its pages a report of his adventures "On the Hennepin Trail."

This article is only one example of Mr. Gale's active participation and deep interest in the work of the Minnesota Historical Society. For nearly sixteen years preceding his death on September 12, 1943, he was a member of the society's executive council, and he served as its president from 1936 to 1939. His leadership was apparent not only to the society's officers and staff, but to its members as well. He was always generous of his time, giving advice and suggestions on the society's affairs; he presided at meetings

with a scholarly dignity that was at the same time marked by a gentle humor; he collected books and manuscripts relating to the state's history and engaged in original research on subjects that drew his special interest; and he placed the results of his researches before the society in addresses and articles.

As a memorial to Mr. Gale, it seems appropriate to bring before readers of this magazine a little-known article, published half a century ago, about an early jaunt into a region closely associated with the frontier history of Minnesota and the upper Northwest. In the early 1890's when Mr. Gale sailed from Rat Portage, now Kenora, for a voyage over the old canoe route by way of Lake of the Woods and Rainy River to Fort Frances, the boundary region of Canada and Minnesota looked much as it did when it was the haunt of traders, voyageurs, missionaries, and adventurers, French and British. While his impressions of the border lake country were still fresh, Mr. Gale published this narrative of his voyage in a St. Paul literary journal, only a few files of which have been preserved. The following reprint of his article is offered both as an illustration of the author's early interest in his state's historic backgrounds and as an expression of deep appreciation for his many services on behalf of the Minnesota Historical Society.

B.L.H.

[From the *Literary Northwest* (St. Paul), 2:221-218 (February, 1893).]

UP THE RAINY LAKE RIVER

Edward Chenery Gale

IF THE READERS of *The Literary Northwest* are half way as ignorant of the geography of the northern areas of the great state of Minnesota as was the historian of this modest cruise before that pleasant event, it may not be amiss for them to be told that along the northern border of the state and separated by a narrow watershed of not more than half a mile in width from the lakes and streams which feed Lake Superior, starts another water-system almost as large and quite as interesting. The waters of this system, after much wandering and many vicissitudes, find their way into the large lakes, Mani-

toba, Winnipegosis and Winnipeg, and thence by the Churchill River to Hudson's Bay and the far north. This intermediate region along the northern Minnesota boundary is a complete network of lakes, marshes and streams, forming, with several short portages, a continuous water highway from Lake Superior and the East into the Canadian Northwest. Before the coming of the Canadian Pacific Railway in the year 1881, it was in fact the only means of access to that vast region.

Over this route the early French missionaries, the voyageurs, the agents of the Hudson[s] Bay Company, the Scotch settlers under Selkirk in the earlier years of this century, and all who from whatever motives, whether of piety, gain or adventure, penetrated beyond Lake Superior, paddled their canoes. From Fort William on Thunder Bay, Lake Superior, the usual course lay up the Manistiquia [*Kaministikwia*] River, thence by easy portages through the Chain of Lakes, so-called, across Lake of the Woods to the "northwest angle" of the international boundary line, and thence by Red River carts across the prairies of Manitoba, or else up the northern end of the Lake of the Woods to the Winnipeg River. The early settlers of the city of Winnipeg, before its somewhat historic "boom," came in this fashion perforce, and several of the large boats used by Lord Wolseley in the military expedition of 1871, are still to be seen rotting away on the banks of a stream near one of the portages.¹

It was the dream of the Canadian Government only a few years ago, but before the possibilities of railroads were fully realized, to make of this water route a great government highway. Several large river boats were being built for such portions of the way as admitted of navigation, and considerable money was spent in constructing locks, but the government changed hands in the midst of it all and the work was abandoned. Then came the imperial Canadian Pacific to bind East and West far more effectively than any water route could have ever done. But though commercially of small im-

¹ The Wolseley expedition was an event of the summer of 1870, when troops were sent from eastern Canada to suppress the Red River rebellion under Louis Riel. The leader of the military force was Colonel G. J. Wolseley. George F. G. Stanley, *The Birth of Western Canada: A History of the Riel Rebellions, 130-141* (London and New York, 1936).

portance, the Chain of Lakes is still as picturesque as it was in the days of the voyageur and fur trader. To this chain, and as one of the very beautiful links in the chain, belongs the Rainy Lake River. A noble stream, worthy of being the international boundary line that it is; it flows westward, a half a mile wide and a hundred miles long, from its picturesque source in Rainy Lake to its still more picturesque basin in the wide areas of the Lake of the Woods.

