

# *The Benedictines in Frontier Minnesota*

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IN THE 1850's, when the first Benedictine pioneers moved into the upper Midwest, Minnesota was developing rapidly.<sup>1</sup> Youthful enthusiasm and boundless boastfulness about the region were typical of the time. The land of rivers and lakes, of prairie and timber stretches, was being converted from a primeval wilderness into a collection of thriving communities, such as Stillwater, St. Paul, and St. Anthony, and of settled areas, like the Minnesota and Sauk River valleys.

On March 3, 1849, President Polk proclaimed Minnesota a territory. Two years later the timely Indian treaties with the Sioux threw open for settlement the land west of the Mississippi River. Immigrants began to move in great numbers into the area thus made available for white penetration in the vicinity of the upper expanse of the Father of Waters. At the same time trade increased over the trails between the Canadian Red River settlements and Pembina on the north and St. Paul on the south.<sup>2</sup> Since one of these routes traversed much of the present Stearns County, the early importance of Sauk Rapids at the head of navigation on the Mississippi increased, and this town in 1850 held a key position in the trade and expansion of central Minnesota.

Early enthusiasts like James M. Goodhue, the spirited editor of the *Minnesota Pioneer*, and Father Francis Pierz, organizer in 1853 of the first Catholic parish in Sauk Rapids, published glorified reports of the exceptional opportunities which life in the early upper Midwest offered for immigrants. Goodhue had tremendous faith in the future destiny of Minnesota. In his colorful editorials in the *Pioneer*, he predicted for the territory "a rapidity of growth unparalleled even in the annals of Western progress," and he promised future settlers that "Here they will find, an unqualifiedly healthy climate, fertile and well drained lands, and upon the Mississippi the best market for mechanical products in the Union. With such a population will come not only the arts but science and morals. Our Falls of St. Anthony with hundreds of water powers upon other streams will be turned to manufacturing purposes. Thrifty towns

<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented before a meeting of the Stearns County Historical Society at St. John's University, Collegeville, on June 11, 1950. *Ed.*

<sup>2</sup> For a description and a map of "The Red River Trails" by Grace Lee Nute, see *Minnesota History*, 6:279-282 (September, 1925).

will arise upon them. Our undulating prairies will rejoice under the hand of husbandry; these hills and valleys will be jocund with the voices of school children, and churches shall mark the moral progress of our land."<sup>3</sup>

Father Pierz in particular did much to entice immigrants, especially those of German extraction, into the Sauk River Valley. During 1854 and 1855 he published articles which extolled homestead possibilities in his mission field. He pictured the area as a most favorable place for settlement. Concerning the nature of the soil, the missionary wrote glowingly: "More than half of the open meadows in Minnesota have an excellent black loamy soil, with a splendid mixture of sand and clay and a rich top-soil formed by the plant decay of thousands of years, so that it would be hard to find anywhere in the world a soil better suited . . . to yield a rich return for the farmer's toil." A good water supply also was available, Pierz observed. "I can assure my readers that not half the rivers and hardly a third of the lakes of this beautiful region are indicated in the maps. Moreover, in many places one will find springs of ice-cold drinking water, and if here and there a farmer does not happen to have such a supply at his door, he can in a few days and at little cost dig a splendid well at a depth of from eight to twelve feet. Hence immigrants need not fear any lack of water." The missionary especially aimed to blot from the minds of prospective settlers all notions about the frigid character of Minnesota winters. He wrote enthusiastically: "During the three years that I have spent here I have not seen more than one foot of snow, and with the exception of some fifteen or twenty cold days the weather was generally so pleasant that one could work outdoors. During the past winter I have seen German settlers at work in their shirt-sleeves, cutting their wood for building and fencing." Furthermore, the "summer in Minnesota," Pierz declared, "is more favorable for human health and for the growth of farm and garden products than in any other country in the world."<sup>4</sup>

The missionary made a special effort to prevent German immigrants temporarily located in Indiana and Ohio from moving into the South. He had nothing but contempt for the climate below the Ohio River. Consider this statement: "In the southern States of North America the climate, the air and the health of the people are quite different. There

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Mary W. Berthel, *Horns of Thunder: The Life and Times of James M. Goodhue*, 81, 83 (St. Paul, 1948).

