

Notes and Documents

THROUGH MINNESOTA TO THE CANADIAN WEST IN 1869

Edited by Marion H. Herriot

MINNESOTA and the American Midwest served for several decades as a bridge between Eastern Canada and what became Western Canada in 1870. The rock and forest of the Laurentian shield, which swings down to touch Lake Superior, formed a more effective barrier to Canadian westward expansion than the Appalachians had been for the Americans farther south. As a result, the Canadian West was almost entirely neglected by the East, and it might have been absorbed by the march of American westward expansion but for the interest of fur-trading firms, such as the Hudson's Bay Company, and the dreams of visionaries like Lord Selkirk.

The first western settlement north of the forty-ninth parallel was the Red River colony established by Lord Selkirk in 1812. Its lines of communication reached north and south in accordance with geography. To the north there was the hazardous route by York boat and ship from Hudson Bay to Britain. To the south, ox carts and later Red River steamboats connected the colony with St. Paul, the Mississippi, and the American railroads. The Dawson trail, opened to the east in 1870 overland through Canadian territory from Port Arthur to Fort Garry, was not much used. It took the Canadian Pacific Railway to successfully defy geography and establish an east-west line of communication in 1883. Most of the earlier immigration to the Red River settlement from the Canadian East went via the Minnesota bridge.

The immigrant who recounts herewith the experiences of his journey through Minnesota to Fort Garry was one of a vanguard of settlers from Ontario who entered the Red River region in anticipation of its union with Canada. He wrote in 1869, when negotiations by

which the vast Northwest passed from the rule of the Hudson's Bay Company to Canada were well under way. The Ontario settlers who moved in before the transfer belonged to the much resented "Canadian party"—a group that was partly responsible for the Riel rebellion of 1869-70. The influx of progressive eastern farmers threatened the whole way of life of the earlier Red River settlers, for their livelihood was based on the fur trade, the buffalo hunt, and primitive agriculture.¹ Consequently, they rose in dramatic protest against the Easterners with their alien way of life. The Riel disturbances marked the last stand of the old order against the new.

As a representative of the new order, the immigrant who wrote the present account no doubt felt that all who endured the hardships and difficulties of migration from Eastern to Western Canada richly deserved to inherit the prairies from the traders and buffalo hunters. Many were the emigrants from Eastern Canada who settled in the United States rather than continue the onerous journey to the Red River settlement. The gradual disappearance of free land and the westward movement of the frontier, however, checked the tendency to settle south of the border.

At first the immigrants went by rail to the Mississippi, by steamboat to St. Paul, and by stagecoach and team-drawn wagon to Fort Garry. Gradually, however, as the railroad crept west and north to Manitoba, immigrants began to go all the way to St. Paul, or even to the Red River, by rail. From 1871 to 1878 an efficient fleet of steamboats operated regularly on the Red River from the end of steel to Fort Garry.² Many of the immigrants used the Red River boats as a means of ingress. By 1878 the railroad had reached St. Boniface across the river from Fort Garry and had ruined the steamboat business. But not until 1883, when the Canadian Pacific Railway connected Winnipeg with the East, was the Minnesota route really challenged.

¹ George F. G. Stanley, *The Birth of Western Canada: A History of the Riel Rebellions*, 48 (London and New York, 1936).

² The story of "Steamboat Transportation on the Red River" is reviewed by the writer, *ante* 21: 245-271. Fort Garry was the Hudson's Bay Company post from which the present city of Winnipeg developed. The gate of the fort still stands in the heart of the city.

[From the *Canadian Churchman* (Kingston, Ontario), November 3, 1869.]³

WINNIPEG CITY, FORT GARRY, RED RIVER SETTLEMENT, Oct, 5, 1869.
TO THE EDITOR OF THE CANADIAN CHURCHMAN.

