

# A Wit Looks at Old Fort Ripley

*Edited by Philip D. Jordan*

THE WIT AND HUMOR of frontier America bubbled spontaneously from the lips of countless travelers, hunters, politicians, and army officers who found time to record their laughing impressions of the pioneer West in the columns of the *New York Spirit of the Times*. One of the nation's great sporting journals of the nineteenth century, the *Spirit*, as it was familiarly called by thousands of enthusiastic readers, welcomed tales of the turf, Yankee witticisms, stories of bear hunts in Arkansas and buffalo hunts on the great plains, yarns of American ingenuity and exaggeration, and timely local-color jokes. The result of this liberal editorial policy soon made the *Spirit*, like *Yankee Notions* or *Brother Jonathan*, a rich depository of folklore.

Only a few years after the reservation at Fort Ripley was set aside by President Zachary Taylor, the *Spirit of the Times* printed a humorous article describing some of the post's activities and commenting upon men and affairs in the Territory of Minnesota. Who "Yorick," the author, was no one now knows. Perhaps he was an officer stationed at the fort; perhaps he was only a casual sojourner. He might have been a trapper, trader, or sutler. Certainly "Yorick" was alert to much that was going on in the North Star country. His contribution was pungent and penetrating as well as humorous. Informal and breezy, it supplements Mr. F. Paul Prucha's serious study of Fort Ripley, published in *Minnesota History* for September, 1947.

[From the *Spirit of the Times*, 22:147 (May 15, 1852).]

## QUEER EPISTLE FROM MINNESOTA TERRITORY

FORT RIPLEY, April 20th, 1852.

DEAR "SPIRIT"—I have just been reading a few late copies of your mirth-inspiring journal, and having laughed away the cobwebs that had gathered through my dull and heavy brain, and wove their

wicker-work around my unexpanded lungs, during a late long spell of most execrable weather, I feel in an excellent writing mood, and now, as the clouds are scattering and clearing away from our troubled and weeping skies, and the sun once more pours down his warm, enlivening beams upon us—and my own feelings brighten, too, and are warming up in company with them—suppose I not only “drop you a line or two,” but a whole flowing sheet full, of “fun, fact, and fancy,” traced with a running hand, and dished up in our usual western rough-and-tumble manner.

And firstly, do you know anything at all about the situation of this “Neck of Woods,” and prairie, too; or of the intellectual, moral, and physical condition of its people—white, half-breed, and Indian—civilized, semi-civilized, and savage? If you do not, oh! then, “Spirit” of my soul, but thou art ignorant—and if so, let me hasten to enlighten you.

Well, we are not absolutely to the west of sundown up here, as some of our writers represent us, but we are on *the* very *pail* of civilization that you sometimes read about, and it is with pleasure that I send *this* to you as one of the hoops therefrom, to bind us more closely to the “Spirit” and the “Porter”<sup>1</sup> which the enactment of the “Liquor Law” will have a tendency to cut us off from. The sovereigns voted for the adoption of the law by a large majority, and it goes into operation on the 1st of May.<sup>2</sup> “So mote it be,” as Dow Jr. would say.

Well, to proceed. We are a great people out here in Minus-sota; we are, indeed, and no mistake. We are minus nothing worth having, whether it be fun, devilment, or diversion. We are most emphatically a *sporting* people, and all your readers ought to be here, to see us perform a while. We have been riding around all winter in dog trains, like Canadians, and flying about on sledges and jumpers harnessed to elk and deer, like Laplanders. We feel

<sup>1</sup> The reference is to William T. Porter, who established the *Spirit of the Times* on December 18, 1831, and remained its editor until 1856. *Dictionary of American Biography*, 15:107.

<sup>2</sup> For the law prohibiting the manufacture and sale of liquor in the territory, see Minnesota Territory, *Session Laws*, 1852, p. 12-18. The law provided that a “liquor election” be held on the first Monday in April, and that, if approved by the voters, the law should become effective on “or before the first Monday in May.”

