

Notes and Documents

MAYER'S ALBUM OF MINNESOTA DRAWINGS

Bertha L. Heilbron

REMINDEES of the artistic importance that Frank B. Mayer attached to his Minnesota journey of 1851 are still coming to the attention of the Minnesota Historical Society, more than a decade after the publication of his written and pictorial records of the trip. Both the diary and the sketches published in 1932 are in the Ayer Collection of the Newberry Library in Chicago; Goucher College in Baltimore has thirty-one water colors which the artist based upon his Minnesota sketches; a second version of the diary, more complete than that in the Newberry Library, was presented to the American Museum of Natural History in New York in 1936;¹ and only recently the Minnesota drawings in an "Album" owned by the New York Public Library were identified as Mayer's work.

For more than thirty years the album has reposed in the library's Reserve Book Room. It was purchased in March, 1912, from Wilberforce Eames, the distinguished bibliographer and collector. He, in turn, obtained it some years earlier from the Anderson Auction Company. The catalogue issued by that firm on January 14, 1907, lists the album as item 249 with the following description: "Album of drawings, mostly in pencil, but a few in water-colors, of scenes, incidents, portraits, etc., made during the Sioux troubles of 1851-52, and the Sioux rising of 1863 under Little Crow. The drawings, which number about 700, vary in size from thumb nail sketches to drawings about 9 in. square. . . . One of the drawings is signed 'White, fecit,' the others not signed but evidently by the same artist."²

¹ *With Pen and Pencil on the Frontier in 1851: The Diary and Sketches of Frank Blackwell Mayer*, edited by Bertha L. Heilbron, was published in 1932 by the Minnesota Historical Society as volume 1 of its *Narratives and Documents* series. An account of the Goucher College water colors and extracts from the diary owned by the American Museum of Natural History appear *ante*, 13:408-414, 22:133-156.

² Paul Rice North, chief of the reference department, New York Public Library, to the writer, December 26, 1944.

The pictures are mounted, sometimes on one and sometimes on both sides of the sheet, in an album of forty-eight leaves. There are pictures on a total of sixty-three pages.

There are several glaring errors in the auction catalogue description. The "Sioux troubles of 1851-52" are pure fiction, and the "Sioux rising . . . under Little Crow" began in 1862. It is true that the outbreak continued into the following year, but Mayer's drawings in no way relate to that tragic event. The one hint of the Indian war in the entire album is a notation on the first page which reads: "Sioux Uprising in 1862 Yanketons not in it." The hundreds of drawings of Indians in the collection picture the Sioux peacefully living at Kaposia or assembled for treaty-making purposes at Traverse des Sioux and Fort Snelling. The Indian and other sketches in the album duplicate to a large degree Mayer's drawings in the six sketchbooks owned by the Newberry Library. The one picture in the entire collection that is signed by White is a crude portrait of Mayer. Obviously this is the work of an amateur, not of the skilled artist who produced the rest of the drawings. A similar sketch, which has been identified as the work of Ashton White, appears in one of Mayer's sketchbooks.³

Many of the New York drawings are far more finished than those in the Newberry Library's sketchbooks; others bear notations that add to available information about the sketches, identify previously unknown subjects, or confirm conclusions reached earlier. A sketch of James M. Goodhue napping beside a tent at Traverse des Sioux is captioned merely "The editor of the 'Pioneer'" in the sketchbook, whereas the album drawing bears the explicit and somewhat uncomplimentary comment, "Col. Goodhue editor Pioneer as usual." A profile of Governor Ramsey, missing from the sketchbooks, appears in the album with the label, "Alex. Ramsey of Penn. Gov. Minnesota Terry."⁴ It is gratifying to find among the por-

³ White's sketch is reproduced in Mayer, *With Pen and Pencil*, 161. Some of the other drawings in the New York collection are erroneously credited to White in a descriptive note accompanying Plate 13 in Fritz Kredel and Frederick P. Todd, *Soldiers of the American Army, 1775-1941* (New York, 1941).

⁴ An original Ramsey portrait by Mayer is owned by the Minnesota Historical Society. It is reproduced and described *ante*, 14:425.

traits in the New York collection a well-drawn likeness of Dr. Thomas Foster, secretary to the treaty commission, who later became a prominent Minnesota journalist. A view of Fort Snelling as seen from Mendota found in the album is far superior to representations of the post appearing in the sketchbooks. The camping scenes and Minnesota River views are clearly defined and far more finished in technique than those previously seen. Some of the latter include good pictures of the keelboat in which the Traverse des Sioux party traveled. The sketchy drawing in the album of the treaty of Traverse des Sioux has an atmosphere of living authenticity that is completely missing in Mayer's later oil painting of the event.⁵

It would be difficult to determine with certainty which set of drawings was made by Mayer during his western travels. Superficial evidence seems to indicate that the sketches in the album are based upon those in the sketchbooks. It might be worth noting that the album contains Minnesota drawings only, whereas two of the sketchbooks include many pictures made on the journeys to and from the West. Since Mayer's diary exists in two forms, it is not surprising to find a second version of the pictures intended to illustrate it.

Through the courtesy of the New York Public Library, the Minnesota Historical Society has obtained photostatic copies of the drawings in the Mayer album. They have been added to the society's few original Mayer items and the numerous copies of his works obtained earlier from other libraries and from private owners. The resulting collection is one of remarkable extent and completeness—a pictorial record that students of territorial history, of Indian life, and of western art cannot afford to overlook.

⁵ The painting, which is owned by the Minnesota Historical Society, is reproduced in Mayer, *With Pen and Pencil*, 18.



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