

The James F. Bell Collection

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HISTORIANS LIVING IN MINNESOTA, and in the Twin Cities in particular, with a wealth of public libraries and repositories of books and manuscripts available for their use, are apt to overlook the important resources offered by private collections.¹ One such outstanding collection is that of Mr. James F. Bell of Minneapolis, which is rich in materials relating to this region.

Mr. Bell, well-known to Minnesotans as the former chairman of the board of directors of General Mills, Inc., and as a regent of the University of Minnesota, has built his collection upon the theme of exploration, particularly the penetration of the continent through what is now Canada. Although Minnesota history is not his primary concern, he has many items which deal with discovery, exploration, and settlement in this state. Moreover, the Bell collection is rich in materials relating to the early history of the present Prairie Provinces of Canada — useful sources for the historian interested in regional backgrounds. Understanding of our own past, which is linked in many ways to the story of this region to the north, is often enhanced when we cease to consider the forty-ninth parallel as a historian's boundary as well as a political border.

Of the printed works in the Bell collection, about twenty are directly concerned with Minnesota. Several are rare, and nearly all are among the important sources for the early history of the state. Included are such items as Beltrami's *Pilgrimage*, the narrative of the Long expedition by Keating, C. C. Andrews' *Minnesota and Dacotah*, Featherstonehaugh's *Voyage up the Minnay Sotor*, and Edwin James' edition of the *Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner*, as well as several immigrant guides. Perhaps the most unusual of the printed works is the Reverend Peter Jacobs' *Journal from Rice Lake to the Hudson's Bay Territory in 1852*. Jacobs was a Chippewa who had been converted to Christianity and who served as a native missionary to his people. This small volume contains his account of a journey by canoe from upper Canada to Norway House, following the route formerly used by the voyageurs of the North West Company through the border lake region of Minnesota and Canada. It contains careful comments and descriptions of the tech-

¹ This article is based in part upon the writer's previous review of Mr. Bell's collection, published in the *Beaver* for December, 1948. Mr. Clifford P. Wilson, editor of the *Beaver*, has courteously given his permission for the use of materials common to both articles.

niques, the adventures, and the misadventures of such a trip, all nicely chinked in with pious saws and ejaculations.

In addition to the printed works, the Bell collection contains a number of valuable manuscripts. Although none deals directly with Minnesota, they are of importance here because they relate to the Hudson's Bay Company and the vast empire it once held in western Canada and the upper Middle West of the United States. Among these papers is an early copy of the charter of the company, probably contemporary with the original, and a series of documents which illustrate the financial troubles and triumphs of that organization in its infancy. More important, however — and perhaps the most significant item in the collection for the American historian — is a manuscript from the Selkirk colony, the germ of Manitoba. Early in the nineteenth century, the Earl of Selkirk, a major stockholder in the Hudson's Bay Company, established the colony at the junction of the Red and Assiniboine rivers, where Winnipeg now stands. It was on land subgranted to him by the company for the purpose of a settlement — a tract that embraced much of present Manitoba and parts of North Dakota and Minnesota.²

Although they had granted land to Selkirk, apparently the company's officers were soon gnawed by sharp anxieties and suspicions. The Red River, which flowed by the new settlement, was a main artery of the fur trade, and there was danger that the poverty-stricken colonists would be tempted to tap illegally this rich traffic, reserved by charter to the company. The manuscript in the Bell collection is partly the product of these misgivings, for it is an "Abstract" of the conditions upon which the land had been granted to Selkirk and of "several of the principal orders and regulations made for the observance of the settlers now and hereafter to be settled thereon." The colonists were expected to read the "Abstract" and to signify their knowledge and acceptance of its contents by signing it. Undated, but undoubtedly issued in 1821 or 1822, the document was apparently never legally in force, but it is valuable for its reflection of the company's policy and its picture of conditions in the colony.³

The manuscript is divided into eight numbered sections, of which five are devoted to trade. The writers of the "Abstract" apparently did not believe in beating about the bush, for they indicated their purpose in the first two articles. The initial one provides that the Earl of Selkirk and those holding his land are not "at any time or times hereafter in or by

² The forty-ninth parallel had not yet been established as the boundary between the United States and western British North America.

³ The date may be fixed within the limits noted because the "Abstract" was signed on behalf of the Buffalo Wool Company, an organization which came into existence in 1821 and failed the following year.

any direct or indirect mediate or immediate manner ways or means [to] infringe or violate or set about or attempt to infringe or violate or aid assist or abet or set about to aid assist or abet or supply with Spirituous Liquors trading goods Provisions or other necessaries any person or persons whomsoever Corporate or incorporate or any Prince Power Potentate or state whatsoever who shall infringe or violate or who shall set about or attempt to infringe or violate the exclusive rights powers privileges and immunities of Commerce Trade and Traffick or all or any other of the exclusive rights powers privileges and immunities of or belonging or in any wise appertaining to or held used or enjoyed by the said Governor and Company and their Successors." Even a casual reading of the above quotation would indicate that the authors of the "Abstract" were trained in law, and that they had a high regard for the ability of their fellow men to find devious paths around, through, and under regulations and orders.

The second article applies the general prohibition contained in the first to the most important specific case by forbidding the settlers to take any part in the peltry traffic without a license. These two sections of the "Abstract," if observed, would have effectively barred the path to poaching on the charter trade reserves of the company.

