

# Territorial Daguerreotypes

## RURAL MINNESOTA AS SEEN BY AN ARTIST

*Edited by Philip D. Jordan*

ARMED WITH LETTERS of introduction and carrying a strange assortment of pencils, drawing papers, and water colors, Edwin Whitefield arrived in St. Paul in 1856. No doubt he astonished residents who were accustomed to seeing emigrants enter Minnesota Territory with rifle and farm tools rather than with the paraphernalia of an artist. Yet Whitefield, for all his brushes and paints, was no day-dreaming fool. Like many another, he had come to Minnesota to make a living. Perhaps he could combine art with land exploration and settlement and thus force one to support the other. Minnesota was far removed from his native England. He had come to the United States, however, at such an early age that the land of his birth assumed no great importance at the time he reached the Minnesota frontier. By then he had already established himself as an artist, having spent at least ten years depicting scenery and towns in upstate New York in the vicinity of Albany and Troy.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps at first Whitefield did not really intend to spend more than a few months in Minnesota, for in November, 1856, an editor spoke of receiving a call from Mr. Whitefield of New York, "who has been spending some weeks in different parts of our Territory, taking views of our interior towns, beautiful lakes, meandering rivers, matchless water-falls, and charming landscapes, for exhibition in the East." In addition to displaying Minnesota sketches, Whitefield planned to lecture in New England and the Middle States.<sup>2</sup>

The lust for land, however, took Whitefield back to Minnesota after he had completed his Eastern lecture tour. In 1856, he had

<sup>1</sup>I. N. Phelps Stokes and Daniel C. Haskell, *American Historical Prints, Early Views of American Cities, etc.*, 94 (New York, 1933); *Appletons' Annual Cyclopaedia*, 1892, p. 582.

<sup>2</sup>Undated clipping in Whitefield Family Papers, in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

organized the Whitefield Exploring Association, for the purpose, said the artist, of exploring "The Land of Promise." Actually, the legal name of the association was the Kandiyohi Town Site Company and its objective was to establish town sites. Twenty-two signatures were attached to the company's constitution, including those of John Swainson, D. M. Coolbaugh, John H. Stevens, and Whitefield. Swainson was listed both as president and as agent. Whitefield was the other agent.<sup>3</sup> Available records do not indicate how successful Whitefield was as a land salesman, but there is no doubt that he was an enthusiastic traveler through Minnesota in search of desirable sites. As members of the company, laden with camp equipment and surveying instruments, moved through the Kandiyohi region, Whitefield jotted down each day's adventures in prose as clear and revealing as his paintings. He wrote of valleys covered with veils of mist and of a moon with a single attendant star. He reported that "Between Chaska and Carver we crossed some rich meadows where the grass reached to the top of our wagons, and most liberally besprinkled us with drops of pearly dew." He told of hurricanes that swept with blinding rain sheets over the prairies, and he described the intensity of the noonday sun. His practical nature manifested itself too. Whitefield's eyes gauged fertile soil and inventoried stands of fine trees. He noted how Anoka was growing and found time to describe St. Cloud. In 1857 or 1858 he wrote a sketch of Minnesota in which, like many another enthusiast, he boldly affirmed that "Minnesota is undoubtedly the healthiest state in the Union."<sup>4</sup>

Little by little his sketchbooks grew fat, and his charming water colors of Minnesota lakes and scenes along the Mississippi increased. To each picture, Whitefield added a brief description. The Minnesota Historical Society possesses many Whitefield originals. Some are unbound, but others have been bound together in handsome fashion by one of London's finest bookbinders. Whitefield did an excellent "View of St. Anthony, Minneapolis, and St. Anthony Falls," which was published as a lithograph in 1857. He also found

<sup>3</sup> Kandiyohi Town Site Company, *Constitution* (Minneapolis, 1856). The Minnesota Historical Society owns a copy of this booklet.

<sup>4</sup> Manuscript sketch of Minnesota, Whitefield Papers.

time to contribute articles to the *Minnesotian*, a St. Paul newspaper. In order to make known the beauties of the future North Star State and perhaps thus to encourage interest in the Kandiyohi Town Site Company Whitefield published in the May 30, 1857, number of Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper an account of a trip he made from St. Anthony to Lake Minnetonka. Although this contribution is unsigned, there is not the slightest doubt that it came from Whitefield's pen. In the first place, the prose style is that of the artist. Indeed, some of the language and descriptions parallel almost exactly selections in Whitefield's manuscripts owned by the Minnesota Historical Society. In the second place—and this is most significant—no one familiar with Whitefield's technique can doubt for a moment that the sketches reproduced with the article are his. To seal the proof, three of the seven illustrations carry the legend, "From nature, by E. Whitefield." Four of his pictures are reproduced herewith.