MR. EDITOR, — Previous to my leaving Kingston for Fort Garrey you requested me to write, and give you an account of my trip to the North West, and my idea of the country. In complying with your wishes I have much pleasure in forwarding the following: —

I left Kingston on the 28th of July, and joined six others of our party at Toronto, left by G[rand] T[runk] Railway at 12:15 P.M. for Detroit, via Sarnia and Port Huron. We arrived at Sarnia the following evening at about 7 P.M., and crossed the St. Clair river to Port Huron, where we were to take the cars for Detroit. (I may mention that the fare served up to travellers, who may have occasion to stop at the Sarnia Railway House, on the Grand Trunk, is not creditable to its proprietor, and gives good reason for dissatisfaction on the part of the travelling public.) The Customs Officers at this place, understanding we were going through to the British possessions, passed our baggage, &c., through without examining them. We remained at Port Huron for the night, as we found that we would be obliged to go on to Detroit instead of connecting with the train for Grand Haven, at the Junction some distance from Detroit. We had some difficulty in procuring rooms for the night, but after a little persuasion with the independent Yankee this difficulty was soon overcome. The street cars run from the town of Port Huron to the depot — a distance of two-miles-and-a-half through a pine wood along the banks of the St. Clair river — a very pretty drive. We left the hotel at 6.30 next morning and arrived at the Detroit junction, about 70 miles from Port Huron, at 9:30 A.M., and had to wait for the Detroit and Grand Haven train, which was an hour behind time; it came at last and we started for Grand Haven about 11 A.M., arriving there at 5:30 P.M., and dined at the Eating House — an improvement on the house at Sarnia; the immense banks of sand thrown up here by the winds are astonishing, resembling great drifts of snow; some being as high as 300 feet. We left here at nine o'clock on the propeller *Ironsides* for the City of Milwaukee, where we

³ A file of this rare paper is owned by the Ontario Department of Public Records and Archives at Toronto. The letter herewith reprinted was found by a member of its staff, Mr. James J. Talman, who kindly sent a typewritten copy to the Minnesota Historical Society. He also made an effort to identify the writer by looking for records of departures in contemporary Toronto newspapers, but in this he was unsuccessful. See his letter to Grace Lee Nute, January 13, 1938.

arrived at 6:30 A.M. the following morning, and drove to the Newhall Hotel, where everything is in apple-pie order, and charges moderate. I was astonished to see so many Germans here; every other name was unpronounceable. We had a chance of leaving at 11:30 A.M., that day, by changing our tickets and going by "Pomme du Tere" direct by rail to St. Paul's, but missed it, owing to some of our party being absent from the hotel.⁴ However, we left at 2:30 P.M., for Lacrosse, to connect with the Mississippi steamer for St. Paul's, and arrived at Lacrosse at 1:30 A.M.; we had no time to see the town, as we had to take the steamer *Davenport* for St. Paul.

These Mississippi boats are wonderful things, as large as lake steamers; they only draw about 3ft. of water, and carry two large beams of wood, rigged with a tackle worked by the engines, which, when they run on a sand bar, they put down to the bottom, and by means of their tackle lift the bow of the boat and back off the bar. We had the pleasure of seeing this invention at work several times, and it worked well.

The food on the boat was not well cooked, or well served, and the waiters (colored men and boys) were very independent. One custom here is to put the ladies at one table and the gentlemen at another, while the officers of the boat eat by themselves. The scenery on the river was magnificent. I have read of the scenery on the Upper Mississippi, but I did not imagine it to be so beautiful. I should like to describe it but don't feel competent to undertake the task. Sunday it rained all day, and as the bars in the river increased in number the scenery began to grow monotonous, after viewing it from a bar in the river, where we were stuck fast for several hours at a time. To add to this the steamer had two barges — one on each side, loaded with agricultural implements, which, though it speaks well for the farming interest of Minnesota, was intensely disagreeable to us, for we only made the fast time of four miles an hour. Without the scows, the steamer would make about six miles an hour against the current, and about eighteen and twenty miles with it. However, we surmounted these difficulties, and transferring our baggage and selves to a small steamer, with a stern wheel, we reached St. Paul's at about nine in the evening.⁵ After a few tosses in the mud, getting up

⁴ Railroad connections between Milwaukee and St. Paul were completed in 1866. Daily service was available over the Milwaukee, St. Paul and Minneapolis Railway in the summer of 1869. William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 3:2 (St. Paul, 1926); advertisement in the *St. Paul Pioneer*, August 3, 1869.