The next three divisions also relate to trade, though they relent from the stern prohibitory tone of the first two, allowing Selkirk and his followers to export any produce of the country, except furs, and to import "into the said land and Territories . . . any Goods Wares Merchandises or commodities of any kind nature or description whatsoever as well manufactured as unmanufactured for the use convenience and consumption of the Persons being or residing within the limits of the lands thereby granted." Such trade, however, was to be carried on through Port Nelson, and the goods involved were to be conveyed in the company's ships, lodged in its warehouses, and subjected to its import and export duties.

The last three sections deal with non-commercial internal affairs of the colony. The sixth orders that each settler "shall employ himself Cattle Carts and Carriages" in making and repairing roads "not exceeding at and after the rate of six days in each year." The colonist is reminded of his duty to his church in the seventh article, which requires him to devote six days a year, three in the spring and three in the fall, "for the benefit and support of [his] clergyman." The eighth and final section commands the settlers to "use their endeavors for the defense and internal peace of their settlement . . . according to the laws and regulations now in force in Canada and Nova Scotia."

The body of the "Abstract" is followed by the signatures, or marks, of forty-eight colonists, providing a list of names rich in historic implications. For example, it indicates the composite nature of the tiny settlement which was peopled in several waves of immigration. First came the original Selkirk settlers, a Scottish and Irish group represented among the signers by such names as Bannerman, Matheson, Sutherland, and Corcoran. These people were followed by the de Meurons, a body of professional soldiers, largely Germans and Piedmontese, brought in by the Hudson's Bay Company to reconquer the settlement after it had been forcibly seized by the rival North West Company. Such signers as Kralic, Bendowitz, Quiluby, Wassloisky, and Lassota represent this military group. Next came a group of Swiss, recruited in Europe by one of Selkirk's agents. In addition to these representatives of group migrations, individuals of various nationalities who had drifted into the settlement signed the "Abstract." We find, especially, the ubiquitous French-Canadian, represented by Maquet, Lalonde, and Jollicoeur among others. Here, then, was a veritable melting pot of nationalities on the prairies of British North America.⁴

These signatures, however, have more than Manitoban significance; they are directly related to Minnesota, for some of the signers were almost certainly members of the first group of permanent agricultural settlers in this state. The de Meurons, from the outset, were unhappy in their new homes. In 1826, their discontent rose with the waters of the Red River, which flooded them out of their homes and washed away any remaining desire to stay in Selkirk's colony. They departed, apparently almost to a man, and made their way south to Fort Snelling, where some remained as squatters on the military reservation. Others subsequently relocated on the present site of St. Paul.⁵ Since the de Meurons left the Red River settlement almost *en masse*, it is logical to conclude that at least some of the twenty-five who signed the "Abstract" were among those who went to Minnesota.⁶ Thus, this document is of value for state as well as regional history, as another of the many connecting links between the backgrounds of the United States and Canada.

The items discussed here are only a few of the many valuable sources

⁴ George Bryce, in his article on "The Old Settlers of Red River," in the *Transactions of the Manitoba Historical and Scientific Society*, 19:4 (1885), identifies twenty-five of the signers as de Meurons or Swiss.

⁵ Alexander Begg, *History of the North-West*, 1:161-206, 223-237 (Toronto, 1895); William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1:213-217 (St. Paul, 1921).

⁶ There is negative evidence to support this statement. Most of the de Meurons who signed the "Abstract" were no longer in the colony when the first census was taken in 1831. The Minnesota Historical Society has a film copy of this census. A complete list of permanent land grants made during the 1830's includes the names of only a few de Meurons. Archer Martin, *The Hudson's Bay Company Land Tenures*, 135-162 (London, 1898).

for Northwest history in Mr. Bell's collection. It contains also much significant material on the early history of eastern Canada, including what is probably the finest set of the *Jesuit Relations* in private hands. Although such works can only be mentioned, it is to be hoped that this outline will indicate to the historian the value of the Bell collection and, by example, of similar private collections.



How THE MINNESOTA OF 1850 impressed a visitor from Pennsylvania who later chose to settle in the new territory is revealed in a letter written in the fall of that year by John C. Laird. With his brothers he founded the Winona lumber firm later known as the Laird, Norton Company. The correspondence and other papers of that vast business enterprise, comprising two hundred volumes and fifty boxes of letters, have now been presented to the Minnesota Historical Society. Here is an extract from Laird's century-old letter, which was printed in full in this magazine in June, 1931:

"Got to St. Pauls this morning. The great Depot of Minnesota. It contains 6 churches, about 25 stores, 6 taverns, groceries and gambling houses too numerous to mention, about 50 Lawyers, and Land agents, 250 gamblers and about 15 or 1800 inhabitation. The houses are principally frame painted white. There are some large commodious brick dwellings. Speculation runs mighty high. Lots sell very high. Mechanicks wages from \$1.50 to 3.00 per day, boarding from 3 to 6\$ per week. Produce and provisions are very high as it must all be brought from down the river. . . . Its my opinion that it [*St. Paul*] will not always remain the seat of government as it is too much to one side of the territory but it is a great place now. Every boat that lands spills out from 40 to 75 passengers. . . . We had seen as much of St. Pauls by noon as we wanted. . . . hired a hack this afternoon to go to the falls of St. Anthony.

". . . The water power here is immense. There is one large saw mill. . . . They have but 4 saws now which cut 25000 ft. every 24 hours and they could hardly sup[p]ly the town of St. Anthony this summer with building lumber. . . . Owing to the great water power here it will always be a place of importance."



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