Whitefield's great ambition was to make drawings "of the more important, or historically interesting, cities and towns of the United States and Canada." During his later years, he devoted the major portion of his time to realizing this purpose. A volume, first published in 1879, depicting historic homes in Massachusetts won him national recognition. In 1882 Whitefield published a similar volume covering Rhode Island and Connecticut; in 1886, he brought out his book dealing with historic scenes and houses of Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont; and in 1889, a book of his sketches compared Boston, England, with Boston, Massachusetts. In 1892, came a new edition of his first book.<sup>5</sup> Although Whitefield had been away from Minnesota for many years, in the early 1890's he still held the state in affectionate regard, for there his children had established homes.

Whitefield's artistic skill, literary style, and love for Minnesota are all present in the little article which he wrote and illustrated for Leslie's pictorial magazine. It is a pleasantly informal recital of an adventure of an emigrant artist with a love not only of beauty, but also of truth. Whitefield's on-the-spot drawings make his report a real territorial daguerreotype.

<sup>5</sup> The Minnesota Historical Society has in its library editions of Whitefield's *Homes of Our Forefathers* published at Boston in 1880 and 1892.

[From *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 3:400-401 (May 30, 1857).]

### A TRIP FROM ST. ANTHONY TO LAKE MINNETONKA, AND SHAKOPEE LAKES, MINNESOTA TERRITORY

ON A FINE DAY last summer our artist correspondent, in company with a friend, set out from St. Anthony to explore the shores of Minnetonka Lake, which lies about twelve miles west of the Mississippi River. The road for some miles lay across the prairie, skirted here and there with oak groves, and he ambled along right merrily, every now and then passing a corn-field or a "claim shanty."

TWO VIEWS OF THE PRAIRIES. A stranger visiting the West at a favorable season, when the prairies are covered with tall luxuriant grass, thickly mingled with the wild flowers of the land, scenting the air with their exhilarating perfume, and interspersed with occasional farm-houses, rising here and there on some finely cultivated portion, that has been redeemed from its wild state to one almost equalling in richness the beauties of Eden, he would readily declare it the most attractive portion of the country he had ever beheld, and would extol it to the skies; while, on the other hand, were he to cross them for the first time in the winter season, when as far as the eye can extend nature presents but the same dreary waste, covered with the dead coarse grass, and even perhaps with snow, but broken in upon by an occasional farm-house, that standing alone and isolated amid such a vast desolation, but makes the scenery more desolate still, which with the cold piercing prairie wind sweeping in all its noted bitterness across the vast waste, he would at once conclude that the West was not the land for him, and would return with the firm conviction that he had seen quite enough of it to satisfy the most inquiring mind. Such are our western prairies to the first beholder. In summer nothing could be more pleasing and attractive, and in winter nothing more indifferent and repulsive; and therefore one must have seen the West, in all its phases, ere he strives to judge of its merits. Deceived in general by the more flattering descriptions, it is no wonder what delusive expectations are entertained by the majority of emigrants going West, many of whom seem to expect to find a land on which they have but to set themselves down, and

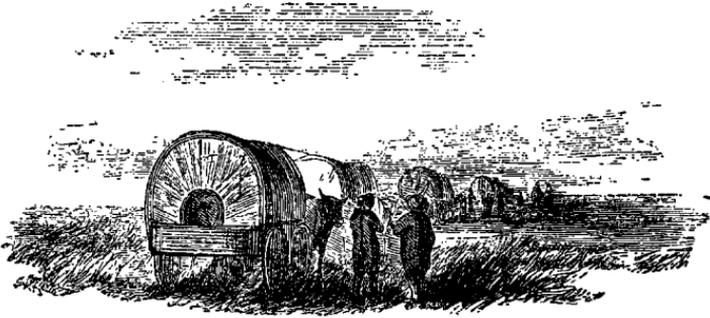
behold a colossal fortune rears itself around them, with scarcely an effort on their part to even set the ball in motion; but finding, to their mortification, they have nearly as many difficulties with which to encounter in settling on our wild prairie lands, as in clearing up a farm of timber, and at first they are somewhat discouraged; though, when once fairly initiated into the mysteries of western life, they soon prefer it by far to the eastern country.