Greenlandish, and our stomachs are longing constantly for such hyperborean delicacies as train-oil, blubber, seal liver, etc.; and I can myself eat more than any Esquimaux that could be scared up along the whole Arctic coast. If you don't believe it, just send on your biggest gormandizer, from a Patagonian to a Russian bear (even Nicholas himself, that Hungary man), and if I don't drink my two quarts of whale-oil, and eat my five pounds of blubber, to his one, at a single breakfast, then you can just take my pile, and hat, too, for that matter, as we don't intend to wear such superfluous articles out yer much longer. And then at night visions of Esquimaux and Icelanders, white foxes, and red snow, haunt our dreams; while our breath freezes the bed-clothes tight around us, and we have to have a fire made before we can get up. The mercury freezes so solid that they shoot balls made of quicksilver instead of lead.

In the way of internal improvements, we have a good plank road from St. Paul to Oregon, right across the Rocky Mountains, along a *straight line*, in latitude 49 deg., and it would go further, if it were not for the mill-pond out there called the Pacific Ocean.<sup>3</sup> Then we have daily trains of cars running to Hudson Bay, *via* Selkirk Settlement, Fort York, &c., which carry enormous loads of freight and passengers at very reasonable rates.<sup>4</sup> A party who have been searching for Sir John Franklin, all along the Arctic coast, for two years past, lately returned by this line, and reported that—they did not find Sir John.<sup>5</sup> The more's the pity they didn't. The travelling time is just four days—distance, 1,250 miles—and the fare only \$50, and found, with good wigwams on the way. Dog cheap at half the price. Extra trains are provided for large parties of pleasure travellers, which are warranted to “go through by daylight,” and “not to cut in the eye.” They go through as sure as a whole box of Brandreth's

<sup>3</sup>This is sly comment upon the prevailing practice of attempting to “gouge” the legislature for money for plank roads.

<sup>4</sup>The writer is probably referring to the Red River cart trains, which made two trips annually between St. Paul and the settlements on the lower Red River in Canada.

<sup>5</sup>Sir John Franklin, British naval officer, in 1819 began Arctic service, which continued until his last voyage in 1845. Franklin died on June 11, 1847, in the vicinity of King William Land. Relics of his expedition were found by a relief party in May, 1859. Perhaps “Yorick” had read Robert A. Goodsir, *An Arctic Voyage to Baffin's Bay and Lancaster Sound in Search of Friends with Sir John Franklin* (London, 1850).

pills. The locomotives run like a streak of chain-lightning, the boilers being forged by "Vulcan," while "Venus," "Mars," and the "Aurora Borealis," light up the track by night, and old Boreas and all the Furies help to blow along the flying trains.

Then, too, we have four newspapers, the editor of one of which, viz., the "Paw-in-here" ("Pioneer"), is a son of one of those same furies, and who keeps up a regular telegraphic correspondence with the Kamtschatka "Gazette," *via* Bhering's Straits; and they do say that he even gets a despatch occasionally from the lower regions, which is the third *House* of Minnesota, and is always filled with a goodly number of the lobby members of the Territory.<sup>6</sup> The despatches, in the absence of the "Old Boy" himself, are generally forwarded by the ferryman across the River Styx, who, it is said, has quit his legitimate business in disgust, since the people here have all got ferry charters, and are going to compete with him.<sup>7</sup>

Then, again, railroads are to be built all around us everywhere, and to connect us with everybody. True, we have no balloons flying through the air with an empty headed fool in a basket following after them, but we have got enough to fill all the balloons that ever floated, and for all other purposes to supply the Union. It flows too spontaneously, like the products of the soil, which spring up and grow without the least cultivation. We have steamboats running here from everywhere down the Ohio and Mississippi, and if you choose to come this way, any of the Captains will "chalk your hat," and be obliged to you for coming. Then we have a boat *as is a boat*, one which you might call a *boat-ee*, called the Governor Ramher, which runs above the Falls of St. Anthony, away up towards Prince Rupert's Land and Baffin's Bay.<sup>8</sup> She steers North till the Pole star

<sup>6</sup> The editor was James Madison Goodhue; his paper, the *Minnesota Pioneer* of St. Paul, was the first in the territory. A volume of Goodhue's editorials, edited by Mary W. Berthel, will be published in the near future by the Minnesota Historical Society. In addition to the *Pioneer*, the *Minnesota Democrat* and the *Minnesotian* of St. Paul and the *St. Anthony Express* were appearing in Minnesota Territory in 1852.