<sup>4</sup> These passages are quoted from an English translation of Father Pierz's "Brief Description of Minnesota Territory," in *Acta et Dicta*, 7:120-130 (October, 1935). See especially p. 121, 122, 124, 125. The missionary's activities in the Sauk River Valley are described by Sister Grace McDonald in an article on "Father Francis Pierz, Missionary," in *Minnesota History*, 10:117-119 (June, 1929).

the winter is much shorter, but it is very changeable and damp and hence injurious to health. . . . During the hot summer days a host of noxious miasmas and poisonous gases arise from the marshes and mineral-charged soil and hang like heavy fog and taint the air and the crops. Thus serious fevers, cholera and other epidemics appear and fill the hospitals with patients and the cemeteries with corpses and especially the German immigrants who are not accustomed to such air fall victims in great numbers." In contrast, wrote Pierz, central Minnesota offered many special advantages for settlement. Wild fruits grew in abundance; game, such as pheasants, elk and deer, abounded; and the prairie and meadow lands produced an immense amount of hay for cattle raising. The Indians were not a threat. As Pierz viewed the matter, the aborigines were no peril unless provoked by the whites or furnished with firewater. Ordinarily, they were quiet and peaceful. The federal government, he pointed out, had been making treaties with the various tribes for the promotion of westward settlement. His aim was to induce the Indians to embrace Christianity so that they might become good neighbors.<sup>5</sup>

The missionary invited all Germans who were living in unhealthy and disagreeable localities in the United States to settle near his missions and to take up land claims at Sauk Rapids and Belle Prairie. He held out the lure of a church which was already open at the former place. Within a year he hoped to establish a school with nuns as teachers. Furthermore, a new church was under construction west of the Mississippi for settlers living along the Sauk River. Father Pierz issued a clarion call: "Hasten then, my dear German people, those of you who have in mind to change your abode and to settle in Minnesota. Do not delay to join the stream of immigration, for the sooner you come the better will be your opportunity to choose a good place to settle. Several hundred families can still find good claims along the Sauk River and in the surrounding country no doubt several thousand families can find favorable places for settlement."<sup>6</sup>

Pierz's advertisement of the Sauk Valley country readily produced results. By 1855 the territorial legislature took action to create Stearns County with the young town of St. Cloud as the county seat. Between 1853 and 1856 John L. Wilson, one of central Minnesota's outstanding pioneers, had platted the town site and had given the town its name. He welcomed the influx of German settlers from Indiana, from the Atlantic seaboard, and from Europe, and he made it possible for them to acquire lots in his new town. Many German craftsmen and merchants settled

<sup>5</sup> Pierz, in *Acta et Dicta*, 7:125-128.

<sup>6</sup> Pierz, in *Acta et Dicta*, 7:129.

there. Anton Edelbrock, father of the second abbot of St. John's Abbey at Collegeville, opened the first store. The Rosenbergers, Balthasar and Henry, arrived during the spring of 1856. By the end of the decade there were 1,533 German settlers in Stearns County, located either in the growing town of St. Cloud or on farms in the Sauk Valley.<sup>7</sup>

In his anxiety to provide for the spiritual needs of the growing number of German immigrants in central Minnesota, Father Pierz turned to the European mission societies for financial help and additional personnel. He had suggested to Bishop Joseph Cretin, his immediate superior in the St. Paul diocese, the possibility of obtaining Benedictines to aid him. The officials of the Ludwig-Missionsverein of Munich in Bavaria, to whom Bishop Cretin applied, referred him to Abbot Boniface Wimmer of St. Vincent's Abbey near Latrobe, Pennsylvania. It was this prelate who dispatched the first band of Benedictines to Minnesota in the spring of 1856.<sup>8</sup>