A CLAIM SHANTY

OPENING UP A HOME. If a settler goes West, the first thing he does is to select a piece of land the most eligible to be had, and he then proceeds to erect what is termed a "claim shanty," the rudest of dwellings, but not necessarily always uncomfortable. Our beautiful picture representing this phase of frontier life will give a more vivid idea of what we wish to impress upon our readers than would columns of description, for it was drawn from life, and stands upon our illustrated pages just as it did a few months since upon the rich prairies of Minnesota. As a general rule "the settler" from New England does not at first bring out his family. If he is a very poor man he comes out alone and selects his claim, tells his neighbors of his limited means, and that he has left a wife and children unpro-

vided for in their distant home. This creates for him sympathy among his neighbors, and he is assisted in the erection of a shanty, which being built he next files at the land office his declaration of intention to settle on the land, his rude house serving as a notice that the place has already an owner. Having accomplished this much, if he is a good mechanic he finds work without difficulty and at fair



EMIGRANT TRAIN CROSSING THE PRAIRIES

prices, in the neighborhood, thus providing means to support his dependent family, and at the same time keeping up a correspondence with his neighbors in the vicinity of "his claim." In a short time, with the work of his own hands he earns the means of removing his family to the "West." Again the neighbors rally around him; a day is appointed when they meet and assist him in putting up the frame of a log cabin. Improvements are thus completed which fulfil the requirements of the law, and the foundation of a comfortable home for the most independent of persons, the American farmer, is complete.

**SYMPATHY FOR RESIDENTS.** We hear much of the "border warfare" which is constantly taking place in Kansas, and of the bloody rivalries existing among the settlers, regarding land claims; but these things are exceptions, not the rule of western life. By the very nature of things there is a community of interests among the inhabitants of a new country. None can claim exclusive privileges on the score of long residence, great wealth, or superior social position. The very fact that they find themselves where they are indicates enterprise, and all start on the same footing; hence it is that the law of

custom is more protective than even the statute laws of older settled communities, and we question if the claim of a settler is ever "jumped" (taken by another), when the neighbors know the first claimant to be honest, and serious in his determination of becoming a settler. The idea prevails of giving all a fair chance, and then to rapidly build roads, open farms, create towns, and in the shortest possible time strip nature of her wilderness look, and make happy, comfortable homes. And this is done with a rapidity that makes fairy tales laggard in invention, for in the West school-houses, churches, communities—nay, cities spring almost literally in a day, and families that a few years previously were toiling for a pitiful subsistence in the crowded Atlantic towns, find themselves in their new homes, not only possessed of the comforts of life, but almost, unexpectedly to themselves, enjoying the luxuries and refinements of the most happy civilization.

**MINNESOTA AND HER LAKES.** The State of Minnesota claims more properly to be the mother of lakes than Michigan, for her interior is spotted full of those silvery basins, all beautiful, yet never so large as to assume an overwhelming importance in the landscape. In a short time, therefore, our correspondent and friend reached the shores of Lake Calhoun, a pretty sheet of water about one mile in length, and a little more than one half in width. Its waters were as clear as crystal, and the shores, though not very bold, were yet very pleasing. Continuing in a western direction, he came to another pretty sheet of water, known as Cedar Lake, decidedly more picturesque, but less celebrated. The road now led our traveller through scrub oak openings, hazel and poplar bushes, which made the travelling anything but pleasant. Gradually, the trees increased in size, and finally the "Big Woods" were reached. This forest, as it really deserves to be called, for timber is scarce on the western prairies, reaches from the Minnesota river on the South to the Sauk river on the North, and extends East and West between thirty and forty miles. Here we find oak, elm, black walnut, sugar maple and poplar, with an occasional specimen of the hickory and other trees. Numerous lakes are found in its shady recesses, one of the largest of which is Minnetonka; as it extends in length some sixteen or seventeen

miles, its shores widening and narrowing into beautiful bays, and its bosom dotted over with emerald islands that seem to float upon its surface. The water was very clear, the bottom of the lake being everywhere visible. Nothing could be more attractive than the finny tribes as they were seen glancing in the sunlight, sometimes breaking the waves and surface of the water with a spray of diamond jets, or furrowing it with molten silver.