<sup>7</sup> A total of fourteen ferry charters were granted by the territorial legislature of 1852. See the *Session Laws* of that year, p. 3, 5, 27, 28, 31, 39, 41-44, 50, 53-56, 59.

<sup>8</sup> The first boat to navigate the Mississippi above the Falls of St. Anthony was the "Governor Ramsey," which made its trial run on May 25, 1850. A stern-wheeler, carrying sixty-five pounds of steam and drawing eleven inches of water, the boat ran regularly between St. Anthony and Sauk Rapids. *Saturday Evening Post* (Burlington, Iowa), February, 7, 1925.

is behind her, and then returns. She climbs rapids, jumps over snags and across sand bars, gnaws through ice, tumbles over rocks, and, when she gets to the head of one stream, they just *Ramher* on the shore, mount her on wheels, and run her over the portages to other streams, no matter whether the distance be one mile or fifty. She has a locomotive engine in her, and when the streams are closed with more than *one foot* of ice in thickness, they just put her on the St. Paul and Hudson's Bay Rail Road, and run her up to Fort York at once. People prefer her to the cars, as her *sleeping accommodations* are so very good, and, besides, she does not run at nights, the track being generally full of White Bear, Buffalo, Musk Oxen, and *ass-inaborne* Indians.<sup>9</sup>

On this side of the Mississippi is the great Sioux country, extending west to the Missouri, most of which was lately treated for, and is now rapidly filling up with the children of this modern Israel.<sup>10</sup> It is the Canaan of this North-western region, and will soon overflow with milk and honey, as well as all the other substantial of this life. Minnesota is the country, and we the people, that the late Gen. [Zachary] Taylor spoke of in his message "as the rest of mankind," but we are now getting so populous that we will soon be a world among ourselves, and the "rest of mankind" will be all down in your direction.

And now, in conclusion, as to the situation of this place. Fort Ripley is situated on the west bank of the famous Mississippi, which is not only the Father, but the Great Grandfather of all running waters. The distance is 150 miles above St. Paul—the latitude 46.10 North. The post was built in 1849, and is not yet finished.<sup>11</sup> Company A, of the 6th Infantry, is now stationed here, and is commanded, as you are aware, by Capt. J. B. S. TODD, who was among

<sup>9</sup> The Assiniboin Indians lived in the lower Red River Valley and in the vicinity of Lake Winnipeg.

<sup>10</sup> Most of Minnesota west of the Mississippi was acquired from the Sioux by the treaties of Traverse des Sioux and Mendota, negotiated in the summer of 1851. Although the treaties were not ratified by the United States Senate until June 23, 1852, settlers began to pour into the region much earlier. For accounts of the treaties and their ratification, see William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1:278-292 (St. Paul, 1921).

<sup>11</sup> For an account of the construction of Fort Ripley, see F. Paul Prucha, "Fort Ripley: The Post and the Reservation," *ante*, p. 206-208.

our most gallant officers in the war with Mexico. DR. J. FRAZIER HEAD, and Lieuts. [Franklin F.] FLINT and [William P.] CARLIN, are all stationed here, and are very popular young officers. A reinforcement of troops is expected on now daily, and will be welcome, as we expect to have a general fuss ere long with the Sioux Indians, more especially if the late treaties should not be ratified by the Senate at its present session.<sup>12</sup> The tattoo has just beat, and I will for the present close. I only sat down to give you some sporting yarn, and one especially in which the officers here figured very prominently a few days since.

I thought I would introduce myself to you and your readers first, by giving you an idea of who we are, and where and how we live, and if you would like to hear from us again, just signify your wish by giving this a place in the columns of the "Spirit." We have ample material here for a rich, rare, and racy series of amusing sketches, for the benefit of your many readers, and I would advise you to send a competent correspondent out to gather them. I am an utter stranger to you myself, or I might be tempted to make you an offer of my own poor services. I hope for a better acquaintance with you, however. Here is my , and my best wishes for your success, and hope you may soon be able to say, in regard to my humble self—"we know him well," poor

YORICK

<sup>12</sup> Until Fort Ridgely was established in Sioux country on the Minnesota River in 1853, settlers looked to Fort Ripley for protection from the Sioux as well as the neighboring Chippewa. See Prucha, *ante*, p. 212.



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