What was the tradition and form of religious life which this group of monks were about to introduce into the upper Midwest? They lived according to a rule which their founder, St. Benedict of Nursia, had formulated upon the establishment of the monastery of Monte Cassino in Italy more than fourteen hundred years ago. As Professor August C. Krey of the University of Minnesota has pointed out: "The Rule of St. Benedict is a masterpiece in the art of government. . . . In its provision for work as well as prayer, in its recognition of the varying needs of illness and of health, in its adjustment to the changing seasons, and in its appreciation of human nature, the rule laid down a form of government which men could follow, whether among the heaping snows of the arctic circle or under the glaring sun of the equatorial zone, whether in southern Italy in 529 or in central Minnesota. . . . And under all these conditions the ideals remained the same, personal salvation and humanitarian service."<sup>9</sup>

Abbot Boniface placed the conduct of the Benedictine missionary enterprise in Minnesota under the direction of Father Demetrius Marogna. He was a member of the patrician family of the Counts di Marogna of Verona, Italy. He was born in 1802, and as a boy he served as a page at the court of the Archduke of Tuscany in Florence. Later his family moved into Bavaria. Having early shown an interest in the priesthood,

<sup>7</sup> William B. Mitchell, *History of Stearns County*, 1:90, 645 (Chicago, 1915); Sister Ardis Hartman, "The First German Migration into Stearns County," in *Acta et Dicta*, 7:203-210 (October, 1936).

<sup>8</sup> Alexius Hoffmann, O.S.B., "History of St. John's Abbey, University, Missions," a manuscript narrative in two volumes, in the archives of the abbey at Collegeville.

<sup>9</sup> August C. Krey, "Monte Cassino, Metten, and Minnesota," in *Minnesota History*, 8:218 (September, 1927).

he was sent by his parents to a seminary in Mainz, where he was ordained on March 30, 1826. As a priest working in the diocese of Augsburg, he became ambitious to serve the needs of German immigrants in America. In 1847 he realized his desire and departed for the United States, laboring first as a parish priest in southern Illinois. In 1852 he took the Benedictine habit at St. Vincent's Monastery, where he was assigned teaching duties and became an official of the community.<sup>10</sup>

Experience as a priest, monk, and educator for more than twenty-five years in Europe and America especially qualified Father Demetrius to undertake the religious and educational development of a frontier area. He possessed the maturity of a seasoned missionary, familiarity with Benedictine ideals, and contact with the best of the European cultural heritage. This able priest left a series of letters written in 1856 and 1857 to his superior, Abbot Boniface of St. Vincent's Abbey, which record his impressions of life in territorial Minnesota.

On April 5, 1856, Father Demetrius, accompanied by two students of theology, Bruno Riss and Cornelius Wittmann, and two lay brothers, Benno Muckenthaler and Patrick Greil, left St. Vincent's for the West. Two days later they boarded the steamboat "Paul Anderson" at Pittsburgh. Their journey down the Ohio and up the Mississippi proved to be an eventful one. With the flood tide of immigration on western waters at its height, the boat was so crowded that all five were piled into a single cabin which contained only two berths. Three of the company were forced to sleep on the floor. At Davenport, Iowa, the party nearly met with disaster when the steamboat "Minnesota Belle," which they had boarded at St. Louis, attempted to pass under the Rock Island bridge. Crossing the river at a peculiar angle, this structure was a serious obstacle to navigation in the spring, the flood period of the Mississippi. According to a report of Father Bruno, the steamer struggled for nearly an hour while trying to pass between the piers of the bridge. "Fat and pitch," he recorded, "were thrown into the furnace to raise steam pressure to the utmost."<sup>11</sup>

The "Minnesota Belle" finally effected a safe passage. The steamboat which followed in its wake, however, was not so fortunate. The boiler exploded, and in the words of Father Bruno, "its passengers were hurled into destruction. Two other steamers came up to offer assistance: they also burned, and hundreds of lives were lost." A priest awaiting the arrival of the Benedictines at Dubuque did not know the name of the

<sup>10</sup> Callistus Edie, O.S.B., "Demetrius di Marogna," in *Scriptorium*, 9:7-9 (Spring, 1949). This periodical is published by St. John's Abbey.

