

# *Touring with a Timber Agent*

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IN THE FIRST WEEK of March, 1890, J. S. Wallace, special timber agent of the United States government, walked along the streets of Duluth making preparations for a six-weeks' trip through the forests of the border country. Like other agents of the department of the interior employed to protect the timberlands of northern Minnesota, he was instructed to cross its snowy expanses at least once a year on winter visits to logging camps and settlements scattered along the border. By snowshoe, horse, and toboggan, the timber agents made their way along the trails, talking to the people they met and making notes on what they saw for their reports to headquarters in Washington.

For centuries these northern forests had belonged to no one and to everyone—to the Indian, the half-breed, and the white, to the hunter, the trapper, the fisherman, and to the squatter who built his shack beyond the limits of private property. But by the 1890's a new age had come. From the North, the South, the East, and the West, people closed in on the lands still in public ownership. Lumbermen who had been thinning the timber in the valleys of the Mississippi, the St. Croix, the Eau Claire, and the Muskegon moved into forests that had previously provided only cover for game and subsistence for a few inhabitants. Speculators from many states of the Union, their sights on timber and iron, bought thousands of acres, holding them for the inevitable rise in land values. And farmers, drifting back from the Dakotas, Montana, and Nebraska, staked out their homesteads on Minnesota's last frontier.

Since northern Minnesota land was becoming valuable, owners made plans to protect their property against those who would occupy it or take its resources. Private owners hired men to watch their land and report trespasses. The federal government, still the largest land holder in the area, extended to northern Minnesota a system of land protection that had been used earlier in other parts of the nation. Agents operating out of centers like Duluth and St. Paul went into the forests to detect violations of the laws and report their findings to the department of the interior. The department then charged offenders who could be apprehended for any timber cut, and seized it or prosecuted trespassers under civil and criminal law. Neither the private owners nor the government

were able to halt trespassing, but their efforts did serve as a warning that a trespasser might be caught and could be punished.<sup>1</sup>

Although most of the letters of agents reporting from the field covered only the routine business of timber trespass, a few of these hardy government employees transcended the requirements of the official report and wrote of the country over which they traveled and of the people they met. On April 21, 1890, when he returned from his annual trip into the Rainy River country, Wallace sent to his superiors in Washington a letter replete with such information. With hundreds of similar documents, it is now preserved in the National Archives in Washington.<sup>2</sup>

Wallace relates that he and his woodsmen left Duluth on March 12, went first to Tower, traveled west sixty-five miles to Loper and Rumery's logging camp, then north to the Rainy River, westward along the border until they came to the Roseau River, and finally back to their headquarters in Duluth. The men had supplied themselves with snowshoes and toboggans for the expedition across snow and ice in "frightfully cold weather." "To give you some idea," wrote Wallace, "of what it is like to travel in that country through the woods and carry your own provisions, camp outfit, blankets &c. at this season of the year—Had we left New York for San Francisco, and San Francisco for New York, we would have been back to New York in the same time we were going from Loper & Rumery's camp to Rainy River—a distance of ninety miles."

The snow was three feet deep when the travelers left Tower, and when they reached the mouth of the Big Fork, their progress was further impeded by a snow storm which obscured all tracks of teams on the ice. By the time the men reached the mouth of the Rainy, they were so "used up" that they could not go off the trail to investigate a small trespass reported to them.

At the mouth of the Rainy River, Wallace hired a dog train to make the seventy-five mile trip to Roseau. Of it he wrote as follows: "Across the ice on the lake to War[road] River we had a frightful trip. The distance is forty miles and we had to make it in a day. When we got across we were blind. The reflection of the sun on the ice was something terrible to the face and eyes. From War River to the Roseau River we had to travel by night, the sun making the snow so soft that it was impossible to get along it at all in day time."

By the time the men returned to their starting point, they had walked

<sup>1</sup> For a fuller treatment of this subject, see the writer's article on "Federal Protection of Public Timber in the Upper Great Lakes States," in *Agricultural History*, 23: 135-139 (April, 1949).

<sup>2</sup> Parts of the letter, which is in the natural resources division, are quoted herein.

between three and four hundred miles, all of it on ice and snow. "The Department," commented Wallace, "will readily see that my position is no sinecure." This opinion of the assignment was seconded by R. W. de Lambert, an agent who wrote in the next year: "I most respectfully call your attention to the fact that the 'promotion' of a Special Agent, for efficiency, to the Rainy Lake River Post . . . is almost equivalent to rewording that beautiful and familiar passage of Scripture . . . to make it read 'Then shall the King say to him on His right hand, Well done, good and faithful servant: go ye into outer darkness too cold for the devil and his angels!'"<sup>3</sup>

One of the most tedious duties of the timber agent was the disposal of logs cut by trespassers. Those seized in winter and early spring were still in the woods, at the landings, and on the ice. If the agent was not able to sell the logs at the government price, they rotted where they lay, useless to trespasser and government alike. On the 1890 trip Wallace made an effort to save some logs that he had seized the year before. They "are in a Gulch and cannot be got out without building a small dam at its mouth, or until the Big Fork will rise sufficiently that the backwater into the Gulch will float them," wrote Wallace. Continuing his explanation of the obstacles encountered, he remarked, "They cannot be hauled out. The construction of a dam at the mouth of the Gulch will cost about one hundred dollars. The logs are worth several hundred dollars. I arranged with Mr. David Reedy, an American living at the mouth of the Big Fork, to watch the spring floods and try and get them out."