At present, and until the new Duluth and Winnipeg Railway shall be completed, the easiest point of access to the Rainy Lake River is at Rat Portage, a little town on the Canadian Pacific Railway, at the northern end of the Lake of the Woods.² Rat Portage, notwithstanding the unpleasant suggestiveness of its name, which, however, is to be translated as Muskrat Portage, has become already something of a summer resort for the English and Canadian people of the northwest provinces. One feels in miniature the relaxation of the atmosphere incident to watering places in general. The registers of the two small hotels are well thumbed in the course of the day and evening; shops for campers and tourists alternate with saloons on the principal street, and row boats waiting to be let chafe jauntily at the wharves. Only the presence of the noble red man and an occasional boulder in the street, reveal the lateness of the hand of the white man in shaping his racial watering place.

It was a happy circumstance which led the historian of this cruise to put his traps aboard the trim little tug, "Chieftain of Winnipeg", upon this her maiden trip. We were a happy family from the start. Captain and cook, cook and crew, crew and passengers were all on the best of terms. The captain and owner was himself a native of the Island of Guernsey, and, like Capt. Ed'ard Cuttle had been "a mar-

²The Duluth and Winnipeg Railroad was incorporated as early as 1876, and construction began in 1881. According to original plans, the road was to connect Duluth with the Canadian Northwest. Only a small part of the road had been built, however, in 1897, when it was purchased by James J. Hill and added to the Great Northern system. The Rainy River did not become accessible by rail until the Canadian National Railways built a line through Baudette in 1900. Walter Van Brunt, *Duluth and St. Louis County*, 1:250 (Chicago, 1921); William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 4:20, 33 (St. Paul, 1930); Grace Lee Nute, "Posts in the Minnesota Fur-trading Area, 1660-1855," *ante*, 11:363; P. R. McMiller and others, *Soil Survey of Roseau County*, 9 (Washington, 1942).

iner of England, man and boy, for forty year." The first mate, who combined in himself all the virtues and none of the vices of purser and general roustabout, also was a very estimable and serious young man, of strong Church of England convictions. He also had been a sailor for a number of years on merchantmen, sailing from Sunderland, England. The engineer was a handsome young German from Saxony, the fireman a burr-accented son of Scotia, and the pilot a full blooded Indian, with no teeth and a very expansive, un-Indian-like smile. Thus did we set sail of a pleasant August noon in the year of grace, 189-.³ The English flag, friendly ensign, though alien it be, flapped briskly astern, and amid the rather inchoate cheering of a portion of the Rat Portage populace on the wharf, ready with equal zeal, no doubt, to see us rush off at phenomenal speed or blow up at the wharf, we turned our prow toward the vasty deep.

The Lake of the Woods is certainly a very picturesque body of water. To rightfully appreciate it without seeing it, one should be told its true Indian name, Lake of the Islands, mistranslated through the French into Lake of the Woods. It is the Thousand Islands of the St. Lawrence, repeated on a larger scale. All down its irregular shores in every direction, are rocks and islands, and islands and rocks. Geologically, the lake is described as a large flooded area of rocks, roches moutonnées, a great irregularly shaped rock basin, some eighty or ninety miles in length and three hundred miles in rough circumference; a basin of granite, gneiss and kindred rock of the oldest Archaean type. It is substantially indeed the same formation which stretches away to the north and east of Lake Superior into the Laurentian system and forms the most ancient part of our continent — as old as the hills, for it is the original hills themselves.

Of these islands in the Lake of the Woods, there are computed to be no less than 14,000, of which 2,900 have been actually surveyed. Such a body of water cannot but be picturesque. As the boat wound in and out the channel, intricate for a long way, one is fairly charmed.