<sup>11</sup> Hoffmann, "St. John's Abbey," 1:9, 11; Father Demetrius to Abbot Boniface, April 22, 1856, Marogna Manuscripts, owned by St. John's Abbey.

steamer on which they had embarked at St. Louis. Receiving word of the river disasters at the Davenport bridge, he supposed members of the group had perished. The next day he mailed a newspaper account about the recent steamboat explosions to St. Vincent's. Members of the Pennsylvania community thus were led to believe that their confreres had met with violent deaths, and funeral services were held, as Father Bruno relates, "while we were slowly but cheerfully nearing our port of destination."<sup>12</sup>

On Friday evening, May 2, the rugged band reached the capital of Minnesota Territory. The next morning, Bishop Cretin welcomed them to his diocese. The Catholic church in Minnesota was in its infancy, and the Benedictines were not too late to take a large share in the burden of "growing up." They remained in St. Paul for some weeks. In the meantime two of the group, Riss and Wittmann, having completed their theological studies under the direction of Father Demetrius, were ordained to the priesthood. On May 19 Father Bruno and the two brothers proceeded by steamboat from St. Anthony to St. Cloud. Bishop Cretin personally conducted Father Demetrius and Father Cornelius by land in his coach to Sauk Rapids, where they arrived on May 20.<sup>13</sup> There they found poverty indeed, and there they met Father Pierz, who had so earnestly begged for their coming to aid him in his zealous work. He shared his log church with the travelers during the next few weeks.

Within a short time Father Demetrius and his associates decided to establish their monastic foundation on the St. Cloud side of the Mississippi. A very cogent reason for the move was the growth of German settlement in that area and the offer of the Rothkopp brothers, two Germans who had taken homesteads on the Mississippi about two miles below St. Cloud on the spot now occupied by the Catholic orphanage, to turn over their claims to the Benedictines. The site thus acquired included terraced lands which provided good protection against floods. The upper section was about a hundred feet high, rich in springs and limestone deposits, and on the edge of fertile prairie lands. The claims extended about a mile along the Mississippi and about a half mile inland.<sup>14</sup>

Father Demetrius liked his new surroundings. He was satisfied with the country and the climate. He pictured the land as a flower garden which produced many edible herbs. The air was bracing. The missionary had no desire to return to Pennsylvania, which he described as the "land of colds and rheumatism." He marveled at the superactivity evident on the frontier, declaring that in the 1850's things did not merely progress

<sup>12</sup> Hoffmann, "St. John's Abbey," I:11.

<sup>13</sup> Father Demetrius to Abbot Boniface, May 27, 1856, Marogna Manuscripts.

<sup>14</sup> Father Demetrius to Abbot Boniface, May 27, 1856, Marogna Manuscripts.

in Stearns County at a fast rate, but went forward at a double-quick pace. Those who do not keep up with the rush, he explained, will neglect the favorable moment which will not appear again, for there is a constant running and racing for advantages.<sup>15</sup>

Some interpreters of frontier development unfortunately have given the impression that life in the West during the nineteenth century was principally a matter of "eye-gouging" and "ear-clawing battles."<sup>16</sup> Such accounts tend to make the reader too conscious of the escapades of Billy the Kid in the Southwest, the Plummer gang in Montana, or the Jesse James gang in the Midwest. Yet an analysis of the factors involved in the peaceful and cultural elevation of frontier society has much more lasting significance. The activities of both Protestant and Catholic missionaries, of schoolteachers, and of spirited town groups have done much to temper life in the West, as has the work of the early Benedictines.

Hardly had the pioneer missionaries raised a roof over their heads when they undertook church services in St. Cloud, St. Joseph, St. James on Jacobs Prairie, Richmond, and St. Augusta—all growing settlements at the time. Monthly the pioneer fathers increased the range of their mission activities, traveling by whatever means they could find, usually afoot, carrying altar supplies on their backs, sleeping when they could, and receiving whatever fare the good settlers could give them.<sup>17</sup>