Occasionally when depredations were discovered, timber agents put trespassers on their honor. Wallace went to see a man named Ward who had been cutting logs on the Red Lake Indian Reservation: "He said everybody cut logs when they wanted them and he thought the Government did not care, but as soon as he learned that it was wrong, he quit. He told me what he had done and I am convinced that he is honest; there was only four or five thousand feet of them—too small a matter to spend a couple of weeks getting them out on the ice—so I told him soon as the River opened to put them in and dispose of them himself and send the money to the Receiver at Duluth. I will vouch for him that he carries this out honestly."

In the course of his travels, Wallace encountered in the Rainy River area many "drouth stricken Dakota Swedes" who had moved eastward across the Red River into the more luxuriant fields of western and northern Minnesota. One indication of this settlers' retreat, which be-

<sup>3</sup> R. W. de Lambert, special agent at Brainerd, to the commissioner of the General Land Office, May 15, 1891, in natural resources division, National Archives.

came common at the close of the nineteenth century, is the number of children recorded in the Minnesota census for the 1890's with Dakota given as their birthplace. In Roseau County alone, there are listed in the 1895 census schedules 375 children who were born in the Dakotas.<sup>4</sup>

In the Warroad River neighborhood Wallace found no fewer than three hundred of these eastward-moving pioneers, who had settled in this precarious wilderness after meeting with failure in Dakota. Their poverty and need of wood induced the agent to temper justice with mercy: "All these settlers have been pilfering a little timber, more or less," he reported. "Last year when I was there they had a little (Jack-legged) saw mill that would cut 800 to 1000 feet per day. I went down and watched them awhile but as they were not doing any particular harm I made no report of it; nor are they doing any harm now, they are all industrious hard working people and very poor. I could not make up my mind that in getting a few boards to make them a table, a door and a bed-stead, and a floor for their log cabins, that they were doing any harm; nor would I have mentioned the matter now had it not been that there has been some 'smart Alecs' got among them, who, when they are not selling whiskey to the Indians, go cut, some of them as much as six or seven hundred logs, take them to this little mill and get them sawed, and then sell the boards to stores. . . . To stop this thing and make every fellow do his own stealing, I left a note with the mill owner, a man named John Norquist, a good honest Swede."<sup>5</sup>

Since Wallace was a representative of the federal government traveling through a part of the country seldom frequented by officials, the settlers asked many favors of him. Those near the border between Buffalo Point and Pine Creek asked that the brush be cut between the boundary markers put up in 1874. Wallace promised he would try to get the work done for them. "It should be done before the flies get bad," he urged in his report, "for in a couple of months from now no one but a drouth stricken Dakota Swede can live there. I will go up and get two or three men and cut this out if the government will sanction it. The distribution of a few hundred dollars among these farmers would be a God-send to them."

When Wallace returned from his inspection of the Rainy River district, he suggested to the government reasons why the policy of timber trespass had failed to stop depredations. Among the considerations were the

<sup>4</sup> These manuscript census records are owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>5</sup> The note, a copy of which was enclosed with Wallace's letter, requested the mill owner to notify the agent whenever a man brought in logs that were to be sold rather than used on his claim, and reminded him that those who cut timber on government land subjected themselves to both civil and criminal prosecution.

poor quality of agents who entered the service and the small number responsible for the large area. "I can't afford to work for \$1300," Wallace wrote, "nor can you get intelligent men who understand this work for \$1300 per year. The Canadian Government keeps three timber men on their side. Mr. Margeax at Rat Portage to whom they give \$3000 per year. A Mr. Duncan Fraser at Fort Francis [*Frances*], 180 miles east of Rat Portage whom they pay \$1500 per year. And another man whom they pay \$1200. The District on our side is too large to be guarded by one man. Stop and think of the great number of saw mills, the towns, the steam boats, fishing interests, &c. and the enormous amount of timber these mills use. 85,000,000 feet in one season! More than is cut about the whole head of Lake Superior, including Thompson [*Thomson*] and Cloquet." No wonder Wallace continued, "the management of this front by our Government is ridiculously silly." He pointed out that "These depredations are equal, if not greater in summer than they are in winter," and he concluded that "until the Government adopts some different and intelligent mode of looking after this vast and valuable section, these depredations will continue. Our Government is the laughing stock of the Canadian people for their indifference to this section."

Wallace's letter is only one example of the many documents relating to Minnesota to be found in the natural resources and other divisions of the National Archives. From this and similar reports a revealing picture may be drawn of conditions on Minnesota's last frontier at the turn of the century.



Peter Gideon, whose Lake Minnetonka orchards have long been familiar to Minnesotans, "was the only man in America to pay attention to apple breeding before 1860," according to U. P. Hedrick's recently published *History of Horticulture in America to 1860* (New York, 1950. 551 p.). His efforts to develop a hardy apple for Minnesota by crossing the "Siberian crab with the common apple" are described by Mr. Hedrick, who reports that "out of thousands of seedlings several fruits of promise were obtained." Among them was the Wealthy, which, writes Mr. Hedrick, "is one of the best varieties in the apple flora of the country, and is the only really good variety that can be grown in the northern part of the central states." A few other Minnesotans who pioneered in the field of horticulture are mentioned by Mr. Hedrick in a chapter on "The North-Central States." They include Wyman Elliot, a Minneapolis market gardener; John S. Harris of La Crescent, who helped organize the Minnesota State Horticultural Society; and Orville M. Lord of Winona, who specialized in plum culture.



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