³ An attempt to determine the exact date of Mr. Gale's trip on the Rainy River has been unsuccessful. Neither his widow nor his sisters, Mrs. Clarkson Lindley and Miss Marian Gale, have any recollection of the journey. Since Mr. and Mrs. Gale were married in June, 1892, it seems likely that the trip was made in 1890 or 1891.

The island shores rise anywhere from a worn rock ledge glistening above the surface of the water, to wooded shores upward of a hundred feet high; and the islands themselves vary in size from a mere rock to shores indistinguishable from the main land. One skirts ledges, shelving mysteriously into the dark blue waters, or a low precipitous shore with its rock carved by the waves, or here and there a yellow, bouldery beach, and the island above clothed with a scanty growth of white birch and pine. Such a glimpse of picturesque waters is not often seen. Notwithstanding several gold mine beginnings in this vicinity, which may or may not develop into something, it is the *abandon* of picturesque nature, not to be brought into utilitarian subjection until the presence of a dense population in the Northwest shall construct out of it one of the populous summer resorts of the future.

The moon shone beneficently on the "Chieftain of Winnipeg" in the evening as we wound our way southward in and out of the islands. No one could refuse to make merry on such an evening, so the mate brought his old country concertina on deck and music flowed fast and furious. We sang our old country glees of "Polly Perkins of Paddington Green," "The Stowaway," and kindred songs, ending of course, with "Annie Laurie"; and of course each man went to his bunk that night dreaming of "Annie Laurie." Verily, Britannia rules the waves, and the concertina rules Britannia! By mid-night we were on the "Big Traverse," crossing an open portion of the lake, where one is out of sight of land even by day, and the morning light ushered us to the dunes and lighthouse at the mouth of the Rainy Lake River.

When Lord Wolseley's expedition in 1871 came by the Hudson Bay post located at the mouth at the river they seemed to have had some difficulty with their supplies. At any rate they dubbed the place "Hungry Hall," and the little hamlet of Indians, French and half-breeds still goes by that name. At Hungry Hall the "Chieftain" commenced its long journey up the river. Occasional settlers have commenced to filter in at scattered points, chiefly on the Canadian side, as the Minnesota shore is still, or was in that year, largely un-

ceded Indian land.⁴ The weekly boat is at present their only communication with the outer world, so that all the way our coming and our going, for an occasional passenger, box of groceries or sack of potatoes, were matters of tremendous interest. Violent toots of the whistle with a complementary gathering of the natives on the bank of the stream, the contortions of the machinery, the running of the plank to shore, and the whole garnished with the absolutely brilliant oaths of our Guernseyan corsair, lent fresh interest to each one of these events.

The character of the country along the river, and indeed along the southern shore line of the Lake of the Woods, is quite different from that farther north. The Laurentian rocks break suddenly off, and the deep subsoil and vegetable mold of a fertile though rather limited farming region follows the river valley down. A more serenely beautiful stream than this same Rainy Lake River one would have to search long and far to see. Heavily wooded down to its reaches of pebbly beach, or rimmed now and then with a fringe of sedge, for a hundred miles its waters flow placidly down. One beautiful vista succeeds another. One can hardly imagine a more stately thing in nature than the bend of a wide and stately stream, with its floor of placid waters and its gates of green, a brimming-full, restful river, quite like that one of verse:

"A beautiful stream is the River of Time,
As it flows through the realm of years."

Whether fortunately or unfortunately, however, we are not all poets. None but the historian's eye all that day and far into the night, I venture to say, saw these visions or pictured these dreams. The crew tramped the narrow deck with muddy boots, and labored and slept. The lumbermen sat on the low boats' rail and chewed and spat, and in their more innocent moments talked lumber. These lumbermen and timber explorers take to the wilderness as naturally as ducks to water. They are a stalwart, rough and ready lot of

⁴The area of Minnesota extending southward from the Rainy River to the Red Lake Indian Reservation was ceded by the Chippewa in 1889 under the Nelson Act, which did not take effect until the following year. Folwell, *Minnesota*, 4:297-299.

men, and one cannot help admiring them in many ways. One of them was something of a theologian in his way, his Halifax-Scotch instincts coming to light even in this far away materialistic land; and the day being Sunday quite a theological discussion was precipitated. The general trend of the debate was very orthodox, though a looseness as regards the ritual and technical observances betrayed itself. As the Halifax man said: "Yes, sur! they's a God all right enough, but — the — ministers."