By the fall of 1856, Father Cornelius had made preparations for the opening of the first school in St. Cloud. Before the snow fell, he was teaching twenty children daily. Classes were held in a frame shanty owned by Joseph Edelbrock. During the week, Father Cornelius worked as a teacher, and on week ends he performed pastoral service. Father Bruno, stationed at St. Joseph, opened a school in the same year. Father Demetrius took steps to plot the site of the Rothkopp claims and to make improvements in an attempt to safeguard the holdings of the young community. Lots were platted and streets bearing such names as Boniface, College, St. Louis, and Bavaria were laid out. Buildings to house the monks and provide a chapel for their use were erected with a frontage of seventy-two feet overlooking the Mississippi. Difficulties arose, however, during the first months of residence in central Minnesota. Drought and a grasshopper visitation damaged the first crop planted by the community. The potato yield was sparse, and grasshoppers ate up most of the greens.<sup>18</sup> The Benedictines, like the neighboring immigrants, were

<sup>15</sup> Father Demetrius to Abbot Boniface, August 16, 1856, Marogna Manuscripts.

<sup>16</sup> Ray Billington, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier*, 481 (New York, 1949).

<sup>17</sup> Father Demetrius to Abbot Boniface, December 14, 1856, Marogna Manuscripts.

<sup>18</sup> Father Demetrius to Abbot Boniface, October 13, December 14, 1856, Marogna Manuscripts.

discovering that Eldorado was not always to be found in the bush or on the prairies.

Yet Father Demetrius did not permit the misfortunes of the first summer and fall to deter him in his set purpose of getting monastic life and the work of education under way as soon as possible. In October, 1856, he petitioned the Minnesota territorial legislature to incorporate the new Benedictine foundation and to grant a charter for the establishment of a college and seminary—truly a bold venture when there were not even doors on the first log buildings! Wilson, the "Father of St. Cloud," who was a member of the territorial body, aided Father Demetrius in his endeavor. By March 6, 1857, the bill had passed both houses of the legislature and Governor Willis A. Gorman had affixed his signature to it. These official words brought genuine joy to Father Demetrius: "Be it enacted . . . that the members of the religious order of St. Benedict . . . shall be hereby authorized to establish and erect an institution, or seminary, in Stearns county, on that portion of St. Cloud city, platted and recorded as Rothkopp's Addition to St. Cloud, to be known by the name and style of 'St. John's Seminary.'" <sup>19</sup>

The fathers then went ahead with plans for the erection of a school for the higher education of the youth in their midst. In the fall of 1857 the first classes were held in a humble log building on the Rothkopp claims within a stone's throw of the Mississippi. Father Cornelius was the sole teacher. Only five students greeted him: Henry Emmel and Anthony Edelbrock (later abbot and president of St. John's) of St. Cloud, Andrew Stahlberger of Lake George, Joseph Duerr of St. Joseph, and Henry Klostermann of Richmond. One of the first students left the following record of his impressions: <sup>20</sup> "We were frontier lads, accustomed to ample elbow-room; broad prairies, little restraint and good meals suited us first rate. We had been largely our own bosses and to enjoy life was not at all the last or least of our aspirations. When therefore the reins were slowly but firmly put on us, sour faces became visible, one or the other even doubted whether he ought not at once bid a long, lingering adieu to Apollo and the Muses." Another pioneer student recalled that "To be confined to the class room for hours when the sun was bright and the weather pleasant for out-door sports, was not a small trial. . . . We had few books. The professor lectured, we had to write. Yes, we were started in on the European plan. . . . The first months seemed half a 'saeculum' to us, it took time to break us in. However some three

<sup>19</sup> Father Demetrius to Abbot Boniface, February 11, 1857, Marogna Manuscripts; Alexius Hoffmann, *St. John's University, Collegeville*, 5, 6 (Collegeville, 1907).

<sup>20</sup> Quoted by Alexius Hoffmann, "A Chapter of Early History," in *St. John's University Record*, 1:62 (June, 1888).



months did the work; we were tamed and felt at home in our 'Alma Mater.'"

The early educational endeavors of the pioneer monks received much aid with the arrival during the summer of 1857 of a group of Benedictine sisters from St. Mary's in Elk County, Pennsylvania. By the fall of that year they were teaching children and offering music lessons in St. Cloud, much to the satisfaction of the first settlers.<sup>21</sup> It was this band of nuns who laid the foundations for St. Benedict's Convent in near-by St. Joseph.