CATCHING A PICKEREL IN LAKE MINNETONKA

PISCATORIAL ADVENTURES. Near this lake was the town of Excelsior, a place decided upon as eligible to pass the night. A "hotel," so called, was speedily reached, and upon inquiry it was found that a good boat was at command, together with very respectable fishing tackle. These were temptations for our correspondent to try his fortune as a disciple of Isaac Walton. It was but a few moments' labor to pull "across the bay" and "cast a line." For a long time there seemed no hope of success, when our friend bethought of going ashore, and casting his bait from behind a large tree that now sent its long shade towards the east. No sooner resolved upon than accomplished, and the reward speedily followed. An enormous pickerel, weighing at least fifteen pounds, that had been suspicious of the boat, now boldly seized the bait, as it seemed to have no unusual associations, and was with but little difficulty landed safely on the shore. Another and still another followed, when, thinking that a supper had been fairly earned, our correspondent again took to his "dug-out," but the



THE MINNESOTA VALLEY AND THE BLOOMINGTON FERRY

while kept his tempting bait in the water. The shades of the coming evening, or some other cause, made our "sharks of the fresh water" less suspicious, for one seized the "running line" so readily that he nearly jerked the fisherman overboard, and upon being secured was found even finer in size and fatness to any of his predecessors. This was glory enough for one afternoon, and displayed to the most unbelieving the piscatorial wealth of Lake Minnetonka. After a refreshing supper, a stroll around the embryo town was indulged in, and great admiration was called forth on the number of building sites which commanded enchanting views of the lake. Fatigue was finally added to gratified curiosity, and a comfortable night's repose was had under the hospitable roof of "The Excelsior," the landlord of which, unlike his prototype of Arkansas, kept something beside tavern, for he kept something to eat, something to drink, and something to sleep upon, things not always found in the most sumptuous hotels in new countries.<sup>6</sup>

In the morning bright and early, after partaking of some of the captured fish, our correspondent resumed his journey through the tangled branches and waste grass, continually coming upon pretty lakes, from which the mists were rising like spirits dissolving away in the warming splendor of the sun. About ten o'clock the open country was again reached, and finally our traveller descended into the valley of the Minnesota river, one of the most picturesque streams in the heart of the continent. At Closka [*Chaska*], a small village on the banks, our correspondent crossed what he believed to be the only turbid river in Minnesota, and five miles farther on entered Shakopee, a very thriving place, situated on the South side of the Minnesota. Near by is the beautiful lake of Shakopee, from which the village takes its name. Our correspondent, struck with its beauty, drew it for our pages, just as it appeared when it first broke upon his enraptured vision.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Excelsior was designated as a town by the Hennepin County board of county commissioners on May 10, 1858. The Excelsior House was built by George Galpin in 1854. See *History of Hennepin County and the City of Minneapolis*, 1:249, 251 (Minneapolis, 1881). For an excellent account of pioneering experiences at Excelsior, see Hezekiah Brake, *On Two Continents*, 61-119 (Topeka, Kansas, 1896).

<sup>7</sup> Shakopee, which was founded by Thomas A. Holmes in 1851 and platted as a

A SIOUX ENCAMPMENT. Upon the banks of Lake Shakopee was the Sioux encampment, which also forms one of our illustrations.<sup>8</sup> At the time its lodges were filled with warriors, who looked sternly upon the intrusive step of the white man, but scorned to express any curiosity as to what he was doing, while making his magic lines upon the fair page of paper. Our drawing gives a clear idea of the peculiar manner this tribe form their wigwam of skins. On a moment's notice they can be struck, and hurried away on the backs of horses, and with equal rapidity can be erected for a permanent or temporary purpose. Keeping on to Bloomington ferry our correspondent crossed the river again, and stopping at Gibson's, partook of a capital dinner, for which a moderate price was charged, and in two hours afterwards was again in St. Anthony, having accomplished a short but exceedingly pleasant trip.<sup>9</sup>

village in 1854, was named for a Sioux chief. There seems to be some confusion in this portion of the narrative, for there is no Lake Shakopee in the vicinity, and Whitefield does not picture such a lake. See Warren Upham, *Minnesota Geographic Names*, 510 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 17). The writer's description of the Minnesota River as a "turbid river" is of interest, since many early explorers and pioneers translated the Sioux name from which the state takes its name as "turbid water." See William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1:455 (St. Paul, 1921).

<sup>8</sup> Whitefield captions his illustration "A Sioux Encampment, on the Banks of the Minnesota River." The houses of the white settlement are visible in the background.

<sup>9</sup> The ferry across the Minnesota River at Bloomington was established in 1852 by Joseph Dean and William Chambers; in 1856 it was being operated by Chambers and A. C. and S. A. Goodrich. Whitefield probably stopped for dinner at the home of R. B. Gibson. The first hotel in the vicinity is said to have been built by a man named Baillif in 1854; a few years later Albee Smith operated a hotel and store at the ferry landing. See *History of Hennepin County*, 1:225. Whitefield concludes his article with an account, which has been here omitted, of the Spirit Lake "Indian Massacre in Minnesota Territory."



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