A good many of these lumbermen, especially in earlier years, have married squaws and reared their dusky families in a brutish sort of way on the banks of this pleasant river. As civilization has come in, however, the inevitable result follows. Kind follows kind, at least if it be Anglo-Saxon and not French kind. The white man grows a bit ashamed and sooner or later abandons the relation, while the squaw disappears into the forest taking her children with her. We saw just such an instance where the final leave-taking was carried on before our eyes. The man, who was going to Washington Territory, came aboard the boat in the middle of the stream from two canoes holding the family and all the family effects; and without one word of good-bye or one look of affection or sentiment on either side, the husband and father pushed off the canoe holding the kettles, blankets, birch-bark and the bright-eyed children mixed up all in inextricable confusion, and the Indian woman stolidly paddled back to shore, abandoned by her liege lord forever.

Whatever may be said of the white man's treatment of the Indians, one becomes convinced in many ways that the Indians themselves, who are here of the Chippewa tribe, are an inferior race, and their advancement a thing of the long future. Even at their own pursuits and in their own habits of life, the white man, when once acclimated, can beat them. In endurance, in wood-craft, in all kinds of physical prowess, the blood of the superior race tells. In their native state, when they consorted with nature pure and simple, they had undoubtedly no little dignity. But now, all that becomes ludicrous after they have put themselves, or perhaps been put by others, up against the background of the poorest and cheapest side of our

Anglo-Saxon civilization. Their dignity becomes nothing more than a cheap solemnity, covering all sorts of craft and cupidity for the poorest flesh pots of the white man: a solemnity made all the more ludicrous by the Indian scare-crow attire of heterogeneous clothing.

Without wishing to be too severe upon the noble red man, it is curious what a strong attraction that after-sense of bodily fullness, known as a "square meal," has for him. One is almost persuaded that it is his ruling motive. Unfortunately, a "square meal" means downright labor in the first instance, for some one, so that the Indian hovers about the track of the white man, a prey to his "motif." In the late afternoon of our first day up the river, passing an occasional clearing, rude log house, or Indian tepee, on some gentle wooded slope, the "Chieftain" arrived in succession at the two rapids of the river known as the Sault and the Manitou, respectively. Whether advisedly or not, there is a small Indian village close by on land reserved for them, and the whistle of the boat brought a miniature cloud of them to the river bank. Both rapids are quite swift, and it is generally the practice of the boats to take on a special pilot and fasten hawsers to the boat a quarter of a mile long, running up stream, for the Indians and the passengers to pull on by way of assisting the craft over the rapids. It is naturally a time of great excitement, and not less so on our trip than at other times. The Indian pilot became fairly frantic; the Guernseyan corsair volleyed forth his most brilliant oaths, and we and the Indians at the hawsers within faint echoes of it all, pulled so hard as to fairly *snap* the boat out of the jaws of Scylla and Charybdis and project ourselves at the same time into some neighboring gooseberry bushes. It was then that the mixed motives of the red men appeared. They hovered about until tea and sugar were distributed around in minute quantities, and two or three of the head men were invited into the cabin to a supper of salt pork and hot bread. It may be said in this place that the Indian appetite is very good indeed.

All of the Indian character, however, is not of dark hue. Be it said to his praise that he takes good care of his sick and wounded, a kindly trait springing no doubt from long and warring tribal rela-

tions. We took two Indians, father and son, on board at one of the two rude saw mill landings up the river, going some sixty miles for the doctor. The boy had cut his hand quite severely on a mill-saw and was well nigh helpless. The father helped the boy up on the open top deck reserved for third class passengers, pulled the boy's flannel shirt off and put a very much soiled linen one on, cut up his food, pulled his feet up when they adhered to the newly tarred flooring of the deck, and in other ways revealed a fatherly care which was quite touching.