The question may now be arising in the minds of some: Why was the first Benedictine location near St. Cloud transferred to the present site at Collegeville? The claims which the Rothkopp brothers had handed over to the monks in 1856 upon their arrival eventually proved to be of questionable value. The title to the holdings was challenged in court; the opposition had a good case against the Benedictine fathers, since the Rothkopps had not complied with the provisions of the pre-emption laws then in force. The matter was under investigation by the federal land office in Washington for some years. Finally a decision of the secretary of the interior left the monastery with only seventy-five of the three-hundred-and-twenty acres which the Rothkopps had intended to turn over to the Benedictines.<sup>22</sup>

As a result of these troubles, the priory and college were transferred in March, 1858, to St. Joseph, where the institution was housed in a log structure measuring twenty-five by thirty feet. Hardly a year had passed when both units were again removed to St. Cloud. With the advent of more fathers from St. Vincent's in Pennsylvania, the mission and school work of the new community began to take on a broader character. The members split into three groups, making their missionary headquarters in Minneapolis, Shakopee, and St. Cloud. From these centers the monks cared for forty-four churches and missions, organizing many of the first parishes in Minnesota. This development caused some to think about locating the school in a more populous district of the state; Shakopee in the Minnesota Valley was considered an appropriate place. This project, however, did not receive general approval. Stearns County eventually kept the institution.<sup>23</sup>

The St. Cloud site, however, was definitely abandoned in the fall of 1862, when Father Othmar Wirtz, the new superior of the community, assumed duties as the director of the activities of the Minnesota Benedictines. The disturbance caused by the Sioux Outbreak of the previous summer, the adverse decision of the secretary of the interior regarding

<sup>21</sup> Father Demetrius to Abbot Boniface, July 14, 1857, Marogna Manuscripts.

<sup>22</sup> Mitchell, *Stearns County*, 1:280.

<sup>23</sup> Hoffmann, *St. John's University*, 9, 12.

the Rothkopp claims, and the conviction of Father Othmar that the St. Cloud location was too near what promised to be a large city and might therefore not prove entirely suitable for a monastery, brought about another transfer. The "Indian Bush," the woods west of St. Joseph in the vicinity of the present Collegeville railroad station, was chosen as a more appropriate place. There the fathers had taken up several land claims years earlier, and there several brothers had lived, cutting down timber and preparing the soil for cultivation.<sup>24</sup>

Father Othmar now deemed it proper to secure a modification of the original charter. In 1864 the state legislature gave the Order of St. Benedict permission to establish an institution at any location in Stearns County. The monastery and school thereby had its new home formally approved. Still another change of residence, however, was in sight. A scenic spot two miles southwest of the 1864 site attracted attention. The proposed place consisted of rolling country covered with dense woods and contained a delightful lake about four hundred acres in extent. The fourth and final transfer took place in January of 1866, when an elevation at the north end of the lake was selected. The entire personnel of the monastery set to work the following spring, cutting down trees, excavating and using the boulders, or niggerheads, as they were commonly styled, for constructing the first building on the present grounds occupied by St. John's Abbey and University.<sup>25</sup> This structure was familiarly referred to for many years as the "Old Stone House."

Events followed in rapid succession. Before another year had elapsed the priory in its new location was elevated to the status of an abbey. The members elected the Very Reverend Rupert Seidenbusch, then prior of St. Vincent's Abbey, the parent house in Pennsylvania, as their first abbot. The monastery for some time became known as St. Louis on the Lake, with the school keeping the name of St. John's.<sup>26</sup>

Thus the year 1867 marked the close of the wanderings of the early community on the Minnesota frontier. A permanent site for future development was at hand. Stable and consistent growth was possible. St. John's was finally rooted "high above the shores of Lake Sagatagan"! The eleven wandering years that followed 1856 had brought forth the organization of the Benedictine foundation from which the present St. John's Abbey has sprung, had provided religious services for a growing number of Catholic immigrants in Minnesota, and had given early educational opportunities to the sons of pioneers in the upper Midwest.

<sup>24</sup> Hoffmann, *St. John's University*, 14.

<sup>25</sup> Hoffmann, *St. John's University*, 14, 15.

<sup>26</sup> Hoffmann, *St. John's University*, 16.



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