⁵ The "Davenport," a side-wheeler built in 1860, "did not make her appearance at the levee" in St. Paul on Sunday, August 1, according to the *Pioneer* of August 3,

the bank to the levee, where the omnibusses were, we drove to Merchant Hotel, where we had supper, and retired for the night.⁶

There is a railway from St. Paul to St. Cloud, but we were told that we should not be able to provide ourselves as well there as where we were.⁷

We remained at the Merchants till Wednesday, during which time we were very busy getting two teams, lumber waggons, covers, harness, and other items. We found things more reasonable than we expected, but afterwards found we could have procured some of them at St. Cloud for the same money and less trouble. Two of our party here left us to go by rail to St. Cloud, while the other five took the teams by the road, seventy miles to the same place. The first night we were to have taken up our quarters in a tavern, at a place called Rice Creek village—a creek supplied by mineral springs;⁸ but we found that we would have to sleep in the waggons and go to bed supperless, as the family had only moved in that day, and half his furniture had been left at St. Paul's, and consequently had no accommodation. We found it rather cold work sleeping in water-proofs, and the misquitos were worse than all the other evils put together. Other places where we put up along the road we were treated well, and not overcharged. The Central House, in St. Cloud, is a swindle on suffering humanity; but as it is the only house in the place it is a necessary evil. We left St. Cloud at ten o'clock A.M., the next morning. Here we saw the last of the Mississippi. That afternoon we struck the Sank [*Sauk*] River and had dinner; saw some ducks, but killed none. This stream is about fifty yards wide—running rapidly over a stoney shallow bottom; it would make a splendid mill stream, and I learn is considerably used for that purpose.

We camped at the Cold Springs for the night, and next day, Sunday.

1869. The paper reports that the boat went "as far as Robinson's Rocks, with a barge of freight in tow, and was met there by the Nellie Kent, and transported her freight and passengers to the Nellie, when the Davenport turned around and returned." For a brief note on the "Davenport," see George B. Merrick, *Old Times on the Upper Mississippi*, 264 (Cleveland, 1909).

⁶ The Merchants' Hotel was located at Third and Jackson streets, only a short distance from the steamboat landing.

⁷ Two trains a day left St. Paul for St. Cloud over the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad, according to an advertisement in the *Pioneer*, August 3, 1869.

⁸ The reference probably is to a little stream entering the Mississippi in the southernmost township of Anoka County. It is designated as Rice Creek on a map of the county in A. T. Andreas, *Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Minnesota*, 161 (Chicago, 1874). The township, which is now named Fridley, and a settlement south of the creek were known in 1874 as Manomin, an Indian word for wild rice. Warren Upham, *Minnesota Geographic Names*, 23 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 17).

The best water between St. Cloud and Fort Garrey is to be had here. From this place to Alexandria in four days by the Praire road from Sank [*Sauk*] Centre.⁹ Before we reached Alexandria we camped one night on a small lake, called Lake Levin; the person who gave it that name had settled there some three years before, when the country was perfectly wild; he had built up one corner of his house to resemble a tower and called it Lock Leven Castle and Lake.¹⁰ The ducks in the lakes are very plentiful and easily shot, but hard to get at without a dog.

The next place of interest to us was Fort Abercrombie, a U. S. Post on the line between Minnesota and the Territory of Dacota.¹¹ We left Abercrombie on Tuesday morning, and nothing more occurred till we reached Pembina, on the line between U.S.A. and B.N.A. Here the Customs Officer wished to charge on taking some things into Canada or the Norwest Territory, but we Kennucs cou[1]dn't see it, and on we went.

At Frog Point we saw about 1500 barrels and packages of sugar, tobacco, and tea, belonging to the H. B. Co., awaiting the steamer to take it to Fort Garrey.¹²

We were two days going to Fort Garrey from Pembina. The horses seemed to know that they were at their journey's end, and started on a brisk trot as soon as they saw the towers of the fort ahead.

The time on the road was as follows:—Four-and-a-half days to St. Paul's; two-and-a-half at St. Paul's; two-and-a-half to St. Cloud by road; eight-and-a-half days to Fort Abercrombie; a-day-and-a-half at Abercrombie, and seven days to Fort Garrey.