In the late afternoon of the second day, the "Chieftain" rounded an unusually beautiful and stately bend of the river and came in sight of the distantly roaring falls and rapids at Fort Francis.⁵ To one who has followed Mr. Kennan in his Siberian journey and looked at Mr. Frost's pictures, Fort Francis needs no description. It looks exactly like some Russian or Siberian village, only that it is Canadian instead; with its single street of low, unpainted buildings, straggling adown a long, steppe-like slope, and with this addition that Fort Francis has some very rugged and picturesque falls at its feet, the precipitous outlet virtually of the great Rainy Lake into its river. Great preparations were made on board the "Chieftain" to disembark. The captain's volleys rather increased in force though they lost correspondingly in picturesqueness; the cook cleaned up his pans; the galley boy went through the ceremony of washing his face; the red shirted lumberman borrowed the historian's most delicate city razor, and with the union jack flapping briskly astern again we gaily steamed into port within a stone's throw of the foot of the brawling rapids.

Fort Francis is an old place, as places in the Canadian Northwest go, having been a Hudson Bay trading-post for many years. It was a matter of some surprise to find how much a thing of the present this Hudson Bay Company still is. It is still a very great power in the land. Hundreds of posts and stations scattered over the Canadian Northwest are the arms which feed the body corporate, located still in

⁵ Both the Hudson's Bay Company post and the present city of Fort Frances, which grew up on the same site, were named for the wife of Sir George Simpson, governor of the company from 1821 to 1860. Nute, *ante*, 11:361.

Liverpool.⁶ Even in so large a place as Winnipeg the company owns and operates by far the largest and most flourishing general retail stores. In Fort Francis it has its usual "fort", or warehouse, for retail purposes and fur depot, shipping religiously every bit of its furs got in exchange to the mother country. The rest of the village is rather moribund, having seen its best days, or rather best hopes, in the days of the old Dawson route, when the long water journey from Lake Superior was broken perforce at this point, and the present neglected lock canal was under construction. The Scotch element seems to predominate, and whether it be from that fact or from the high altitude, and the natural craving of high altitudes for stimulus, whiskey is a prominent social factor. One really cannot be very severe, however, as there is absolutely nothing else to do. The social instinct is compelled to take that direction. There is said to be a quiet alcoholic soaking process going on from October to April, and, such is the force of habit, from April to October.

About three miles from Fort Francis, up the river, Rainy Lake opens out to the eye; a very large, rock-shored and beautiful body of water. The name is supposed to have come from Regnault, an early French explorer, and not at all from any atmospheric peculiarity.⁷ No region east of the plains, has less rain than the Rainy Lake country. It was just at sunset that the historian and the Indian chief engaged for the occasion, paddling up stream above the falls came to the Lake and the Indian agency building picturesquely situated at the point where the river emerges in a series of gentle rapids. The lake reached away toward the east in misty headlands, and in the evening light was as fine a picture of northern waters and sky and terra incognita as one can well imagine. In winter the region must

⁶ Hudson's Bay House, the company's main office, is in London. For a description of the business headquarters, see George Bryce, *The Remarkable History of the Hudson's Bay Company*, 474 (New York, 1910).

⁷ The name originated with the French, who called the lake "Lac la Pluie." It is commonly believed that the term, which was in general use in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, referred to the mist from the falls at the present cities of Fort Frances and International Falls. The French explorer mentioned might have been Jean Baptiste Renaud, a voyageur who followed the border lakes route with La Vérendrye in 1731. Warren Upham, *Minnesota Geographic Names*, 8, 281 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 17); Theodore C. Blegen, "Fort St. Charles and the Northwest Angle," *ante*, 18:241.

be cold and desolate, however dry the atmosphere. All the lakes, large and small, and streams as well, freeze up tight of course to a depth of three feet or more. Frosts occur occasionally the latter part of August. Frozen peat matter can be dug in the thick moss of the swamps within three or four feet of the surface, even in midsummer. It is a hardy northern latitude meant only for a hardy race of men. A glimpse of it cannot fail to increase one's respect for the old voyageurs and explorers, who, at a time when it meant far more than it does now, faced its tremendous distances and severe hardships.



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