For the benefit of persons intending to emigrate next spring I will give a short description of route, and the way they will have to travel from St. Cloud:—Next June the St. Paul and Pacific Railway will be finished as far as Buckenridge [*Breckenridge*]¹³ (a small town about 12

⁹ The road through Cold Spring and Sauk Center was doubtless one of the trails that connected St. Cloud and the Red River settlements. For a map and a description of the "Red River Trails" by Grace Lee Nute, see *ante*, 6:278-282.

¹⁰ Leven Lake and a township of the same name are about ten miles south of Alexandria in Pope County. For a note on the name, see Upham, *Minnesota Geographic Names*, 432.

¹¹ Fort Abercrombie was a military post on the west bank of the Red River in what is now North Dakota. Since the Canadians also stopped at Pembina, they evidently followed a trail west of the river.

¹² Frog Point was at the foot of Goose Rapids, about thirty-five miles above Grand Forks. The Hudson's Bay Company shipped goods across Minnesota in Red River carts to this point, whence they were sent to Fort Garry on the company's steamboat, the "International." Herriot, "Steamboating on the Red River," *ante*, 21:250-252.

¹³ The St. Paul and Pacific was completed to Breckenridge in 1871. Folwell, *Minnesota*, 3:61.

miles up the Red River from St. [*sic*] Abercrombie) from thence a steamer, with a passenger scow in tow, will take persons down at the cost of \$30.00 a head. This boat will make the trip down in six days, and the round trip in twelve days. If they should come in May they will find the steamer and scow but not the railway; and will have to come by stage to St. Abercrombie. If they come in April they will have to perform the last part of the journey from Fort Abercrombie to Ft. Garrey in teams of their own, or build a small scow and float down the river. This would cost (were the party composed of, say six) about \$7 each, greenbacks.¹⁴

It is not necessary for me to enter into a long account of what business will pay best. Any kind of business will pay well, no matter what it is.

I call your attention to the following account of one farm of 200 acres, owned by Mr. [Robert] Morgan, Suniside, Headingley, 14 miles up the Assineboine.¹⁵ Farm 20 chains, front, 200 acres:—

Wheat planted, 60 bushels, yield 1000 bushels,

Oats " 10 " " 200 "

Barley " 6 " " 80 "

Potatoes " 60 " " 1200 "

Turnips, ½ acre " 400 "

Onions, ½ " " 200 "

Cabbage, 2000 plants, 5 to 15 lbs. each.

1 lb. of early rose potatoe yield 172 lbs, one potatoe yielding 2 lbs. and

1 oz.

The following are the current prices obtained in the settlement:—

Wheat, \$1.25; oats, 87½c.; barley, \$1.00; potatoes, 62½c.; turnips, 25c.; onions, \$2.00; cabbages, 8c.¹⁶

That is the sum of \$2,900, or thereabouts, of an average piece of land and a very small seeding.

What more is it necessary to say about the productiveness of this great country.

¹⁴ For a discussion of passenger rates on the Red River boats, see Herriot, "Steam-boating on the Red River," *ante*, 21:270; some examples of the use of flatboats are given in the same article, p. 260 n. Immigrants and importers often built scows or flatboats on the upper river, floated down with the current to Fort Garry, and there broke up the boats for lumber, a valuable commodity in the Red River settlements.

¹⁵ An advertisement inserted by Morgan appears in the *Nor'-Wester* (Red River Settlement) for October 26, 1869. He announces some of his produce for sale at prices similar to those quoted herewith. A file of the *Nor'-Wester* is in the Manitoba Legislative Library, Winnipeg.

¹⁶ The prices listed are per bushel. Since wheat was not shipped out of Manitoba until 1876, the price quoted probably was that prevailing in the local market.

The Red River carts are curiosities of themselves, there is not a particle of iron used in their manufacture. The wheels are about six feet in diameter, and if, as is often the case, they don't oil them, you can hear them for miles away, and they sound very unearthly the first time you hear them.¹⁷

With these few suggestions, I remain yours,

AN EMIGRANT.

¹⁷ For a detailed description of the Red River carts and of the extensive trade carried on in them between the Red River settlements and St. Paul, see J. Fletcher Williams, *History of the City of Saint Paul*, 304-306 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 4). One of the original carts is preserved in the museum of the Minnesota Historical Society.



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